

BaptistWay Bible Series for May 6: Salvation offers the chance to live a holy life

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Salvation offers the chance to live a holy life

- Acts 15:1-22

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Theological issues may produce unity or division. The question of salvation is not an incidental doctrine. The two major divisions in this discussion are: salvation by grace or salvation by works.

The lost and the saved of the world fall on one of these two sides. Most of the religions of the world teach a salvation by works, by keeping the laws of moral decency and communal ritual. Salvation by law can never accept grace, but salvation by grace can accept the value of the law that is written on the tablet of the land but more so of the heart.

This discussion started years before the Apostle Paul came on the scene. Jesus and the Pharisees found themselves at odds over this same question of how can one be saved, either by keeping the law or by faith in God (see

Luke 18:9-14). Paul, at one time, was sure salvation was found in the Old Testament law, but following the resurrection of Christ and a personal experience with the resurrected Savior, he changed his mind and accepted the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ while claiming himself to be the “chief of sinners.”



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Martin Luther, the hero of the Reformation, found no penance in a Catholic salvation of works and was saved after a discovery of the biblical teaching that the just “are saved through faith” (Romans 1:16-17). Since “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), sin is removed by faith in the grace of God who gives us forgiveness through Christ’s atoning death on Calvary.

While Barnabas and Paul stayed for a lengthy period in Antioch (14:28), no doubt to rest and recuperate from their first mission trip, the issue of salvation brought discord with the proponents of law and proponents of grace venting strongly their opposing opinions and arguments. Jesus, Peter and Paul already had settled the matter, but the contention fueled the possibility of destroying and maligning the new church.

Years of false teachings and mind training had built fences hard to take down. These fences were strongly engrained by the most revered leaders—priests, Levites, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees who gave the people this information from the Holy Book of the Law, Prophets and Writings, and from their traditional theological conclusions inherent in the

rituals practiced for generations.

Islam teaches keeping the statues of Mohammed, written in the Quran, gives eternal life, though one will not know for certain until death takes place if they have achieved the desired standard. With children schooled from birth, the teachings of Islam are pounded into the mind to the extent that anything else becomes suspicious and unacceptable. Every religion, to some extent, mentors converts in the faith of the fathers.

Jesus knew how difficult this transition from law to grace would be, suggesting his teachings were like “putting new wine in old wineskins” (Matthew 9:17). The good news is not just that Jesus saves, but that he saves by grace through faith, making the impossible possible (v. 10—“a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear”).

That is the good news. The law reminds us what is right and wrong, but keeping them correctly can never be the means of divine grace unto salvation. With this in mind, let the Jerusalem Council begin.

The cause of the contention (Acts 15:1-4)

Some unauthorized individuals (15:24) from the more traditional congregation of believers in Jerusalem took it upon themselves to correct the theology of the missional church at Antioch. Hyperventilating over being totally right, they created a crisis in the kingdom and community of faith. By merging the new faith in Christ with the old ways of Judaism, these believers were convinced of their understanding and were diligent in their respective mission from Judea to Antioch to argue the case that Gentiles had to be circumcised, as taught by Moses, in order to be saved (vv. 1-2).

Caving in to tradition and the persuasion of the Pharisees, they missed or

ignored the meaning of Pentecost and Peter's experience with Cornelius, defending the status quo of Jewish ritualism. Few people would keep a straight face over this argument of circumcision today but look just as ridiculous arguing one can get into heaven by being good (salvation by works, by keeping the law of citizenship). Incorrect concepts of religion die hard—especially the bad ones.

The cross really is a stumbling block to those who believe in a works salvation and to those who are agnostic or atheistic.

Barnabas and Paul jumped into the fray to debate the issue with them. Without knowing these misguided friends from the mother church were unauthorized, the seriousness of such error demanded that Paul and Barnabas be appointed to go to Jerusalem to “see the apostles and elders about this question” (v. 2). Paul and Barnabas “told how the Gentiles had been converted” wherever they could on the way to Jerusalem (v. 3).

Upon arrival, the church in Jerusalem was accepting and listened carefully as these two who “reported everything God had done through them” (v. 4). Luke knows the source of Paul's victories and wants all who read these words to know this is God's work done through Paul and Barnabas, and God gets the glory. Missional missionaries seek no glory for themselves and seek no reward to flex the ego.

The case for consideration (Acts 15:5)

Paul, once a Pharisee, knew his adversary well. He knew them personally, their position, their footnotes, their sources and their logic. I would say the issue is not so much theology but pride, power and position. Was this not the way Jesus looked at them in their arrogance and piousness? Would Paul not know their attitude? They saw their prestige slipping and their position questioned. I would guess it was the Pharisees who sent the unauthorized

spokesmen to Antioch, coaching them and paying their expenses. Motives hidden, the Pharisees in their objection define the issue of the ages—salvation by obeying the law or by the gift of grace.

Here is the case stated by the Pharisees, angry because Gentiles were allowed into the church: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.” One might suppose the Pharisees were not followers of Christ but exerting their external influence upon this new immature church assembly. They might have been believers but still steeped in years of rabbinic covenant doctrine. Luke does not elaborate.

Their case, couched in terms of Jewish thought, can be stated in many ways. The outcome, however, is always the same. It is a yoke, a burden that cannot be lifted, only to weigh down the spirit of all mankind with oppression and tyranny. The oppressive Pharisees could only force their oppression and slavery upon the others rather than perceive spiritual freedom in Christ. They refused to see the forest for the tree of the old pre-messianic covenant.

The conclusion of the council (Acts 15:6-18)

The conclusion of the council was a compromise. “The apostles and elders” were the first to confer. The apostles were those at Jerusalem, specifically named in Galatians as Peter, James and John (Gal. 2:9). There may have been others since Luke simply refers to them in the plural. The elders were chosen leaders within the congregation. Typical of most Baptist meetings, discussion took place, and opinions were expressed (15:7). In characteristic fashion, the charismatic Peter, both apostle and preacher, took the floor (v. 7) to give his support for his understanding that conversion is by faith alone, affirming the conveyance of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles as proof of God’s acceptance of Gentile believers (v. 8) and concluding with:

“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (v. 11). Nothing else is necessary; not race or ritual, not works or law, not priest or synagogue, not temple or tabernacle—just simple faith.

The whole assembly of the church hears Paul and Barnabas tell of their missionary experience in which God used miracles and signs to aid in bringing Gentiles to Christ through faith (without circumcision). That is the kind of business conference I like to attend—one that exalts the mighty works of God. Since John does not speak in this conference, we might assume parliamentary protocol in which the moderator is impartial and votes only when necessary to break a tie.

The Apostle James, the half-brother of Jesus, begins his address by affirming Peter’s words but pointing out what they might have missed, that God had created the nation Israel for his purpose, from out of the Gentiles, and now, “we should not make it difficult for the Gentles who are turning to God” (v. 19). James refers to Amos 9:1-2 as a proof text of God’s intention from the beginning to make the gospel available to the Gentiles.

Being a mediator, he suggests they compromise so every one wins: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (15:20-21).

James is calling for the church at Antioch to be tolerant of their traditional views on these specific issues out of respect for their Jewish heritage. James, knowing the immorality of the Gentile world where idols were worshiped and sexual acts often were included in pagan rituals, included a warning to live a clean and pure life in that immoral environment.

Even so, Paul and Barnabas, through this church business conference,

established, again, the truth that faith—and faith alone—was sufficient for salvation. There was no compromise on this foundational doctrine. What happened at this council in Jerusalem was another turning point. The majority leadership of the church listened to the evidence and agreed with Paul and Barnabas but was offered some less significant rituals to abide by.

Had the Jerusalem Council decided otherwise, Paul and Barnabas would not have been deterred from their conviction. Jerusalem's affirmation was a helpful aid to their cause and gave additional credibility to Paul's calling to the Gentiles.

Summary

With brotherly affection, the church at Jerusalem sent a letter to the church at Antioch confirming the decision that circumcision was not necessary for salvation of the Gentiles and also politely requesting the Antiochian fellowship to tolerate other practices of Jewish tradition. James seems to do this out of respect for the law-giver, Moses, who had been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (v. 21). Interestingly, James refers to the blessing of the Holy Spirit to affirm the doctrine of salvation by faith (v. 28) and refers to the "other requirements" as a "burden" (v. 28).

James' appeal to the Holy Spirit is joined with an appeal for grace and tolerance, something that the unauthorized defenders of tradition had not offered to the church in Antioch. Salvation by grace through faith does result in freedom to live a holy life by conscience, which always is superior to law.

Discussion question

- What else is needed for salvation other than faith in Jesus? Do we ever add anything?

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