

Sovereign Grace

Acts 16:6-15

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. **7** And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. **8** So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. **9** And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." **10** And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

The Conversion of Lydia

11 So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, **12** and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. **13** And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. **14** One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. **15** And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Sermon Notes

In v.11 we come to another major transition in Acts—the addition of Luke to Paul's missionary team. We know he joins them because this is the first occurrence of the plural first person, "we." It is also interesting to note that Paul and his companions were visiting churches they did not plant. For instance, they began the second journey with a visit to churches in Syria and Cilicia. In Paul's first journey, he only went as far east as Derbe in Galatia; Cilicia and Syria were even farther east. Apparently the early Church was not utterly dependent on its ministers. They organized and planted churches on their own. Surely they dared to do so because they knew that they served a sovereign God, which is the theme of our passage this morning. In these verses, Luke encourages us to understand that the gift of God's grace is sovereignly dispensed.

I. Gives Grace (6-10)

There is a detail we typically miss in the account of the famous story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Without grasping that detail, one cannot appreciate the full impact of the Lord's parable. As you recall, the younger son impudently demanded his inheritance early. In effect, he wished for the early death of his father so that he could get his money. The event would have been publicly humiliating for the father. Regardless of that and even though he was not obligated to give the inheritance, he yielded it to his ungrateful son. Apparently he knew full well that his son would squander it and return, because his father saw him when he first appeared on the horizon. The father had been watching for his return.

Though the son was humiliated, he had not yet been fully humbled. While eating with the pigs, he devised a plan for his return complete with a speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." While the speech expresses greater humility, there is still a note of pride because he proposes that he can earn his way back to respectability in his father's household. He did not

fully grasp that the punishment he deserved for such public disrespect for a father was severe.

Here is the detail we tend to overlook. As the father embraces the son, the son begins his speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son," but he never completes it. The father stops him and in so doing dictates the conditions of his return. The son cannot earn his way back. His restoration to the household will be by grace or nothing.

That idea of paying for grace is one many of us have. We do not generally like things we have not earned or contributed to. It often wounds our pride to have to accept the help of benefactors. And some of us even insist that we have to pay for or contribute to the benefits of grace we receive freely from God. However, when we do God is not impressed. He is actually offended, because grace is not grace unless it is freely given and his grace is freely given to us for the praise of his glory. He is a sovereignly gracious God and will share his glory with no other.

To live a humble and secure Christian life, one must understand that God sovereignly distributes his grace. It humbles us to realize that he owes grace to no one and it encourages us to understand that the one who gave it to us in the first place is the one who sustains us in it.

A. Overrules our plans

The first indication that God sovereignly distributes his grace comes through this rather strange account in vv.6-10. After visiting existing churches in Syria, Cilicia, and Galatia, Paul and his companions struck out to plant new churches in previously unreached territories. They were heading in a northwesterly direction when they came to a crossroads. To their right was Bithynia, the northernmost province of Asia Minor. To their left was Macedonia. Paul and his company tried to go right into Bithynia. That direction made common sense. First, no one in the ancient world boarded a ship unless it was absolutely necessary. And secondly, by proceeding in that way, they would have circumscribed Asia Minor and effectively reached the whole of Asia's population.

It was a brilliant plan, but it was not God's. Through a vision, God called the missionary team to cross over to Macedonia. Why? Perhaps it was because God had an even better plan. By crossing the Helleponte of the Aegean Sea over to Macedonia, Paul established a beachhead for reaching all of Europe! Could it be that God turned them away from one province in order to reach a whole continent? By Paul's second missionary journey the Gospel had spread from the Middle East to Africa, then to Asia, and finally to Europe. The Gospel spread rapidly across Europe—eventually to the ancestors of most of us—and from there to America. Am I, as a descendent of Europeans, ever glad that God sent Paul to Europe! Of course I do not know all of God's purposes in turning Paul from Bithynia but we can certainly infer that reaching Europe was at least one of them. God's plans, even when they are different from ours and initially disappointing, are always better. They are always better for us and ultimately for the Kingdom of God.

B. Distributes at will

Having said that, we must now face the fact that God turned Paul and the others away from preaching the Gospel to a certain group of people. Here is one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of God's sovereign electing grace. Some people suppose that God owes his grace to

every single person, that God is beholden to make his grace available at least to every single person in the world. If every person is going to be judged according to his relationship with Jesus, then they think that God must make him available to every one. But Paul said in Romans 1 that by virtue of the self-witness he has placed in every person's heart together with power of his testimony in the creation, there is sufficient revelation for every person to seek a relationship with God. And those who do can be saved sovereignly by God even without a Bible or a preacher. And this text shows that God in his sovereignty takes the clear presentation of the Gospel to whomever he wishes. That also means there are some for whatever reason to whom he never takes it. Why? Why does he choose some and pass over others to be the recipients of the message and/or his salvation? No one knows and the Bible gives but one explanation. Paul says in Ephesians 1 that God chose some to everlasting life out of love and for the praise of his glorious grace. There is no other reason which will ever be revealed.

What does that mean for us? It means for one that if you have yet to receive Christ, you must not put it off. If you are hearing the Gospel today it is only because God in his sovereign goodness has brought it to you. There is no guarantee that it will come to you again. The Spirit blows the message wherever he will and there is no promise that he will blow it your way again. Perhaps you will die this afternoon or maybe you will be lured away from any place that preaches the Good News and you will never hear its sweet message again. Today is the day of salvation.

If you are already a Christian your response should be that of humility. There is only one reason you heard the Gospel and that is because God in his grace chose to reveal it to you. Centuries before you were born, he took the Gospel to one of the four continents from which you come today and perhaps caused your ancestors to believe. And at some point in your personal history—for reasons sufficient unto himself—he brought the Gospel to you so that you could hear and be saved. When we forget our dependence on the Lord for his grace, he graciously (though sometimes painfully) must remind us, because the best thing for our souls is to rest on him alone.

II. **Grants Repentance (11-15)**

God's sovereignty is further illustrated in this text by the way he saves a woman named Lydia. After preaching in Troas, Paul and his companions, including Luke, next set sail for Macedonia. While Luke identifies it as a "leading city," it is unclear what he means by that. Other cities like Amphipolis could be argued to be greater. Paul was prone to go to strategic spots first, so it is reasonable to believe that Philippi was recognized as a pace-setting city for the region. It was obviously dominated by Gentiles, because there were not even enough Jews to form a synagogue which required at least ten married men. However, Paul and the others found a group of women who had gathered for prayer. They were gathered by a river, which was a common site for places of prayer.

A. Grace to women

It is significant to note that these men visited this group of women. Women were not highly regarded in the ancient world by Jews or Gentiles. The head of a Jewish household would give thanks every morning in his prayers that God had not made him a Gentile, a woman or a slave. By the end of this chapter, God will take the Gospel to each of these categories. In the previous point we learned that it is God who takes the Gospel to those he chooses. So we may conclude that it was God who took the Gospel to these women on this riverbank. Why? Because, as we also learned in the previous point, he loved them and desired to bring praise to his glorious grace.

B. Gift nature of repentance

The Bible teaches that no one repents unless God enables him to do so by grace and thus teaches us that if we would come to Christ and live faithfully in him then we must continually pray that God would give us grace to repent. For instance, David prayed, "O God, turn us . . . that we may be saved" (Ps. 80:3,7,19). Ephraim and Jeremiah prayed, "Turn me, O Lord, and I will be turned" (Je. 31:18; La. 5:21). We have already observed in our study of Acts that God gives repentance as a gift. Christ ascended in order to do so (5:31) and the Gentiles in Cornelius' household were "given repentance unto life" (11:18). And Paul teaches Timothy to pray for those members of his church who were living in rebellion, that God would "grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth that they might escape the snare of the devil being held captive by him to do his will" (2 Ti. 3:25). Finally, you will be encouraged to realize that by Christ's submitting himself to John's baptism of repentance he was repenting in your place in order to "fulfill all righteousness" for you (Mt. 3:13-15). It is clear, no one repents unless God gives grace; therefore, everyone must pray for the gift of repentance.

C. Gift nature of faith

Likewise, no one believes for salvation or continues to believe unless God enables him upon turning in repentance. The proof of one's Christianity is not a one-time turning and believing, but a *continual* turning from sin and reliance upon Christ alone. Paul says that every "spiritual blessing" (which surely includes repentance and faith) were procured by our election unto eternal life (Ep. 1:3,4). Later in that same book, Paul says it is by grace that we have been saved "through faith, *which is a gift of God*, not of works lest any man should boast" (Ep. 2:8,9). In Philippians 1:29, Paul describes the gifting of faith in the same way he describes the gifting of repentance in his letter to Timothy, that it had been "granted" to the Philippians to believe. And in our study of Acts, we have already learned that only those who have been "appointed for eternal life believe" (13:48). Later Luke explains that the brothers in Achaia believed "by grace" (18:27).