

Lurgan Baptist: 1:11:2011

Reading: Acts 15:1-35

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

25. GRACE ON TRIAL

Not long after Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, the Reformers discovered or rediscovered, we should say the gospel. It had been hidden away for centuries in a dark dungeon of legalism. In those days, according to the religious hierarchy human effort was the requirement for salvation. But when the Reformers heard the trapped cry of truth, they determined to set free the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. It was a valiant rescue one filled with daring advances and vicious reprisals. Trumpeting the cause the loudest was German monk Martin Luther. Of this fiery man, Philip Schaff wrote, "*Luthers writings smell of powder, his words are battles: he overwhelms his opponents with a roaring cannonade of argument, eloquence, passion and abuse.*" Luther and his followers stood their ground against anyone who opposed the gospel of grace.

Like Luther, the apostle Paul also fought for grace, and like Luther he passionately stood his ground against anyone who opposed this gospel. Now at various times in its history, the church's leaders have met together to

settle doctrinal issues. For example, historians recognise seven councils in the first several centuries of the church's existence. Of those seven, perhaps the two most significant were the Councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451). At those councils, erroneous teaching about the person and nature of our Lord Jesus was condemned, and the biblical position carefully defined. As important as those councils were, the Jerusalem Council described in this chapter, and taking place some twenty years after Pentecost was the first and most significant of all. For it settled the most momentous doctrinal question of all: What must a person do to be saved ? Indeed, here in this chapter there is brought before us, "**GRACE ON TRIAL.**" There were four stages in this event.

(1) THE DISPUTE

What is it that is objectionable to Gentiles believing in Christ ? Most of our churches today are made up of Gentiles. Why was this such an issue then ? To understand this situation, we must go back to the beginning of Acts and view the events in the book from the perspective of an average Jewish convert to Christianity. A Jew in that day might have reacted to Christ's last words before His ascension (1:8) like this.

The Lord Jesus, "*Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem.*" The Jew, "*Great lets go.*" The Lord Jesus, "*And in all Judea*" The Jew, "*Good idea, we have family in Judea.*" The Lord Jesus, "*And in Samaria*" The Jew, "*S-S-S-S Samaria ? We don't talk much to those half-breed Jews.*"

The Lord Jesus, " *And unto the uttermost part of the earth.*" The Jew, " *Now wait just one minute ! There are Gentiles out there.*" You see, from childhood, Jews were taught to shun the " *morally unclean,*" Gentiles. Even their culture was off-limits Greek theatre or sports, Roman fashions or music all was forbidden. And what happened was this. The Jews who became Christians carried this separatist attitude into their faith.

Do you recall when it first surfaced ? It first surfaced when " *there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.*" (6:1) The Grecians or the Hellenists were Jews who had come to Palestine from other countries. Although they were Jewish by birth, they were Greek culturally which the Jerusalem Jews perceived as contamination. So these Hellenists felt that they were being discriminated against and that the native born widows were being favoured.

Fortunately, this problem was wisely-solved when a " *seven man team,*" was appointed " *to serve tables.*" But my this incident was just a taste of what was to come. Do you recall Peter's vision ? " *Rise, Peter, kill and eat.*" (10:13) At first Peter was confused, but later it all made sense when he watched an " *unclean,*" Gentile named Cornelius trust Christ and receive the Holy Spirit. (10:44-48) Peter had learned a lesson about God's grace: anyone can trust Christ and be saved. But the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem,

who hadn't such vision, struggled with the concept. Indeed, " *they that were of the circumcision contended with him.*" It was touch and go for a while: but after Peter had explained God's hand in Cornelius' conversion, his Jewish-Christian brothers accepted his testimony and glorified God. (11:4-18)

So this boiling issue had been contained thus far, but now the lid blew sky high, when some legalistic Jewish teachers came to Antioch, and taught that the Gentiles, in order to be saved, had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. Thus the bomb exploded. Look at:

(a) *THE FALSE DOCTRINE HERE:*

(15:1) Good-bye, free grace ! Good-bye joy ! These men Judaizers did not deny salvation by grace outright. They simply said salvation came by, " *grace plus,*" specifically, " *grace plus circumcision.*" They were saying, " *A Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian ! Its not sufficient for them simply to trust Jesus Christ. They must also obey Moses.*" My this was a direct attack upon the principle of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. It was all the more dangerous because it was plausible: because it made an instant appeal to the Jewish members of the church: because of the zeal with which it was spread by the legalising faction in the church, which saw in the doctrine a way of maintaining the Jewish balance of power against the wholesale Gentile invasion of the church.

My there was no diluting their message: " *Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot be saved.*" (15:1) False teachers have plagued the church throughout its history.

They are the emissaries of Satan, sent to destroy the church's power and corrupt its proclamation. Two of the apostles at the Jerusalem Council, Peter and Paul, warned of the false teachers' pernicious influence, already being felt in the church. Do you recall Paul's warning to the elders at Ephesus ? " *I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.*" (20:29-30) My here were people who were seeking to add a damnable plus to the gospel and undermine the work of the cross. God Himself pronounces a solemn anathema on anyone who preaches any other gospel than the gospel of the grace of God. (Gal 1:1-9)

My when any spiritual leader says, " *Unless you belong to our group, you cannot be saved !*" or, " *Unless you participate in our ceremonies and keep our rules, you cannot be saved,*" he is adding to the gospel and denying the finished work of Christ. Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians to make it clear that salvation is wholly by God's grace, through faith in Christ, " **plus nothing.**" (a) led to:

(b) THE FURIOUS DEBATE HERE:

For the two missionaries immediately locked horns

with these Judaizers. Here was an issue that allowed no compromise. No matter who they were or who they came from, this error had to be opposed before it destroyed the church. Now the Holy Spirit uses two words to describe Paul's method of dealing with this delusion. The first word is " *dissension,*" the word literally means a standing up, a disagreement. Luke uses the same word to describe Barabbas, " *who for a certain sedition made in the city was cast into prison.*" Paul saw this false doctrine in its true light as sedition, insurrection, high treason against God. He dealt with it accordingly. The second word is " *disputation,*" and Luke uses the same word to describe the reaction of the Jews of Rome to Paul's gospel. They " *had great reasoning among themselves.*"

My Paul did not allow the intruders to get away with a thing. The Judaizers were convinced they were right, Paul was equally convinced they were wrong. And the debate waged back and forth until the Antioch church was torn asunder, confused and rendered almost wholly ineffective. My do you see Satan's answer to Paul's evangelism ? Paralyse the church with inward strife: direct all energy against other believers: put the church on the defensive, keep it squabbling. Is it not significant that we have no record at this time of further plans for missionary activity, and no record of souls being saved at Antioch ! Evangelism had come to a halt. And controversy is one of the enemy's favourite tactics against the church. So (a) led to (b) and this led to:

(c) THE FAIR DECISION HERE:

Look at (15:2) My the affair was now so serious that it was decided to refer the matter to Jerusalem. Let the apostles and elders there decide the issue. Probably Paul was not too happy about this decision.

He well knew where their sympathies might be expected to lie, however he was willing to allow the Lord of the harvest to work out all things according to the counsel of His own will ! (Gal 2:1-14) (1)

(2) THE DEBATE

This meeting is known as the Jerusalem Council, and it appears that at least four different meetings were involved in this strategic conference. (1) There was a public welcome to Paul and his associates: (15:4) (2) A private meeting of Paul and the key leaders: (Gal 2:2) (3) A second public meeting at which the Judaizers presented their case: (15:5-6 Gal 2:3-5) and (4) This public discussion described in (15:6) Now in this public discussion, four key leaders spoke. Notice:

(a) PETER UNDERSCORES THE LORD'S WILL:

Now its interesting to notice that Peter did not speak at once. No doubt some of the hotter heads had said some things for which they were already sorry. Perhaps, there were times of chaos before Peter rose to speak. But at last Peter stood up and he said this, " *God enlisted me for a very great task. God could have chosen anyone, but He chose me, the apostle of*

circumcision. He sent me to the Gentiles that by me they might have the gospel preached to them." Now do you see what Peter is doing here ? He presents 4 arguments to prove that salvation is by grace alone ! He says:

(1) Past Revelation proves Salvation is by Grace:

Look at (15:7) This issue was settled earlier, Peter asserted, when God saved Cornelius and his household apart from circumcision, law-keeping, and ritual. (10:44-48) Peter's point was simple and direct: the legalists had no right to require of the Gentiles what God had not. (1)

(2) The Gift of the Holy Spirit proves Salvation is by Grace:

Look at (15:8) You see the Judaizers could have argued that since Cornelius and the others did not meet their legalistic requirements for salvation, they could not really have been saved. But Peter demolished that potential argument, by stating that God gave them the Holy Spirit, as He did to the Jewish Christians. My the gift of the Holy Spirit belongs only to the truly redeemed. (Rom 8:9 1 Cor 6:19) So (1) (2)

(3) Cleansing from sin proves Salvation is by Grace:

For Peter says, " *And put no difference between us and them, purifying (cleansing) their hearts by faith.*" Since these Gentile believers had already been cleansed of their sins by grace alone, what more could

the law and ritual add ? The issue of sin had been dealt with, and justification had been granted ! So (1) (2) (3)

(4) The Inability of the Law to save proves Salvation is by Grace:

Look at (15:9-10) My it was foolish of these legalists to expect Gentiles to shoulder a burden they themselves found too heavy to bear. Moreover, not one of Peters Jewish listeners had been saved by the law, cleansed from their sins by the law, or received the Holy Spirit by keeping the law. Since keeping the law, could not do any of those vital things for them why require it of the Gentiles ? My whether for Jews or Gentiles, there has always been and always will be only way of salvation. Peter says, " *But we believe they.*" Law put the load on man: grace put the load on Christ. We are either saved by law, which depends on our accumulating our own merits, or we are saved by grace, which depends on our accepting His merits. My Peter was beginning to sound more and more like Paul. Paul must have been beaming all over his face as he heard Peter speak. His whole being said a hearty, " **Amen.**" For Peter emphasises: ***The Lord's Will !***

(b) THE APOSTLES UNDERSCORE THE LOST WORLD:

Look at (15:12) You see those miraculous signs and wonders confirmed that Paul and Barnabas were God's spokesmen. (2 Cor 12:12) They taught salvation by grace and (13:38-39) the miracles God performed through them confirmed the truthfulness of that

teaching. (Heb 2:3-4) You see, like Peters arguments, the evidence presented by the apostles was irrefutable. They were preaching that salvation was by grace alone, and that preaching was stamped with God's approval.

Finally, James stands to his feet and my

(c) JAMES UNDERSCORES THE LIVING WORD:

The key idea in James' speech is **agreement**. First, he expressed his full agreement with Peter that God was saving the Gentiles by grace. My today, God is graciously calling out a people, the church, from both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, the Greek word for " *church,*" (*ekklesia*) means " *a called out assembly,*" and if they are called out, then their salvation is all of grace and not through the keeping of the law. James stated that the prophets also agreed with this conclusion, and he cited (Amos 9:11-12) (Is 11:10 42:1-3) to prove his point. Now notice, that he did not state that what Peter, Paul and Barnabas had said was a **fulfilment** of this prophecy. He said that what Amos wrote **agreed** with their testimony. A careful reading of (Amos 9:8-15) reveals that the prophet is describing events in the end times, when God will regather His people Israel to their land and bless them abundantly.

My if we " *spiritualise,*" these promises, we rob them of their plain meaning and James' argument falls apart. You see God's " *mystery program,*" for the church does not cancel His great " *prophecy program,*" for Israel. The calling out of the Gentiles comes first. But let not the Jews think that God has forgotten His promise to David or imagine it will now have no literal

fulfilment. All in good time. God is working to a plan. Jewish national hopes have been postponed, but they have not been cancelled.

For at the appointed time, Christ will return, rebuild the Temple, and restore the Jews to Himself, finally fulfilling all His promises to them. Now my do you see what happened at this Jerusalem council ?

Peter Reviewed the past: Paul and Barnabas Reported on the present: and James Related it all to the future ! And everything that they said proved that salvation is by grace. Indeed look at:

(3) THE DECISION

That was reached in (15:19) " *Wherefore my sentence is* " Thus:

(a) ***THE DOCTRINAL ISSUE WAS SETTLED:***

Paul had won and the Gentiles were free. The way of salvation was the same for all faith in Christ. And Jews with their religious scruples were to trouble the Gentiles no more. My there's a principle here that we need to grasp. **As those under grace we are not to make non-Biblical requirements of others.** In that day this meant foisting a Jewish lifestyle on Gentiles. Today this means we are not to make areas of our lifestyle that are not spelled out in Scripture normative for others if they are to be " *good Christians.*" My we so easily push our preferences on others. We assume they will either do things our way or they are unscriptural. One of the reasons we not to do this is

because of what it does to us.

III: Winston Churchill told of a British family that went out for a picnic by a lake. In the course of the afternoon the five-year son fell into the water.

Unfortunately, none of the adults could swim. As the child was bobbing up and down and everyone on the shore was in a panic

a passer-by saw the situation. At great risk to himself, he dove in fully clothed and managed to reach the child just before he went under for the third time. He was able to pull him out of the water and present him safe and sound to his mother. Instead of thanking the stranger for his heroic efforts, however the mother snapped at the rescuer, " *Where's Johnny's cap ?*"

Somehow in all of the commotion the boy's cap had gotten lost. Instead of rejoicing in her son's deliverance, the woman found something about which to be critical. My is it not so easy to be like that woman ? Especially as we relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ ! Somehow others are never quite right. There is always something more that is needed before they measure up. Do you need to be careful about making non-Biblical requirements of others ? (a) But then:

(b) ***THE PRACTICAL ISSUE WAS STATED:***

You see while James did not want the Jews to trouble the Gentiles, he also did not want the Gentiles to trouble the Jews ! And so to smooth the way to social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles, and to avoid legitimate Jewish scruples, the Gentiles should be prepared also to take some measures. This was no

longer a question of Law but a question of Love !
Notice, James put his finger on several areas of concern.

(1) There was the SPIRITUAL Issue:

They were to " *abstain from food polluted by idols.*"
(15:20) This refers to food offered to pagan gods and then sold in temple butcher shops. (Exod 20:3 34:17 Deut 5:7) To eat such meat in Jewish eyes would be to become a partaker in idolatry. The Gentile should remember that !

(2) There was the MORAL ISSUE:

" *abstain from fornication* " (15:20) Illicit sex was an integral part of the pagan Gentile worship. Temple priestesses were often little more than prostitutes. But God's moral law had to be obeyed.

(3) There was the RITUAL ISSUE:

The Gentiles must abstain from eating the flesh of animals that had been strangled and from eating blood. (Gen 9:4 Lev 3:17 7:26) Now there was nothing intrinsically wrong with eating a rare steak, but James said to eat it well-done for the sake of fellowship with the Jews. You see there's another principle here and its this, " **because we are under grace, we gladly restrict our freedom for the sake of others.**" (1 Cor 9:19-21) Now is it not beautiful to see that this letter express's the loving unity of people who had once been

debating with each other ? The legalistic Jews willingly gave up insisting that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, and the Gentiles willingly accepted a change in their lifestyle.

It was a loving compromise that did not in any way effect the truth of the Gospel. As every married person and parent knows, there are times in a home when compromise is wrong, but there are also times when compromise is right. Wise Samuel Johnston said, "Life cannot subsist in society but by reciprocal concessions."

The person who is always right, and who insists on having his or her way, is difficult to live with happily ! Now what did this decision accomplish ? Well, look at:

(4) THE DEVELOPMENT

You see the apostles and elders drafted a letter and sent it along with Paul and Barnabas, Silas and Judas Barsabbas, to take back to Antioch. The reading of the letter and the report of the delegation evoked four responses from the assembled believers !

(a) THERE WAS CELEBRATION:

" *They rejoiced* " (15:31) The confirmation that salvation was indeed by grace alone lifted a tremendous burden of worry from their shoulders !

(b) THERE WAS CONSOLATION:

Look at (15:31) They no longer needed to fear that

their salvation was not genuine.

(c) *THERE WAS CONFIRMATION:*

" *And Judas and Silas* " (15:32) My legalism produces neither confirmation nor edification: it is, "*the Word of His grace,*" that is "*able to build,*" up believers ! Finally,

(d) *THERE WAS CONTINUATION:*

Look at (15:35) Paul and Barnabas just picked up where they left off and continued their ministry of teaching and preaching ! And their teaching made clear that salvation is by grace alone !

My the apostolic church thus survived the greatest challenge it had yet faced and established the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Satans attempt to inject heretical teaching was thwarted. So also was his attempt to split the church along racial and cultural lines. What does this mean to us to day ? My we must preach grace alone. There has always been and always will be, only way to be saved. "*For by grace faith* "

(Eph 2:8-9) **We must preach grace alone and we must tolerate nothing else !**