By God’s Grace Alone

Acts 15:1-35

Key Verse: 15:11 “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

The British historian Arnold Toynbee said that history repeats with a cycle of challenges and responses. He meant that when human civilization responds to challenges successfully, it grows. The German philosopher Hegel said that history has been developed with the dialectical cycle of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. He meant that the history has been promoted with better solutions after conflicts between two opposite sides. But the Bible teaches us that history is his story, the story about Jesus, the Messiah, and it goes toward his second coming. The book of Acts is also about his story, the story of Jesus, whose spirit works, teaches, saves, heals, empowers, directs, and so on.

Today’s passage is the story about the Jerusalem Council. The Jerusalem Council, which might be held in AD 45, is known as one of the most significant meetings in church history along with the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and the Council of Constantinople (AD 360). The Jerusalem Council made a very important decision for the Christian doctrine, especially regarding salvation principles. We learn how the council made such an important decision, and how the apostles worked together to lead the council beautifully. We also learn how we can solve conflicts within and out in a biblical way at home, in the church, and in the community.

Look at verse 1. “***Certain people came down from Jerusalem to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved***.”Certain people were Judaizers who insisted on the circumcision of the Gentile believers. They claimed that in order to be saved, the gentile believers had to be circumcised according to Moses’ law. They meant that the Gentiles must be Jewish first, then Christians, for their salvation. Look at verse 2. “***This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.***” The Judaizers’ teaching was not acceptable to Paul and Barnabas, who had just come back from their missionary journey. They had witnessed how the Gentiles were saved through faith in Jesus Christ, not through circumcision or Moses’ law, and how God confirmed their work through signs and wonders. So there was a sharp dispute and debate between the apostles and the Judaizers. Finally Paul and Barnabas had to go to Jerusalem in order to know the opinion of the church leaders.

On the way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas shared their mission report with those in the church of Phoenicia and Samaria, who were very glad with the work of God for the gentile believers.(3) The apostles were welcomed by all the people in the Jerusalem Church, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. (4) Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “***The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses***.” (5) The Pharisees were the religious leaders who mainly taught the Scripture in the synagogue. They were Judaziers who insisted the Gentile believer’s circumcision as a requirement of salvation. The same problem in Antioch also arose in Jerusalem. To the Jews, circumcision was the identification of being God’s people. In Genesis 17:11 God commanded Abraham to be circumcised as the sign of the covenant between the two. The Jews believed that they could become God’s covenant people through circumcision. The Judaizers’ problem was that they put circumcision as a requirement for salvation. This was not a matter of practice, but a matter of principle. How did the church respond to this matter?

Look at verses 6-11. “***The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.***” Peter mentioned the Roman centurion Cornelius’ conversion through his visit and teaching. Peter continued. “***God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.***” By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Peter visited Cornelius’ house, even though the Jews were not allowed to visit a Gentiles’ house according to their tradition, and he taught the good news of Jesus Christ. While they were hearing Peter’s message, the Holy Spirit came down on them and they all began to speak in tongues. (Ac 10:45,46) After this, Peter was investigated by the leaders of the church because he had contacted Cornelius, the gentile, violating their tradition. But after hearing how God had worked for the salvation of Cornelius’ family through the Holy Spirit, the church leaders could not but keep silent and approve of Peter’s work as the will of God. (11:18) At that time, Peter knew that God did not discriminate against the Gentiles because of their race or culture. He believed that God purified their hearts by faith, not by circumcision and whether they were Jews or not. In verse 10 Peter compared Moses’ law to a yoke which even they and their ancestors could not bear. God gave the law through Moses so that the Jews might know who God is and how they had to live as God’s covenant people. But, they made this law of God into a yoke, a requirement of salvation that no one could accomplish. In verse 11 Peter concluded his speech with this statement. “***No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are***.” (11) Peter’s conclusion about the principle of salvation was that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is God’s gift or favor which is given to those who do not deserve. Salvation is God’s gift to us even though we do not deserve it. Romans 6:23 says, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*.” As Peter mentioned before, we are purified by faith, not by circumcision or by observing the law. We are justified by faith, not by the law. Paul wrote 16 chapters of Romans and 6 chapters of Galatians in order to explain this doctrine of salvation. It is amazing that Peter had already summarized this doctrine of salvation in several verses before Paul wrote the book of Romans. Paul said in Ephesians 2:8, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God*.” He meant that we are saved not because what we have done, but because what Christ had done. We are all sinners who deserved to be condemned. No one is qualified to be saved according to God’s standard. The Bible says that there is no one righteous, not even one. (Ro 3:10) Paul said whether they are Jews or gentiles, all are under the power of sin and under the judgment of God. (Ro 3:9,19) But God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (Jn 3:16) Whoever believes in this promise of God and accepts Jesus Christ are saved. Paul explained this more in Romans 3:23-26, which says, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*”

Look at verses 12. “***The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.***” Paul and Barnabas did not miss the chance to support Peter’s message. They testified on how God saved the Gentiles when they believed in the good news of Jesus Christ. No one received circumcision, but God saved them through the Holy Spirit with signs and wonders. In Cyprus, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe God opened the hearts of the Gentiles through Paul and Barnabas’ message, and many of them became their disciples. No one dared to oppose them because of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. There was another man who stood up to support Peter’s message. He was James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church. In verses 14-18 James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to prove the Gentiles’ conversion as the fulfillment of God’s prophecy. In the future, God let the Gentiles seek him and bear his name. The prophecy indicates that the Gentiles also would be saved along with the Jews. The Scripture proved the Gentiles’ salvation, too. Now James concluded his judgment in 19-21. “***It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 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 the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.***” James concluded that they should not demand circumcision and Moses’ law from the Gentiles for their salvation, but suggested that the Gentile believers must practice the holy life as Christians with minimum regulations. These four regulations are not requirements for their salvation, but for their purification. These are not the matter of principle, but of practice. These four regulations could be accepted and observed by all believers who had sincere faith and a good conscience. These regulations were also for the unity between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. The Jewish believers had observed these regulations as God’s covenant people. They had been read and taught in the synagogues every week, just as we recite the Apostle’s Creed. The Gentiles believers needed to respect the Jewish tradition even though they were not familiar with them. Mutual respect and mindfulness brings beautiful harmony and unity among the believers.

The Jerusalem Church chose two men among them, Judas and Silas, as the carriers of their letter and sent them to the Antioch Church with Paul and Barnabas. (22) What was the response of the believers in Antioch Church to the letter of the Jerusalem Council? Verse 31 says that **the people read it and were glad for its encouraging message**. The believers in the Antioch Church were thankful that the Jerusalem Church removed the problematic and divisive issue which was brought up by the Judaizers. They didn’t need to be circumcised to be a Christian. They also thanked God for solving this problem through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit with the beautiful unity among the believers. We are also thankful to God when some problematic and divisive issues among coworkers are solved in peace through our humility and mindfulness. I believe that they are the fruits of the Holy Spirit which Galatians 5:22-23 mentions, such as, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Amen.

Above all, through his response to the decision of the Jerusalem Council, we learn Paul’s selfless, obedient and gospel-centered faith. In view of Paul’s faith in *Sola Fide* (by faith alone) and *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone), he could have opposed the council’s decision. He could have resisted these four regulations for the sake of perfect freedom for the Gentile believers. But Paul did not raise his voice even though he did not agree. He learned how to yield and how to deny himself for the sake of the unity. He learned how to win over all the believers, both Jews and Gentiles, in all situations. He followed the decision of the council as the direction of the Holy Spirit. Later Paul confessed this in his letter to the saints in Corinthian Church. In 1 Cor 9:19-23 he said, “*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings*.” What an amazing statement and confession of faith by Paul, who denied himself for the sake of the gospel! Can we do this for the sake of the gospel? Can you deny your own ideas and favoritisms in order to win over someone who has different ideas and opposing opinions from you?

I believe that Paul could do so because he remembered the grace of the Lord upon his life. He used to be a murderer and a persecutor against the church of God. He said that he did not even deserve to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church of God. (1Cor 15:9) But Jesus did not reject him or oppose him. He did not kill him, either. Rather, Jesus forgave him and accepted him as his brother and called him an apostle. Later Paul praised the grace of Jesus in this, “*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me*.” (1Cor 15:10) We are saved by grace alone. We are saved by faith alone, not by our human efforts or achievements. Those who know God’s grace become humble and gentle because they know that they don’t deserve God’s salvation. Those who remember the grace of Jesus live holy lives because their hearts are purified by faith. Those who appreciate God’s grace live a gospel-centered life because they want to please God and share his blessings with others. I pray that we all may do this for the glory of God (*Soli Deo Gloria*). Amen.