11-15-26

God's Rescue Mission

Acts 15: 1 – 21

Okay kids – and adults. It's time for a history lesson. Did you know there's a statute of a dog in New York City's Central Park? Does anybody know the dog's name and his claim to fame? I'll give you a hint: He's a Siberian husky and sled dog.

His name is Balto, and he became famous after his 1925 trip when he carried a twenty pound container of medicine to the people of Nome, Alaska. He took this trip in the dead of winter, in white out conditions, high winds, and in the middle of the night when the temperature plummeted to -35 degrees Fahrenheit. With the wind chill factored in, it probably felt like 50 below.

But Balto and his owner, Gunnar Kaasen had to go because the engine of the only aircraft that could quickly deliver the medicine was frozen and would not start. The medicine he delivered was antitoxin serum for diphtheria, a contagious disease that if left untreated could have had severe, even fatal consequences.

Chances are you may have already known about this famous journey. But did you also know that there were 20 different mushers and over 100 dogs that took part in what is sometimes called the "Great Race of Mercy"?

Nearly 1000 miles separated Anchorage from Nome and sled dog teams travelled nearly 700 of those miles. A train transported the medicine over the first 300 miles.

Another lead sled dog named Togo also took part in this memorable journey, and received recognition, but it was Balto who was honored with a statue of his likeness. His body is on display at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Go job Buckeyes!

Now I'm sure you're wondering, what does a bunch of sled dogs have to do with Acts 15?

I doubt there are few places further away from Antioch than Alaska. But here's the connection: Just like the sled dogs who were involved in a very important mission to prevent the outbreak of the deadly disease diphtheria, so Paul and Barnabus were sent on a journey to prevent the outbreak of another deadly disease, one of a spiritual matter that threatened the souls of many in the early church and quite frankly, still does today.

The serious matter that Paul and Barnabas attended to revolved around the issue of salvation and the question of whether or not God's grace is sufficient to save the souls of mankind. In other words, is there something extra that man must add to the formula to render God's salvation active in our lives?

These men from Judea seemed to think so, and they were so convinced of it that they were willing to take their teaching on the road - to Antioch, in Turkey 300 miles to the north, and the hub of the Gentile Christian church.

So as you can see, the men from Judea did not randomly or haphazardly select Antioch as their audience. They targeted Antioch for a specific reason.

How terribly mistreated they must have felt. They had done nothing wrong, but were considered guilty because of their nationality. I know the treatment they received probably seems trivial when we compare it to atrocities that have been committed toward other races throughout history, but the fact remains, it's never easy to tolerate or withstand injustice especially when we're on the receiving end of it.

Think of the last time you were mistreated. How quickly did it take to get your dander up over something that now, as you look back on it may have not been such a big deal?

But this whole situation with these – let's call them for who they are – false teachers – was a big deal, and troubling indeed. So troubling in fact, that Luke writes that *"Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question."*

Wouldn't it have been great if they had instant replay back then?

Then, just as in a football game they could have stopped play and called New York to settle a controversial call, the church of Antioch could have put a call into Jerusalem so the apostles and the elders could make a ruling.

But no, instead Paul and his companions were going to have to travel three hundred miles south to have a meeting. This meeting, known as the Jerusalem Council, occurred around 49 AD. This was approximately 15 years after Paul had been converted while on the road to Damascus.

As it happens, this meeting turns out to be extremely important even for the contemporary church because the speeches given at the council by Peter, Paul, and James address six lines of logic that establish once and for all, and beyond a shadow of a doubt that salvation of mankind is by God's grace alone, as Paul clearly states in Ephesians 2: 8 -9: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."*

Here are the six lines of logic Peter, Paul, and James used to render once and for all the verdict that man's salvation rests completely in the hands of God's grace, and there's nothing in man's power to change it.

Past revelation

Gift of the Holy Spirit

Cleansing from sin

Inability of the law to save

Miracles

Prophetic promise

Now, what's pretty cool is that there are a total of six pieces of evidence put forth by Peter, Paul and James. and six is also the number of sled dogs that typically follow the lead dog.

Balto had six sled dogs following him as he made his famous trip into Nome, and I don't know their names, but for the sake of my sermon, I'm going to give them names, with each name being a reference to one

of the points that Peter, Paul, and James used to make the all-important argument that salvation is by God's grace alone.

So here it goes:

The first dog's name is **Rev**, short for revelation.

Peter speaks of God's revelation in verse 7: *"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 is essentially taking the assembled believers back to the early days of the church. He reminded all of them that God made a choice that through Peter's ministry, the Gentiles should come to faith.

This issue was settled years earlier when the church was just a pup and God saved Cornelius and his whole household apart from circumcision and ritual. (See Acts 10: 44 -48.) His point was simple and direct: Legalists had no right to require of the Gentiles what God had not required of them. The matter was divinely settled and revealed to church leaders. Good dog, Rev.

Spirit is sled dog #2. It's short for Holy Spirit.

Peter continues in verse 8 saying, *"God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us."* Peter skillfully anticipated and refuted a possible objection to his first point. The Judaizers could have argued that since Cornelius and the others did not meet the legalistic requirements of salvation, they could not possibly be saved.

Peter, however, beats them to the punch by pointing out that God, who knows the heart, bore witness that their salvation was in fact genuine

because God gave them the Holy Spirit just as he also did to the Jewish Christians! The Gentile's receiving of the Holy Spirit definitely affirmed that their salvation was genuine. Romans 8:9, *"If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."* Maybe Spirit was a boxer!

Our third dog is **Spot** because verse 9 says, *"He purified their hearts by faith."*

In other words, the Gentiles received forgiveness of sins, and this was further proof of salvation by grace alone. Their stains and spots had been washed clean by the blood of Christ. God does not cleanse people who are not truly saved. Such forgiveness only comes by God's grace.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:7, *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."* Since the Gentile believers had already been cleansed of their sins by grace alone, what more could the law and ritual possibly add?

Bear is sled dog #4.

He reminds us that only Christ himself could bear the yoke of the law. Pete is just getting warmed up when he asks the very pointed and honest question to the legalists, *"Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?"*

What is Peter saying? Listen you guys, we Jews are unable to keep the law and we rejoice in having it lifted from us. Why burden the Gentiles with something that we couldn't keep?

Even Jesus himself commented on the religious leaders placing undue burden on those who sought to follow the law. Matthew 23: 2 – 4: *"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, so you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."*

No Jewish person was ever saved by trying to keep the law. No Jewish person was ever purified by attempting to observe the law. No Jew ever received the Holy Spirit by keeping the law.

Since the Jews' attempts to keep the law failed – outside of Christ himself - why require the Gentiles to perform this exercise of futility? In fact because Christ did keep the law, our burden is thankfully lifted.

Sled dog # 5: **Wonder.**

It is now Barnabas and Paul that take center stage to describe the *"miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them."* These miraculous signs and wonders confirmed that Paul and Barnabas were in fact God's spokesmen, and their message was salvation by grace alone.

The miracles God performed through them confirmed the truthfulness of their teaching. In contrast, the legalists had no miracles to support their teaching. The miracles were God's stamp of approval on the message that salvation is by grace alone. Wonder stands for the old dog that learned a new trick!

Prophet, sled dog #6.

With Paul and Barnabas now taking a seat, James makes the final appeal, the closing argument if you will. He summarizes Peter's first point – that God had saved the Gentiles by grace years earlier, and then reinforces his point by quoting words from Amos, an Old Testament prophet.

The Amos passage speaks of the millennial kingdom in the future when God will rebuild the tabernacle of David. Along with David's tent, in the millennial kingdom, the rest of mankind, including the Gentiles, will also seek the Lord, those who are called by God's name.

James point with the help of amos is an easy one: Gentiles will be in God's kingdom without first becoming jewish converts. Therefore there is no need for them to become Jewish converts in the present age.

James speech is a fitting conclusion to all the speeches given in defense of salvation by grace alone through faith. Peter stressed that Gentiles in the <u>past</u> were saved by grace alone. James concludes by showing this will be the case in the <u>future.</u> Therefore, Gentile salvation in the <u>present</u> must also be by grace alone.

<u>Wow, what a team!</u>

Rev, Spirit, Spot, Bear, Wonder and Prophet, all pulling together along with the lead dog Balto to deliver the irrefutable and undeniable theological truth that salvation is by grace alone through faith.

But you still might be wondering why make such a big deal about this one theological truth?

It's a big deal because this truth separates true Christianity from all other religions.

Think of it this way:

All other religions are like the people in Nome Alaska. The good doctor of Nome could have made the decision to fight the deadly diphtheria disease without any outside help. He could have prescribed chicken soup, more rest, or fresh air to all his patients in hopes of curing them, but no form of exercise or diet was going to cure them. They needed the specific antidote for their specific illness. So, he called for outside help.

Hinduism, Buddhism, the Islamic faith, Catholicism, even secularism demand that a person mix up their own concoction to save themselves.

Perhaps exercises on clearing the mind to reach a state of Nirvana will prove to be your salvation.

Maybe it's observing the five pillars of Islam that will finally tip the scales in your favor to produce salvation.

Maybe it's a matter of going to confession, praying the rosary, and never missing communion that will ultimately put you in the good graces of God.

Maybe it's believing that mankind is inherently good and that salvation is found in new technology and education.

These are all religious ideas that are bantered about to somehow ease the consciences of mankind who want to believe that somehow they must contribute to their own salvation. We always want to be in control of own destiny in size or shape.

But thankfully, the Bible tells us otherwise. God has already offered the remedy. It comes in the form of his Son Jesus, and just like in the days of Moses when the Israelites had to look upon the golden snake that hung from the staff and believe that this simple act would heal them from venomous snake bites, so we by faith must look to Christ, God's one and only Son provided for us to be our substitute – our antidote against sin and death - to look upon him as our Savior and Redeemer, the one who fulfilled the law and so becomes our righteousness if we'll only believe and have faith. This is God's mission of mercy to us. Let us accept his help with thanksgiving in our heart. Amen.