

SEPTEMBER 29, 1991

## SAVED BY GRACE

I remember growing up in a time when some people thought that a person could not be a Christian and go to the movie theater, that Christian women could not wear makeup or have short hair, that being saved was a result of what we do and don't do. I guess that there are still a lot of people that believe that sort of thing. The concept of what is "acceptable moral behavior" has changed considerably in the last 40 years, but many still have the idea that salvation is something that we earn by living a good moral life (the definition of which changes each year), being fair with other people (however you define that) and believing that there is a God (or as some are likely to state it, "a higher power"). Such ideas are completely contrary to the Gospel message and are very much like the error that some Jewish Christians tried to interject into the practice of the early church.

**ACTS 15:1-3** Old habits are hard to break and old paradigms (the way we think about things) are even harder to get rid of. People have a lot of silly notions about how things work and it is difficult to avoid thinking in certain ways about things once they have been put into your mind, especially when these ideas are introduced at an early age. For example, how many of you could break a mirror and NOT think about seven years of bad luck? What about walking under a ladder? Spilling salt? Black cats? Just the other day I overheard an older man say something about hurricanes bringing in cold weather. This is nonsense, but many people give credibility to such ideas by letting them influence what they do. Those Jewish Christians that had been raised in a very orthodox environment (Pharisees) were taught from the earliest times about the origin of circumcision and how important it was for the Jews. They could not imagine anyone being pleasing to God that had not been circumcised. Now I believe that all the laws of Moses had good reasons for being given to the people. Many of the health practices are right in line with what modern day medicine has discovered. However, to make these a requirement for salvation misses the point of the grace of God and the fact that salvation is so precious that it cannot be earned.

Paul and Barnabas recognized the error of the teaching and they saw that it would be a serious impediment to the spread of the Gospel. If the Jewish laws were imposed on the grace of God, then Christianity would be nothing more than a sect of Judaism. They wasted no time in refuting the teaching. Of course, they did not change the minds of those that were teaching the error and it became necessary to get a ruling from the church leaders in Jerusalem.

As Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, they used the opportunity to share what God was doing among the Gentiles as a result of the missionary trip they had taken.

**ACTS 15:4-5** As they shared the message of what God was doing through their ministry -- Gentiles were being added to the church, the Pharisees in the church challenged the authenticity of what had been happening since these Gentiles had not been circumcised nor were they following the law of Moses. This controversy was the very reason that Paul and Barnabas had come to Jerusalem.

**ACTS 15:6-11** Conflict can be constructive or destructive depending on how it is handled. The two groups could have taken the stance that they were right and that they would not listen to the other side and that approach would have caused a split in the early church. The matter was brought before a council of the church leaders and the two sides argued back and forth. After hearing what the arguments were, Peter then stood up to give his thoughts on the matter. He had seen that the very first Gentiles were saved without any other requirement except that they believed God and trusted Him. The conversion experience of Cornelius and his family was just like what Peter had experienced. God had given them the Holy Spirit in the same way that he did for the Jews that

believed. It was evident that God had not set up any special requirements for salvation when He saved Cornelius. That same grace would work for the Jews as well as for the Gentiles.

Peter's message gives a sequence of events that are essential if the church is to carry out the Great Commission:

First of all, God made a choice to call Peter to carry out a task. We as Baptist believe that God does call people to the ministry. Some other groups believe that the gospel ministry is a career that one chooses for himself. The difference in effectiveness of ministers is perhaps a result of whether the person is called or not.

Secondly, people have to hear the gospel. It is important that the message of salvation be proclaimed in our churches. I have known people who had gone to church for years and had never heard the plan of salvation. We need to get rid of the "pop psychology" from the pulpits and preach the gospel.

The third point is that belief (faith) is necessary for a person to be saved. This is more than just mental acceptance of the idea, but is an acknowledgment that because of God's redemptive act in Christ Jesus that Jesus is now Lord of our life.

Next we see that those who are saved are given the Holy Spirit to live in them and they know that they are saved. People who don't know if they are saved or not are not!

The fifth thing is that the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to bring about purity in our lives and in doing so causes us to become more and more like God (be ye holy for I am holy).

The impossibility of earning salvation by being good is the next point that Peter makes.

Finally, God's grace is sufficient for our salvation as we believe.

**ACTS 15:12** Those that had argued that keeping of all the Jewish law was necessary for salvation realized that they had been ignoring the facts of what God had already done. They were saying one thing and the clear evidence was something else. Now the council was ready to listen to what had been happening among the Gentiles by the missionary team that God had ordained out of the church at Antioch.

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own agendas of "what we want to see" that we might be missing "what God is doing." Great things were happening in the kingdom of God which was in direct contradiction to the paradigm that the Pharisees had and they could have missed it. We need to be careful that we do not miss what God is doing today by concentrating on the trivial issues rather than the Good News that we are saved by grace.