

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH A CHURCH UNIFIED BY GRACE**

## **Acts 15:1-21**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every November for many years I have enjoyed four days of unity with my brothers and sons and nephews as we hunt the wily whitetail in the woods of northern Wisconsin. My brothers and I have very diverse political and religious views. We have different values regarding our children and somewhat different lifestyles. We are not all in the same economic class. Yet, during those four days we are perfectly united in our thinking, our feeling and our acting. We all work together towards the common goal of bagging deer, preferably of the male variety. Our unity requires significant amounts of cooperation. We get up early in the morning. One of us makes breakfast. We eat in shifts. We help each other get dressed for the hunt. We coordinate our activities throughout the day. We rejoice in each other's success and we mourn each other's defeats. Our unity and camaraderie is unassailable as long as our attention is focused upon our common ambition and love.

Most of us want to live in churches and families and workplaces and schools and neighborhoods where we enjoy peaceful unity. Most want to experience the kind of unity and camaraderie the Swanson boys have during deer hunting. None of us enjoy the fighting and emotional turmoil that come when people who are supposed to be united and working to the same end fight with each other and break ranks with one another. Split churches, alienated families, neighbors who don't talk with each other, workers who won't eat lunch with each other are not the sort of groups of which most of us want to be a part. Yet we all know that in every group of which we are a part, the potential for disagreement and dissension and disunity are always present.

In our passage today the unity of the church is gravely threatened when people from the church in Judea come to the church in Antioch and teach that Gentiles cannot be saved unless they submit to circumcision as taught in the Law of Moses. It is not simply circumcision that they are requiring as can be seen from vv. 5 & 10 but they are proclaiming that Gentiles who believe in Jesus must also submit to the entire OT law in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas who have been living among and ministering to the mostly Gentile church in Antioch since returning from their church planting trip through the region of Galatia are brought into sharp dispute and debate with these men from Judea. So here we have men who all profess to be followers of Jesus engaging in a very heated public disagreement. This controversy is not between unbelievers and believers but between believers. The two words used to describe the conflict are incredibly strong words. The first one in particular usually is translated "riot" or "insurrection". This is not a small disagreement.

The seriousness of the matter can be seen in that the church in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas and a number of other believers from the church to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this issue. Paul and Barnabas are not going in order to get the approval of the apostles for their message but rather they are going to demonstrate that there is no division between the church in Jerusalem which is made up of Jewish people and the church in Antioch and Galatia which is primarily made up of non-Jews or Gentiles. The churches scattered throughout the region between Antioch and Jerusalem are in agreement with Paul and Barnabas as can be seen by the joy which these mainly Jewish churches along the way express when hearing the report of how God had saved the Gentiles in Galatia through the preaching of the gospel by Paul and Barnabas. What we are observing in this passage is how it is that God promotes and builds and maintains the unity of his church in the face of the many diabolical forces aimed at destroying that unity.

### **MAIN POINT**

**God builds unified churches through...**

#### **I. Fierce loyalty to the gospel of grace (vv. 1-12)**

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem the entire church gathers together and welcomes them and they proceed to describe to the church and its leaders what God did through them during their journey through the

island of Cyprus and the Roman province of Galatia. Sometime during this report we find out that there is indeed a division in the church in Jerusalem. There are men who have believed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and have submitted to baptism, professing that their hope of eternal life is through Christ who are from the party of the Pharisees. If you will remember, Jesus, during his earthly ministry had numerous debates and altercations with members of the Jewish sect called the Pharisees. The Pharisees believed that the whole OT was God's word and that obedience to that word was the way to be saved. So these men had been converted to Christ but were still fiercely devoted to the OT law. They arise and restate the same position that others had declared in Antioch: "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." They are asserting that unless Gentiles comply with all the law then they cannot be saved, they cannot be part of the church. Again, they would argue that Jew and Gentile must believe in Jesus. They are not saying that people will be accepted by God and go to heaven without faith in Jesus. However, they are saying that in addition to faith in Christ, a Gentile believer must also submit to all of the OT law, like they do. The next day the apostles and elders call the church together so that they can investigate this question.

After much discussion, the content of which Luke does not report to us, the apostle Peter stands and addresses the gathered church with its leaders. Peter reminds them how God had chosen him, about 10 years previously, to make the gospel known to Gentiles when he preached the gospel to the Roman army officer, Cornelius and his household in the seacoast town of Caesarea. He reminds them that God, who knows the hearts of people, demonstrated that he accepted these Gentiles by giving to them the HS just like he did to the 120 Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. If you will remember that story it was while Peter was still preaching and before Cornelius and his household had said or done anything that the HS came upon them, thus demonstrating that God had accepted them apart from their doing anything. Then he makes the critical assessment of the situation: God made no distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews at that time. He cleansed their hearts by faith, just as he had done for the Jews. Both Jew and Gentile had received the HS, who made their hearts clean and the only thing that they shared in common was faith in Christ. Thus, both Jew and Gentile are made clean by God not through observing the law but through trusting in Jesus alone.

What Peter says in v. 10 is incredibly confrontational. He tells these believing Pharisees who are saying that Gentiles must obey the law to be saved that they are testing God (not "trying" to test God as in the NIV but actually testing him). Remember, Peter is talking with men who know their Bibles backwards and forwards. By using this word he is calling attention to the numerous times the OT talks about men testing God. He is saying that they are doing exactly what the Israelites did to God in the desert when they demanded that God give them water to drink and meat to eat. They are doing what Israel did when they refused to go into the Promised Land but made plans to return to Egypt. They are doing what Israel did in the time of the judges when they worshipped idols and paid no attention to God. Here is what God says about Israel's "testing" of him in Psalm 78:56-64, "Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies. Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless, as unreliable as a faulty bow. They angered him with their high places; they aroused his jealousy with their idols. When God heard them, he was very angry; he rejected Israel completely. ... He gave his people over to the sword; he was very angry with his inheritance. Fire consumed their young men, and their maidens had no wedding songs; their priests were put to the sword, and their widows could not weep." Do not miss this: Peter is telling these people that by insisting that the Gentiles must obey the law to be saved they are testing God, rebelling against his clear command and daring him to do something about it. What they are doing is no different than worshipping an idol. Thus they are subjecting themselves to God's just judgment.

In v. 11 he declares that message which is the only thing that unifies the people of God. This is the reason we are a church and it is the only reason to belong to a church. He says that it is only through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we Jewish people are saved as also are the Gentile people. The only way to be saved is by grace, not by works of any variety. This is what we believe and this is what we love and what we hope in. The grace we are saved by is not simply God's disposition to be kind to undeserving sinners but God's unmerited favor that comes to us through the person and work of Jesus. That old acronym is absolutely true: Grace is "God's Riches At Christ's Expense". God makes you his child, counts you as a member of his kingdom, loves you, guarantees

you eternal life and sends you the HS not because of anything you do or decide but entirely on the basis of who Jesus is and what he has done. Obtaining all these riches at Christ's expense is grace because you deserve the exact opposite of each of these things. You deserve for God to treat you as his enemy. You deserve for God to hate you and send you to hell. You deserve to be left alone to fend for yourself. All this you deserve because of your sin. Yet, the glorious news is that God gives you all of his riches because of Christ's life and death and resurrection. It is all by grace, not by human works or decisions. The only fitting response to grace is faith because faith is nothing but reliance upon Christ. All the promises are true for me not because of me but because of Christ. This is what the true members of the church of Jesus believe.

If you believe something different then you do not belong to the church of Jesus, which is Peter's warning to these men. If you think that your acceptance with God depends upon anything you do or don't do, then you are testing God and not living in union with the church of Jesus. You are making yourself the enemy of God and are bringing disunity into the body of Christ. The only way that any church will ever be united is if we are fiercely devoted and loyal to this gospel of grace, this good news that all of God's wealth is given to undeserving sinners on the basis of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

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- *Fierce loyalty to the gospel of grace*
- *And through...*

## **II. Open debate and wise leadership (vv. 2-7a & 13)**

I don't want to spend a lot of time on this but I am fascinated by how the apostles and elders handle this controversy. The leadership and the membership of the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem are in agreement about this gospel of grace. Paul and Barnabas are not in any doubt as to who is right in this debate and they have no doubt as to where the other apostles stand on this issue. They know that the same HS who has been working through them and in the churches they have begun has been at work in and through the other apostles and the churches they have begun. Yet, the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem permit those whom they know are 100% wrong to put forward their case in public, in the midst of the assembled church. Verse 7 is simply amazing. After much discussion, then Peter makes his point. He gives the believing Pharisees plenty of opportunity to make their case, then he talks and then Paul and Barnabas share what they have witnessed in Galatia. Note that Paul and Barnabas are not involved in the discussion they are simply present to share their testimony. It is their activity of including thousands of uncircumcised and uneducated Gentiles in the church that has aroused the ire of these believing Pharisees and so they are only permitted to share their eyewitness testimony, not engage in the debate.

What is very clear here is how necessary it is for local churches to have places where important issues of doctrine and practice can be openly debated and discussed together under the direction of called and qualified leaders. This isn't anarchy or pure democracy, as if we decide what is true by a majority vote, but there is an opportunity for issues to be discussed and conclusions drawn in public. Over the years I have regularly run into people who have lots of questions about the faith but who were told at some point that asking questions was somehow evil. Questions are good, not bad. Discussion is good, not bad as long as the discussion is carried out in a charitable way and under the direction of called and qualified leaders and with the understanding that all of us are ultimately submissive to the word of God which is what we see in the next point.

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## **III. Experience judged by the word of God (vv. 13-19)**

After Paul and Barnabas show that the Spirit of God has been working among the Gentiles just as he has been working among the Jews in performing signs and wonders, and thus confirming what Peter has just said, James, the half brother of Jesus who is the chief elder in the church in Jerusalem stands up and announces the decision of the apostles and elders regarding this issue and the way the church is going to move forward. What I want you to notice in vv. 13-19 is how he evaluates the experiences of Peter and Paul and Barnabas in light of the OT Scripture. First, in v. 14 he makes a statement which to Jewish people would be shocking. He says, in referring to Peter's proclamation of the gospel to Cornelius and God's sending the HS that God "visited in order to take for himself a people for his own name." Virtually every word he uses is used in the OT in relation to Israel. God visited Israel to deliver them from their slavery in Egypt, to conquer the Canaanite tribes, to rescue them from their oppressors in the time of the judges, to establish the kingdom of David and Solomon and so forth. Then the OT repeatedly says that God took Israel out of the Gentile nations to be his people. But here God visited the Gentiles in order to take from among the Gentiles a people for himself, made up of Gentiles. James applies biblical language only used to describe Israel in the OT to the Gentiles.

But then, James says that what Peter experienced and Paul and Barnabas as well is in agreement with the words of the prophets. All of these Gentiles receiving the HS without being circumcised or obeying the law but simply by faith in Christ are talked about in the OT prophets. Notice the plural endings here. There are many passages in the OT scriptures that confirm the fact that God was going to include Gentile people among his people without requiring them to keep the law, without their being circumcised physically. Then in vv. 16-18 he quotes one of those words from the prophet Amos (9:11-12). The point of the quote is that God, after the destruction and exile of Israel in about 550 B.C. will return and restore or rebuild David's kingdom. How has God done this? Jesus is great David's greater Son. He is the son of David who is the king of Israel who has come to restore the kingdom of God. However, in this passage from Amos the Davidic kingdom is rebuilt in order that "the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who bear my name." In other words the rebuilding of David's kingdom is not simply for Israel but for all kinds of men, Gentiles and Jews.

There are two key OT ideas in this verse. First, the "remnant" always refers to the people who escape God's judgment, the elect, believing community whom God saves. Micah 7:18, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love." Zephaniah 3:13, "The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid." Jeremiah 23:3, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number." Second, for a people to "bear the name of God" means that they belong to God. Again, most of the time in the OT it is the nation Israel that is said to bear God's name. However, in Amos and in a number of other places Gentiles are also said to be part of the people of God, to bear his name. Therefore, the words of the prophets agree that all men, both Jew and Gentile are part of God's people by grace through faith apart from their obedience to God's law.

So James concludes in v. 19, based upon the experience of Peter, Paul and Barnabas as confirmed by the Scriptures that the Gentiles do not need to obey God's law. To do so would be trouble them, just as Peter had said in his speech (v.10). No Jew had ever been able to carry the yoke of God's law and so why in the world would we try to require the Gentiles to do what we have never done? No Jewish person has ever kept the law and so why would we now require the Gentiles to do what we have never done? Salvation and inclusion in the church is entirely a work of God's grace in Christ which is received by faith alone and not in any part based upon what any human being does. The church is sure this is the way of God not just because of the experience of Peter and Paul and Barnabas but because this experience is in keeping with what the Scriptures say. Thus the word of God is the ultimate standard by which all experience must be evaluated and the only way to maintain the unity of the church is to evaluate all experiences by that word.

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#### **IV. Love for Christian brothers and sisters who are different (vv. 20-21)**

Verse 20 sounds like James is talking out of both sides of his mouth. We aren't going to require them to keep the law but we are going to require them not to worship pagan idols and not to have sexual relations outside of marriage and not to eat certain foods. All three of these things are clearly forbidden in the OT and so it looks on the surface as if James is requiring the Gentiles to keep the law after just saying they don't have to keep the law. So what is going on here?

What James is doing here in this one verse is what the apostle Paul does at great length in all of his letters. He is declaring that there is a way of life that corresponds to faith in Christ. Paul says it this way in his letter to the Gentile church in Ephesus: "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." Or this is the way he says it to the church in Galatia: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love." So what James is saying is that the Gentiles faith must be expressed through their love for God and others. These "works" will not save them but these are the works they will do because they are saved by grace through faith. This is the life of the Holy Spirit in us. The particular expressions of love that James identifies is avoidance of pagan worship, avoidance of sexual relations with anyone to whom you are not married and watching what you eat so as not to offend your Jewish brothers and sisters.

The prohibitions on eating are more clearly described by Paul in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. The point is that if your brother or sister thinks that eating certain foods is a sin against God and your eating those foods tempts your brother or sister to partake of food they believe to be sin, then you are, by your eating, destroying your brother for whom Christ died. The concern of the Christian is the welfare of your brothers and sisters in Christ, not your freedom to eat whatever you want. We adjust our freedom in order not to tempt a brother or sister to do something they believe to be sinful. According to v. 21, the reason this is so important is because in every city there are groups of Jewish people who are reading and listening to the Law of Moses and thus the church will always be including Jews who believe eating certain foods is sinful and thus you must always be prepared to love your Jewish brothers and sisters by refraining from those things they consider sinful so as not to tempt them to sin against their conscience.

The point here is that the unity of the church is preserved when Christians love God by avoiding pagan worship and illicit sexual relations and when they love each other. I will contribute to the unity of the church when the main thing is not that I get to exercise my rights and get my needs met but the main thing is caring for and watching out for my siblings in the faith. When the members of a local church pursue by faith a life of love for God and others, then the church is built up until we all attain unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

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