

Saved Through Grace

Acts 15:1–35

November 25, 2001

“We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” What could be simpler? What could be purer? What could be more attractive? And yet, how quickly we complicate it and compromise it.

The very words strike us as elementary. They form the starting point of the Christian faith, or at least they should. And yet, there is something peculiar about the way the Apostle Peter frames the issues: “We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Why is it cast in the future tense? Is our salvation not yet complete? And why does he say that our salvation will be just like theirs instead of the other way around? Do they go first? Does the salvation of the other somehow take priority? Who are they? And who are we?

No wonder “all the assembly kept silence.” The presbytery meeting had been called to talk about new church development strategy. Some saw it one way, some saw it another. Now they were talking about the very grace of God, the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, and the meaning of salvation. From the human perspective, the entire faith, life, and future of the church were hanging in the balance. Either salvation is purely by the grace of God in Jesus Christ alone, or it is not by the grace of God in Jesus Christ at all. If salvation is by grace, it depends upon the love and mercy of God alone. If it were not by grace, then it would depend upon our own puny efforts, and then we would be in a lot of trouble, because that would be no gospel at all.

So, what the presbytery determined is that even some common sense strategies of the church for new church development are antithetical to the grace of God, deny the gospel of Jesus Christ, and endanger the souls of the recipients and the perpetrators of the error.

“We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” The content of this pure and simple faith is salvation. The means of this salvation is grace. The one who takes action here is God, in and through Jesus Christ. And the ones who are acted upon include both us and them. What are we being taught here? And what could possibly go wrong?

If we are yet to be saved through the grace of God, that salvation must be richer and more extensive than we have ever dreamed, or at least more than we have usually meant by those words. This salvation includes not only justification but also sanctification and even glorification. It includes not only the initial forgiveness of sin but also a life of growing obedience and righteousness and even going to heaven. This great salvation is not just one tiny piece of that, even the crucial beginning point, but is instead the whole thing from beginning to end. That is why it is cast into the future. It is not to say that it has not begun, or even that it has not begun well. It is not to say that the whole thing has not been provided for. But it is to say that there is more yet to come, that we have not yet beheld the glory of God, and that the conclusion will be even grander than we have ever imagined.

How can this be? The means of this salvation is grace. Therein lies the genius of the whole gospel. Grace is the sheer, undeserved love and goodwill of God. So, the one who takes action here is God, in and through Jesus Christ. And the ones who are acted upon include both us and them. All is grace, or else there is no gospel at all. If it were part grace and part my good work, there would be no gospel at all, for my good work would never be good enough, even for

one percent of one percent, so there would be no salvation. But this is where we always complicate it and compromise it.

When we have done all that we can do and it is not enough, when we have done our best and it is not good enough, when we have hurt not only our enemies or people whom we do not know but also those who love us and whom we love dearly, and when we have hidden from God and even from ourselves for so long that we do not know which way is up, then we know, or we should, that we are standing in the need of the grace of God who does for us that which we cannot do ourselves, that we are standing in the need of salvation more than we can accomplish on our own, and that we are standing in the need of God's forgiveness that heals our deepest wounds and the sicknesses of our souls, God's justification that makes us just, God's sanctification that makes us holy, and God's love that reconciles us to God and to each other. It is when we are standing in the need of God that the grace of God means something. But sometimes, we still want to help God.

Back then, the confusion was over being Jewish and being Christian. All the first Christians were Jews, so it was not a problem at first. But soon, non-Jews became Christian, and then it was a big problem. Somebody got it into his head that you had to be a Jew to be a Christian. That is what this whole presbytery meeting was about. And that is why Peter said, "We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." The final decision was that you did not have to be Jewish to be Christian or to be saved. That has been settled doctrine ever since. I have never heard it raised as an active question.

And yet, the question cleverly reappears in one new form after another. There is always somebody willing to claim that you have to do something to be saved. There are at least two aspects to this. One is uniformity. An elder from Gainesville, Georgia, told me a story about a man who was out walking one day, looking up at the beautiful sky, and he fell down a well. As he was falling, his whole life passed before his eyes, and while he was at the bottom a lot of things in his life were put into the proper perspective, so that he understood things as he never had before, he came to terms with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and had a powerfully renewed relationship with God. Eventually someone rescued the man and lifted him out of the well, but he was changed forever. In fact, the elder told me, with a twinkle in his eye, the experience of falling down the well had shaped and influenced that man so powerfully that he spent the rest of his life pushing people down that well! That happens sometimes, even with the best of intentions, but it simply is not the case that the grace of God comes to each of us in the same way or that we have to experience it in the same way.

The other aspect of this claim that you have to do something to be saved, and the much more insidious one, is precisely that: the notion that you have to do something to be saved. The first presbytery meeting at Jerusalem decided that you do not have to be Jewish to be saved. That is to say, you do not have to obey the whole of the Old Testament law before you become Christian. The church has since decided that, for instance, while it is fine to be charismatic if you are led that way, you do not have to be charismatic to be saved. We do not require a uniformity of experience, nor do we require that you have to do or to accomplish something in order to be saved. This is a logical extension of that first decision. What the church has yet to declare itself on is today's insidious claim that you have to be inclusive, tolerant, and diverse in order to be a true Christian. These qualities may have some positive value in and of themselves, even as obeying the moral law of the Old Testament is good in and of itself. The problem is that

requiring any of them is antithetical to the grace of God, denies the gospel of Jesus Christ, and endangers the souls of the recipients and the perpetrators of the error.

How does it do this? Consider the implications. To say that we have to do something to be saved is to say that the grace of God is not sufficient to meet our need. How ungrateful! To say that we have to do something to be saved is to say that what Jesus has already done for us on the cross is not enough, so that we have to add to it. How ungrateful! To say that we have to do something to be saved is to cast us back upon our own resources and to demand of us that of which we are incapable, as if we did not need to be saved. That strikes terror in the heart of the hearer, and it should strike terror in the heart of the perpetrator of the error, if the perpetrators ever understood how much it undermines the gospel.

For instance, today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells of the decision and the process whereby the church acknowledged the grace of God and became inclusive of non-Jewish Christians, tolerant of those who did not observe the law, and racially and ethnically diverse. There is even a priority given to the salvation of the other and therefore a priority given to the task and the privilege of the proclamation of the gospel to the other. At the same time, and by the same action, the church became exclusive toward those who denied or otherwise sought to corrupt God's grace, intolerant of those who sought to overthrow Christ's gospel, and less diverse in the sense that not all opinions and not all interpretations of the scripture or the faith are equally acceptable. So, it is not appropriate simply to say that we must be inclusive, tolerant, and diverse. There are prior concerns that we live by the grace of God, be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, and acknowledge the authority of scripture. So today's issues of political correctness are not peripheral. They threaten the integrity of the gospel.

Having declared itself on the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the presbytery at Jerusalem drafted a letter to the Gentile Christians at Antioch: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well." These were not requirements to be saved or to become Christian; these were part of what it meant to be Christian, part of holding the now Jewish and Gentile church together as one church. Are they still important? I know of no zeal to overturn the first three about idols and sacrificial animals. There is, however, a tremendous effort underway following the leadings of our fallen culture to say that chastity is old-fashioned, unimportant, and irrelevant. We need to resist this and to continue to ask for, and to encourage, chastity.

For many centuries, when human life was hard and short, the church articulated the gospel of salvation in terms that addressed that problem. It told of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life. In other centuries, when the consciousness of human sinfulness came to the forefront, the church articulated the gospel of salvation in terms that addressed that problem. It told of the forgiveness of sin and the washing away of guilt. In the twentieth century, when the world seemed to fly apart into meaninglessness and absurdity, the church articulated the gospel of salvation in terms that addressed that problem. It told of meaning in service and purpose in suffering. These different emphases are not mutually exclusive. In fact, taken together, they give a fuller picture of the gospel: justification in the forgiveness of sin, sanctification in lives of service, glorification in the eternal life yet to come.

Today, we live in a strange new world. We sense that the world has changed forever, though we are barely beginning to realize how it has changed. We still need the grace of God and

the gospel of Jesus Christ. We still need the forgiveness of our sin, the call to lives of service, and the promise of the life beyond this one. And yet, the ground has shifted. The questions are not quite the same. And we may need to articulate the truth of the old gospel in new, faithful ways. We have been made to realize, more than we ever have before, that we cannot secure our own lives: individually, as families, or even as a nation. If we do not respond to terrorist acts, they are likely to continue. If we do respond to terrorist acts, they are likely to continue. Whether we do, or whether we do not, there are severe limits to how much we can protect ourselves. I am not saying that I think we should not do anything. I think we should do more than we are. However, we of all people should do so with an acute awareness of the contingency of human life and of the futility of much of our action. So, what I am saying is this: human life is inherently insecure. We have been able to hide that hard reality for some decades. We have been able to obscure that nasty little fact for a long time. Now, that is no longer possible. It is out in the open for all to see: human life is inherently secure.

So, what does the church have to say about that? What does the gospel have to say about that? Part of what the first presbytery said when it upheld the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the most important aspects of human life are beyond human control. Yes, we desperately need to be saved, but no, we cannot do anything to bring about our own salvation. Thanks be to God, that has already been provided for. Sin is not taken away, but it is forgiven. Death is not taken away, but its power is broken. We still sin and die, but we are forgiven and given eternal life. The same dynamics can apply to our dilemma today. Human life is inherently insecure. There are profound limits to our ability to secure it, and, ironically, some efforts to secure life inevitably increase our insecurity. However, at the point of this extremity, we are ready to hear again the word of grace from God: our only real security is in God alone. Beyond the partial and incomplete securities of this world, our only real security is in God alone. Beyond the profound and real insecurities of this world, our only real security is in God alone. We are but strangers passing through here. Our true citizenship is in that world yet to come. Our only real security is in God alone. This gives us the courage to face the insecurities of our world and of our lives. This gives us the wisdom not to be immoderate in our efforts to secure our lives here. Prudence, perhaps, is one thing. The effort to do the impossible is foolish and faithless. In our day, this is how we articulate the gospel: Our only real security is in God alone, who has already given his son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to redeem us from all sin, death, and evil. Come what terror may, and resist it as we can, this is our one good hope: Our only real security is in God alone.

This is what we mean when we join our voices to that of the Apostle Peter: “We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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