

# 'IT WAS FOR FREEDOM THAT CHRIST SET US FREE'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

---

I was privileged to be the speaker at a family conference at Mount Hermon last week. These conferences, which I always enjoy very much, invariably present opportunities to meet people from all walks of life and from all kinds of religious backgrounds. In several conversations I had with some of those attending it soon became obvious that many were confused about the biblical doctrine of salvation. Some who had formerly been members of the various major cults were struggling to form a clear understanding of their new faith. They believed they were saved by grace plus something else--an additional work, a religious rite or whatever. It was hard for them to grasp the fact that they truly had been saved by means of the free gift of the grace of Jesus Christ. There was nothing they had to do to receive that gift except believe that Jesus had died for their sins and that they would be saved from the wrath of God by placing their faith in him.

I always find it interesting that the majority of the different groups who claim to be Christian insist on adding something to the good news of the gospel. For instance, here is what one cult says people must do to inherit eternal life: "All who by reason of faith in Jehovah God and in Christ Jesus [their theology holds that Jesus was not divine] dedicate themselves to do God's will, and then faithfully carry out their dedication, will be rewarded with eternal life." Faith plus works, in other words. Another group says this of salvation: "Baptism is essential for salvation. You must be baptized to become a true Christian." Faith plus baptism, they maintain. Yet another major cult says this of salvation: "We believe that through the atonement of Christ [although they do not consider him divine either], all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel. 'They who believe not your words and are not baptized in water in my name, for the remission of their sins...shall be damned.' Baptism is...the very gateway into the kingdom of heaven, an indispensable step in our salvation..." Again, faith plus works plus baptism.

While all these approaches sound religious and godly, they are not to be found in the Bible. They are part of the trap of legalism, designed to capture, not liberate people. Far from being good news, this is the worst possible news. It merely offers to exchange one impossible burden for another.

Here, by contrast, is the good news as set out by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. (Eph.2:8, 9)

These words formed the very heart of Paul's gospel from the day he first encountered the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road. But when the apostle later ministered to Christians in Antioch he found that his gospel of salvation by grace through faith was being severely threatened by a number of believing Pharisees who had come into the city. The confrontation that resulted from their error-filled teaching has kept Christians basically free from the law for the past two thousand years. Every generation of Christians, however, needs to hear the gospel restated in its purest terms so that they can be protected from placing themselves under the law of Moses once more.

In this series we return to our studies in the life of the apostle Paul. When I first decided to do a study on the apostle's life, I quickly discovered that the record of scripture shows that Paul had very little to say about himself but had volumes to speak about his Savior Jesus Christ. Thus, my study became an education in how the resurrected Christ expressed himself in and through the apostle. In the same way, therefore, Paul becomes a model for how Jesus desires to be expressed in and through Christians. So we pick up our studies once more, this time in Acts 15, where we find the apostle and Barnabas home again in the church in Antioch. In verses 1 through 5 we will see that one is not justified by the law; but that, as verses 6 through 12

demonstrate, one is justified by grace through faith.

Following Paul's conversion, the Lord declared of him to Ananias, "...he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." Earlier we traced Paul's first missionary journey, which he undertook with Barnabas. They began in 47 A.D. with a visit to the island of Cyprus, and then traveled on to the cities of Galatia. Following their return home to their Gentile church in Antioch, Acts 14 records, "...they gathered the church together, and began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples." But then, during this period of peace in Antioch, some Jewish Christians, who had earlier been trained by the Pharisees, traveled down to the city, some 350 miles from Jerusalem, and set about disrupting the minds and hearts of the new Gentile believers.

We take up the account again in Acts 15.

## **I. One is not justified by the law**

Acts 15:1-5

And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning the issue. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

Jerusalem, of course, was the site of the mother church of the Jewish Christians. Later, following the martyrdom of Stephen, the church spread to Phoenicia, Samaria, Cyprus and then to Antioch, the city which was to become the center of the mother church to the Gentiles. The Christians who arrived in Antioch at first shared the gospel with the Jews only, but then some of them began to preach also to the Gentiles in the city. Many of them came to faith as a result, and thus the church at Antioch became the mother church of the Gentiles. This was the church to which Barnabas brought Paul to become part of the teaching staff, as it were, before they both departed on the first missionary journey.

It was obvious that a theological battle between the Jews and the Gentiles would occur sooner or later. Sixteen years earlier, the church at Jerusalem was founded on the day of Pentecost. Some men from that church apparently took it upon themselves to visit this younger church at Antioch to see if the teaching there was theologically sound. They soon discovered a great difference between their definition of salvation and this Gentile church's definition of salvation. If believers did not submit to the rite of circumcision, and submit themselves to the Law of Moses, the believing Pharisees reasoned, how could they possibly claim to be saved? These men were either unwilling or unable to allow the Holy Spirit to shed any new light on their social and racial prejudices. They were insisting, in fact, that all the new Gentile believers become Jews. The Pharisees may have been willing to give in a little in the case of Cornelius, the Roman centurion who earlier was led into the Jerusalem fellowship by Peter, but here in Antioch, thousands of Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus Christ. That was just too much for some of these men who had "come down from Judea" to check the theological base of the church at Antioch.

These Judaizers would argue that Paul had no authority of his own and no gospel of his own apart from what had already been taught in the church at Jerusalem; and, furthermore, that he had not given believers at Antioch the whole of that gospel. The Jerusalem believers and their leaders revered the Law of Moses. All of them, of course, being Jews, had already been circumcised. They discovered that the Gentile believers at Antioch had not been circumcised; but, they held, if the Gentiles were to have the same foundation as their Jewish brethren,

they too had to be circumcised. If Paul and others had taught them otherwise, they had no authority to do so, they claimed. They had been taught a partial, and thus defective, gospel. They therefore invited the believers at Antioch to come under their authority and teaching, and by doing so they would again have peace in their midst.

These teachers would hold, then, that Christianity for the Jews was but the fulfillment of the law, the completion of the history of their fathers; while Christianity for the Gentiles started with Christ, but was without Jewish history, tradition or laws, which were a necessary part of conversion. To the Gentiles, they would say: "You cannot start in the middle of the process. You must also come under the covenant of Abraham, receive the sign of the covenant--circumcision--and submit yourselves to the Law of Moses."

Some time earlier, the apostle Peter had visited the church in Antioch to see for himself what was going on there. But the Judaizers arrived and began to challenge him as well as Barnabas. Paul, however, stepped in "and had great dissension and debate with them." The apostle would later write to the Galatians about this,

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming certain of men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. (Gal.2:11-13)

Those who have been raised in a different religion or a different culture before coming to faith in Jesus Christ may understand this. I was raised as a Catholic, and I well remember the scent of the incense, the solemnity of the services, the choirs, the feast days, etc. I sympathize therefore with Catholics who have been born again but still struggle over whether they should go to Mass and attend confession. They're still inclined to pray to Mary and maintain their interest in the various services associated with their old faith--just in case... My own mother-in-law is wrestling with these very issues today; she has a lot of history to contend with. Yes, we can sympathize with Peter. His Jewishness was no tokenism; it was his very life. But Paul confronted him in Antioch and called him a hypocrite. The upshot of this encounter was that the church there agreed to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders concerning this issue of grace and works as the means of salvation. If the elders had maintained that salvation was achieved by grace plus works, it would have made no difference to Paul, however. He would have returned to Antioch holding firm to grace plus nothing; and the division between Jew and Gentile would have continued.

So Paul and Barnabas set out for Jerusalem, accompanied by "certain others," according to the text. One of those was Titus, an uncircumcised Greek Gentile convert to Christianity. He would be Paul's "Exhibit A" in Jerusalem. Later, Paul would write in Galatians that he went to Jerusalem, not because he was selected to go by the elders of the church at Antioch, but because of a revelation from the Lord which he had received. On their way Paul and Barnabas passed through Phoenicia, which had been evangelized by the Jews during the persecution which followed Stephen's death (Acts 11:19); then they passed through Samaria, which had been evangelized by Philip, and then by John and Peter. Wherever they went, our text says, Paul and Barnabas "described in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren."

Three groups, the church, the apostles, and the elders, greeted Paul and Barnabas on their arrival in Jerusalem. The pair had been away from Jerusalem for about 14 years so they had much to share with the church there, especially concerning what the Lord had been doing among the Gentiles in Antioch. Another group, however, "certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed," stood up and interrupted the "body life" service. These believers, former separatists, who loved the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law, were listening very closely to what Paul and Barnabas were sharing. These men, who were still wearing their rags of Judaism over their new faith in Christ, could not get a clear picture of what it took for a Gentile to become a Christian. "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to obey the law of Moses," they maintained.

What did the Jews regard circumcision to be? According to Genesis 17, the cutting off of the male foreskin was a sign to Abraham of the covenant that God made with him:

"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (Gen.17:7).

When one came under the Abrahamic covenant, one received all the physical and spiritual blessings which God had promised to Abraham. But circumcision was not the cause of God's promise to Abraham, rather it was meant to be an act of faith symbolizing Abraham's confidence in God's ability to do what he had promised. Circumcision was an outward symbol of the fact that the Jews were separated to God and dependent upon him. All that they were, and all that they were able to do in the world, arose from the activity of God through them.

Unfortunately, however, circumcision had become a self-righteous symbol for the Jews. They boasted in it, claiming that through it they had a special relationship to Jehovah. The Jews who were of the opinion that the new Christian church was just another party within Judaism, therefore, felt that Gentiles should be admitted into the Jewish church in the usual manner whereby proselytes were adopted into the Jewish commonwealth: first, the proselyte had to accept the covenant and bring sacrifices; second, he had to obey the Torah; third, he had to be circumcised; fourth, he had to take a ritual bath, symbolizing purification. As a result, he would be accepted into the covenant community and have a share in the life to come.

According to these Jews, the central issue was as follows: Unless Gentiles became Jews they could not be saved. It was not that Gentiles sometimes should be circumcised, but that unless every one of them was circumcised according to the Law of Moses, they could not be eternally saved. This certainly would rule out the work of Jesus the Messiah on the cross at Calvary. These Jews were advocating works, not faith, saying that unless Gentiles first come under the Jewish covenant they could not become true believers.

After I left the Catholic church, I felt I had found freedom. Later, in the orphanage where I was raised, I became part of a group who claimed to be Christians. But they taught that one was saved by grace plus something else. That "something else" had more to do with baseball than the Bible. For instance, they said we could not play baseball on Sundays; old clothes could not be worn to play baseball on Sundays; and if I had good clothes on, I could not throw a ball on Sundays. In fact, you could do nothing on Sundays except sit and watch the cars go by. So we would count how many Chevvy's and Ford's drove by us. But we could not use a pencil to record the numbers as that would be work; we had to memorize the numbers. I have been so ingrained in that kind of legalism from the Protestant side of things that now I wash my car on a Sunday--but I always feel guilty for doing so. I sometimes stop in the middle of my work, wondering who will see me, feeling that one of you will drive by and say, "This is Sunday. What are you doing?" I have my answer ready: "At least I'm not playing ball!" I'm sure many of us have some of that kind of legalism in our background.

To this statement by the believing Pharisees, however, Paul would emphatically reply, "No, a thousand times no! No one is justified by the law, rather,

## **II. One is justified by grace, through faith**

Acts 15:6-12

And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The spiritual leaders of the church at Jerusalem, together with Paul, Barnabas and Titus, held a private meeting in order to discover the mind of Christ in the matter which the believing Pharisees had raised. Referring to this meeting in his letter to the Galatians, Paul would later write, "I submitted to them the gospel which I preached among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation for fear that I might be running or had run in vain." It was not that the apostle feared his gospel was wrong, but that it might be rendered fruitless by the Christian Pharisees present. He met with the leaders so that he might overthrow their influence, not that he might strengthen his own convictions; for his gospel did not come by the teachings of men but by a revelation of Jesus Christ.

At that private meeting the issue discussed was as follows: Should Gentile Christians, such as Titus, be made to be circumcised in order to be saved? Should Titus be instructed to come under the law? Should a Gentile place his faith in Jesus as Messiah and then become Jewish in order to be Christian? According to Galatians 2:1-10, the answer arrived at at the meeting was "No" on all three counts. The apostles James, Peter and John agreed with the gospel which Paul had been preaching. Titus did not have to be circumcised; the leaders of the church gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship; and they asked them to remember the poor.

Following this private meeting a public meeting held which was addressed by Peter. The apostle had come a long way since the vision he had when God showed him several kinds of unclean food and instructed him to eat. Later, Peter had seen the Gentile Cornelius come to faith in Jesus. Later still, he met with the Jerusalem Council and instructed them in what he was learning. But in Antioch, Peter slipped back for a while into his legalistic ways. He refused to eat with the Gentiles--that is, until he was confronted by Paul and called a hypocrite. These incidents had taught Peter his lesson; by now he was a strong advocate of the gospel of grace and nothing besides.

So Peter addresses the multitude and makes three points. First, he gives a review of God's activity in the church of Jesus Christ. He reminds his listeners that ten years earlier he had brought the gospel to the Gentiles, beginning with Cornelius. Then he reminds them that they had confirmed that ministry by agreeing that God had "granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (11:8). Peter also reminds them that the Jews had received the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost; and that the Gentiles, after confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior, also received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then, as the Lord God cleansed their Jewish hearts from sin when they placed their faith in his Son, so he cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles from sin when they likewise placed their faith in Jesus. The Gentiles were cleansed from sin through faith plus nothing; not baptism, not the Lord's Supper, not circumcision, not by obedience to the law of Moses. When it comes to salvation, the message is the same for all peoples of all races, Peter maintains, Jew and Gentile alike.

Secondly, Peter asks a question of the believing Pharisees: "Why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" God had already spoken of the faith of the Gentiles, Peter says. Why are you refusing to respond to God's revelation, putting God to the test? he asks. The "yoke" which Peter is referring to is the Law of Moses, which the Jews themselves could not fulfill, and yet they now sought to place the new Gentile believers under that very law. The Lord Jesus declared of the Pharisees,

"They tie heavy loads and lay them on men's shoulders...Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt.11:28, 29).

Jesus' burden was light because he himself would provide all the power people would need to be men and women of God. He would put his law within their hearts--and ours--and then give them the Holy Spirit and the power necessary to keep the law.

Thirdly, Peter shares with them the message of the gospel: that Jew and Gentile alike were saved by grace through faith, plus nothing. His message at Pentecost to both Jew and Gentile was,

"Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself" (Acts 2:38, 39)

Peter's message to Cornelius and his family was: salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing. The message of the Jewish evangelists who came to Antioch was: salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing. The message of Paul on the island of Cyprus, and later in Galatia, was: salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing.

To emphasize this, here is what Paul said to Peter in their confrontation at Antioch,

"We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." (Gal.2:15, 16)

There is not one thing you can add to your salvation once you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ.

Verse 12 demonstrates that those listening confirmed what they had heard: "And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles." Here, Paul and Barnabas gave evidence of their confirmation as apostles by relating of the signs and wonders that had occurred during their ministry.

At the Mount Hermon family conference which I mentioned earlier, I went in to dinner one evening hoping to sit at a table with some fun-loving family. As I looked around the dining room, a young Vietnamese girl invited me to sit at her table. Three of the eight seats at the table were already taken when I sat down. There was one older woman, Sonya, sitting there, and another woman, Linda, who had her deaf and retarded daughter sitting beside her. This was not quite the group I had in mind to join for dinner; but I decided I would meet some more interesting people later. About halfway through dinner, the four empty places at the table were still not filled. It was then I began to realize that that was where God would have me sit that evening. Linda told me that the older woman, Sonya, had brought her to the conference, and she said she was really enjoying being there. I decided to pour a lot of godly interest into those at the table and the result was that I had a very nice time with them.

Just before we finished eating, I asked Linda, "Are you a Christian, or are you in the process of becoming one?" She said, "I am in the process of becoming one." I asked her, "What has prevented you from finishing that process?" She said, "No one ever asked me." "Do you want to take a walk?" I asked her. She said, "Yes." We went outside and I explained to her the gospel of the love of Jesus Christ. I told her that if she would simply place her faith in Jesus the sin-bearer, that all her sins would be forgiven, that she would have power to live on earth until he comes again, and that she would live forever in eternity with him. "Would you like to do that?" I asked her. "Yes," she replied, "I would love to." So on 6:26 On Tuesday evening, July 21st, Linda came to know Jesus. The time is important, because at 7 o'clock the meeting started and a young couple was in the audience. The following Friday a letter was slipped under my door. I will read it for you:

I just had to share with you that my husband just told me this afternoon that he asked Jesus to be his personal Savior on Tuesday night [after I had told the story of Linda's conversion]. We both sat here and cried our eyes out with joy and happiness. As for me, I have rededicated my life to the Lord this week. I was born into a Christian home, but I so desire to have total faith in the Lord. Doug and I have been married for only seven months, and the Lord certainly chose the right time to bring us both on track. We are excited about our new faith and looking forward to seeing what the Lord has planned for us. Please pray for us as we really start our new (and renewed) Christian life together. Praise the Lord!

Your brother and sister in Christ,

Lynn and Doug.

We are living in the age of the Spirit, an age when God is using all kinds of people and circumstances--even rebellious and selfish people like me--to be instruments in his wonderful plan of redemption. He is calling out of every nation a people for his name's sake, and he wants you and I to be part of that.

Close to the end of his letter to the Galatians, Paul said to these believers who were being tempted to abandon their freedom in Christ and come once more under the yoke of slavery.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free, therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. (Gal.5:1, 2)

The law cannot justify us any more than it could the Galatians in that first century day. We are justified, declared righteous, as they were, by the grace of God, through faith. Our salvation is a gift of God. It does not depend on some work of righteousness by us but on his grace. Let us thank him for that.

---

Catalog No. 4051

Acts 15:1-12

Eighth Message

Ron R. Ritchie

July 26, 1987

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.