

Salvation for All the World

1 Kings 8:37–43, Acts 15:6–11

As our text in Acts begins with the words, “Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter,” our first task is to remind ourselves what “this matter” is. It is indeed a very important matter, for it concerns the way of salvation. At the beginning of our chapter we were told that “certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” To be saved is to have our sins forgiven and receive the promise of heaven. All of us have sinned and are guilty in the sight of a holy God. The only way we can have our guilt removed is by the precious blood of Christ. Christ died for our sins. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All who look to him in faith are saved. Our sins are washed away by his blood, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us as a free gift. The Judaizers wanted to add another condition: those who come to Christ must also be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. So which is it: is a guilty sinner saved by Christ alone, or is he saved by Christ, plus something else: circumcision and obedience to the law? Obviously it is a very important question. Both points of view cannot be right. On a matter of such great importance the church must speak with one voice.

Now at this point in time the apostles alone could have settled the matter. Out of his seventy disciples Christ had chosen twelve and invested them with authority to teach his gospel. To this number was added the apostle Paul, who was converted on the road to Damascus. The apostles could have sought the mind of Christ and spoken with apostolic authority, and the matter would have been settled. But led by the Spirit, the church chose a different course. The apostles and elders would come together, search the Scriptures, debate the matter and render a decision in accordance with God’s word, establishing a precedent for all time: weighty matters are settled in church councils. Local issues can be settled at the sessional level, regional issues at the presbyterial level, and issues that affect the whole denomination at the General Assembly level. Perhaps at some point in the future the whole church worldwide might again call for an ecumenical counsel to decide a critical point of doctrine. The chances of this happening in our lifetime are slight, but Christ is building his church and purifying it by faith. His goal is at the final day to present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. Never underestimate the power of Christ!

As we have seen, Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church that they had planted. Faithful churches *must* have elders: men with proven leadership capabilities who are mature in the faith and have the confidence of the people. They are never imposed from above but chosen by the people in a show of hands.

Our own congregation has a pastor and four elders who sit in a session. Pastors and elders in a region sit as a presbytery. Our own Presbytery of Michigan and Ontario will meet this Friday, and the church's prayers should be with the body for God's guidance and blessing. God's work done God's way will experience God's blessing.

As we explain and apply our text this morning let us consider three points: (1) God's choice, (2) God's knowledge and (3) God's grace. First,

1. God's choice

At the Jerusalem council the apostle Peter arose to speak. This was altogether appropriate, as Peter was the recognized leader among the apostles. In the lists of the Twelve in the synoptic gospels Peter's name always appears first. Peter was one of the three in Christ's inner circle, and it was to Peter as the representative of the Twelve to whom Christ gave the "keys of the kingdom," the power to bind and loose, a power that, if exercised in accord with Holy Scripture, would be ratified in heaven itself. This power is exercised through the preaching of the gospel and through discipline. One author explains it this way: "First, by preaching the gospel the kingdom of God is opened to believers and shut to the impenitent, and secondly, by discipline, serious offenders are excluded from the church until they repent In either case, forgiveness is mediated through the church, acting in the Spirit and through the Word."¹ The "power of the keys" shows the importance of the church in the matter of salvation. Some people say they believe in Christ but want nothing to do with the church, but the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given to the church. All who profess Christ ought to become part of the covenant people, Christ's church on earth, to receive God's blessing.

So Peter, as the recognized leader among the apostles, rises to speak at the Jerusalem council. He says, "A good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (Acts 15:7). Here, he refers to his preaching to a Gentile household, the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, back in Acts 10. At first, Peter did not want to go there. But having seen a vision of a great sheet being let down from heaven, containing all manner of unclean animals, and hearing the voice of Christ, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat ... What God has cleansed you must not call common," he had become persuaded that God wanted him to go there to preach Christ. Indeed, through Peter's mouth this Roman household would hear the word of the gospel, believe on Christ and receive his Holy Spirit. It was a landmark event: Peter, the recognized leader among the apostles, received Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ.

But notice specifically how Peter says this came about: "A good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear." The word for

¹ R. N. Caswell, "Power of the Keys," *New Bible Dictionary* (Logos Bible Software)

“chose” is ἐξελέξατο—God “elected.” Here is our sovereign God, working behind the scenes in heaven to accomplish his purpose on earth. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is a great comfort to all who love Christ. As individual human beings we feel powerless in the face of powerful forces seeking to throw off the yoke of Christ and institute a purely secular, antichristian society. “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” But the Bible assures us that God, at every moment, is in heaven, working all things according to his own perfect will. Christ will build his church, and the gates of hell shall not be able to resist it. Tyrants want to subject us and neutralize the power of ordinary Christians. But we have a mighty Savior, and he is in control! Though evil happens to us in this vale of tears, God is on his throne, and he promises to protect us. At every moment our Savior intercedes for us. He has the power to lead all his true sons and daughters to glory. Of all that the Father has given him he will lose nothing, but will raise them up at the last day. Our God is a powerful God. The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!

So when bitter disappointments and reversals happen in this life, we should not lose hope! Christ still is seated on the throne. He has not forgotten us. We are still the objects of his love. He has taught us to say, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” He will never fail us!

Oh, how we need to grab hold of that word “God elected.” We, his saints, were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Paul uses the very same word that’s in our text, ἐξελέξατο—literally, he *elect*ed us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Way back in eternity past God the Father elected a people and gave them to his Son. He elected us, not on the basis of anything we had done, or would do, but on the basis of his own choice. “Even so, Father, for it seemed good in thy sight.” All were equally unworthy. “*All* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” “As in Adam *all* die.”

But Christ himself is God’s elect: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine *elect*, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:1). In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures that was in use in Jesus’ time, the word is ἐκλεκτός—elect. Christ is the elect Son, and all the elect are in him. In Christ we are elect, and we are safe. The natural man hates the doctrine of election because it is a reminder of a sovereign God to whom men will ultimately give account. Even some Christians are uncomfortable with the doctrine of election because they somehow think that it makes God guilty for sending deserving sinners to hell. But the fact is that *none* of us are deserving. *All* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. The truth is that out of the mass of undeserving sinners—rebels against the Lord of heaven—God elected some and passed by others equally undeserving. He was under no obligation to save any. As a free and sovereign

being he had the freedom to do whatsoever he wills in the armies of heaven. We who are elected in Christ before the foundation of the world were undeserving—we had no claim upon God’s love; in fact, we were spiritually dead. But God chose us in eternity past, and in time the Son sent his Spirit to regenerate our hearts, to give us the new nature capable of responding to his gospel and accepting his Son. He convinced us of our sin and misery, enlightened our minds in the knowledge of Christ, renewed our wills, and persuaded and enabled us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel. Salvation is all of grace—praise his holy name!

This is reflected in the words of our text. The words “a good while ago” are literally *from the ancient days*. God himself is “the Ancient of days,” a title given to him in Daniel 7, where it is used three times. “The Ancient of days” refers to God’s presence in eternity past. In the ancient days the Ancient of days made a choice of a people to give to his Son. And in time the eternal Son came to this earth and became a man. He went to the cross and died for his people, making perfect satisfaction for sin. He rose again the third day and ascended to heaven, where he poured out his Spirit upon his church. In those same ancient days God chose Peter. He chose him for a specific office: to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. In his perfect plan, Gentiles would be included in the church. Why did he do this? “To the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph. 1:6). Salvation is all of grace.

As Christians, let us give thanks for God’s sovereign election. In a fallen world, bad things happen. Take yesterday’s earthquake in the tiny Polynesian nation of Tonga, for example. A giant undersea volcano erupted, spewing steam and ash heavenward and causing a great earthquake and tsunami which inundated the little island of Tonga and eventually caused a giant wave to crash into California, far across the Pacific. Now we do not yet know the extent of the devastation in Tonga. According to an online encyclopedia, Tonga was home to about 100,000 people, 98% of whom are Christians—mostly United Methodist. It is very likely that many of these Christians lost their homes and their lives in the earthquake and tsunami. Why did God allow this to happen? We do not know the full reason, but we can rest assured that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Whatever happens in this vale of tears is for God’s glory and his people’s good. Everything! He who ordained all things from the beginning is even now working out all his holy will from the courts of heaven—and we can trust him. Amen! Here, then, is God’s choice. Secondly,

2. God’s knowledge

We read in verse 8 that “God, *who knows the heart*, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us.” Here is God’s knowledge, and it is perfect. The church actually coined a word for this: καρδιογνώστης; the word is used only two times: here, and back in Acts 1:24. The word καρδιογνώστης is made up of two elements: *cardio-* and the word meaning *to know*. The first element

comes into English in the phrases *cardiac arrest*, *cardiogram*, *cardiovascular*, *cardiologist*. But God, who made our fleshly heart and gave it the ability to keep on pumping and circulating blood throughout our bodies for a hundred or more years of human life, is the only one who knows our deepest thoughts and motives, what in Scripture is called our *heart*. “The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). You and I can observe outward actions and make judgments as to whether they are or are not in conformity with God’s standard for all men in Holy Scripture. But what we or any human being cannot do is to know definitively another person’s heart motivation. Hate-crime legislation, which imposes stricter penalties for crimes committed out of hatred for another individual based on race or sexual preference, is fundamentally evil, as it impowers a judge and jury to judge what was in a man’s or woman’s heart at the time a crime was committed—something that no other person, even a judge, can know with certainty. Only the Lord is the καρδιογνώστης, the Knower of hearts.

God’s knowledge of you is perfect. He knows your parentage, your background, your family, your likes and dislikes, your habits, your weaknesses, your strengths, your attitudes, your motivations. He knows whether you’ve been bad or good. He knows everything about everybody. Nothing can be hidden from him. Paul writes, “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts” (1 Cor. 4:5). You cannot fool God. At the final judgment he will “make manifest”—that is, *reveal*, the counsels of the hearts. You may think that you are getting away with some sin that you indulge in secret, but at the final day, everyone will know. That which was done in secret will be proclaimed from the housetops. The only safe course is to commit your life to Christ and live a life of integrity, obedience and self-sacrifice before him. Become his worshiper and confess your faith in the company of his church. Hear the preaching of his word and let his body minister to you in your weakness. Don’t neglect the means of grace—the word, the sacraments and prayer. Take time to “speak with one another” (Eph. 5:19); speak with your fellow Christians, building them up in their faith.

Peter makes the point that “God, who knows the heart, acknowledged [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.” Here in this one verse are two references to the heart.

Before the sermon we read part of King Solomon’s eloquent prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem in 1 Kings 8. Solomon prays for God’s blessing upon God’s people as they come to offer their sacrifices. He begs God to hear his people, forgive their sins and bless them as they face various situations. Solomon speaks of “whatever plague or whatever sickness there is” (v. 37). As

God's people experience a plague—something akin to what we are experiencing right now with Covid—each person should “know the plague of his own heart,” that is, be aware of “his sin as the cause of his distress, and own it, though ever so privately committed” (John Gill). Our world may be experiencing a plague right now—though there are countries in Africa and India that seem to be little affected—but the plague of which we must be most afraid is the plague of sin in our hearts. All of us are affected by this plague. The word in the original for plague comes from the verb *to touch*. When a plague happens, everybody is touched—rich and poor, highborn and lowborn, prepared and unprepared. But the plague of sin in our hearts comes from our forefather Adam, whose first transgression brought sin upon the whole human race. No human has escaped the touch—the plague—of Adam's sin. As our covenantal head who bore the genetic material for the whole human race in his own person, his first transgression brought original sin upon us, his descendants. “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.” As the sin of our covenantal head, Adam, has touched us, so the righteousness of Christ, our covenantal head, touches us as well. All who look to him in sincere faith are washed from their sins in his blood and receive his perfect righteousness as a free gift; praise his holy name!

Our Old Testament text, like our New Testament text, contains multiple references to the heart. Solomon intercedes for God's people, saying, “when each one knows the plague of his own *heart*, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose *heart* You know (for You alone know the *hearts* of all the sons of men).” God infallibly knows when his people are sincere, and when they are playing semantic games, and he will answer accordingly.

And notice one thing more: Solomon's prayer extends not only to the native-born Jews but to the “foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake.” God is no respecter of persons. Those who come to him in true faith, whether Jew or Gentile, are received by him. As the hymnwriter Joseph Hart put it, “Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him.” We ought not to brood over our background or our parentage or our apparent lack of advantages. God is sovereign over these things as well, and he chose the precise background he wanted for each of us. None of these things is either a head start nor an impediment to receiving his salvation. Our job as his disciples is to trust in God's sovereign purpose and give thanks to him for his salvation. His choice is perfect, his knowledge is perfect; thirdly, let's consider

3. God's grace

Peter points out to the Jerusalem council that God had sovereignly poured out his salvation on the Gentiles, giving them the Holy Spirit, purifying their hearts by faith, and delivering them from the obligation to keep the law as a condition of salvation. He concludes his remarks by stating, “we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.” Note the phrase “through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” For both Jew and Gentile, salvation is by grace alone. God owes salvation to no man. The only way any man can receive salvation is freely, by grace. If you feel you have earned your salvation, then you are not saved. If you feel you merit salvation, then you are not saved. If you feel God owes you salvation, then you are not saved.

Peter’s theology agrees perfectly with Paul’s. Paul wrote: “For *by grace* are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Though good works are requisite as the *fruit* and *evidence* of saving faith (v. 10), they are not the *ground* of our salvation, which is faith in the finished work of Christ. Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures. He was buried, and rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures. That is the *gospel*—the good news of Christ’s saving work. Christ has done what we could never do: he has shed his own blood as the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He has reconciled us to God. He has saved his people from their sins. He has poured out his Holy Spirit to regenerate our spiritually-dead hearts and give us the gift of faith. He has perfectly fulfilled all the demands of God’s holy law. To him be the glory, amen.

We have seen (1) God’s choice, (2) God’s knowledge and (3) God’s grace. God’s salvation is not for the Jews alone but is for all the world. At the final day, men and women from every kingdom, tribe and nation will lift their voices with ours to sing the praises of Christ. Salvation is for all the world, not just the Jews. Amen.