

‘The Gospel of the apostles.’ (4)

A few weeks ago, I went to McDonald’s with Josh, He saw on the menu that you could have an order of 6, 9 or 20 Chicken McNuggets and so Josh went ahead and asked for a half dozen nuggets. The young person behind the counter said, ‘sorry, we don’t have half dozen nuggets’. Josh said, ‘you don’t?’ ‘No’ said the young person, ‘we only have six, nine, or twenty’. Josh said, ‘so I can’t order a half-dozen nuggets, but I can order six?’ ‘That’s right,’ they said. So, Josh just shook his head and ordered six McNuggets.

And I guess the point is that there are times when people say the same thing but just use different words. The last time we were together we saw how Paul was defending his apostleship. He preached the same Gospel that was preached by all the apostles. They may have presented the Gospel using different words but what they were all saying was, salvation is by grace and faith and not by works of law or meritorious deeds on the part of man.

His argument to the Judaizing teachers is that all the apostles agreed on the message he was preaching. In Galatians 1 he finished talking about his trip to Syria and Cilicia where he said he was unknown to the brethren in Judea but they praised God for Paul’s conversion.

Galatians 2:1-3 “Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek”.

Now Paul made several trips to Jerusalem after his conversion, so let me give you a quick outline of those trips. In Acts 9:26-30 and Galatians 1:18 we find that Paul went there to meet the apostles. In Acts 11:27-30 we find Paul taking famine relief to Judea. In Acts 15 he attended the Jerusalem meeting when the church dealt with the matter of legalism. In Acts 18:22 Paul greeted the church after the second missionary journey. In Acts 21:15-23 Paul made a last evangelistic effort after the third missionary journey.

And when Paul mentions he went to Jerusalem ‘again’ here in Galatians 2:1, I believe he’s referring to Acts 15 which was our Scripture reading. Because it’s in Acts 15 we the occasion when the church met to deal with the threat of the Judaizing teachers.

Let me give you a quick summary of what’s happening here in Acts 15. In Judea, there’s a bunch of men talking about circumcision. And what they’re saying is that no one can be saved unless they’re circumcised. Paul and Barnabas don’t agree and decide to head to Jerusalem to take up the topic with the twelve apostles and elders to get their opinion. Some of the Christians there say that male converts need to be circumcised because a follower of Jesus still has to follow the laws of Moses.

Peter stands up and tells everyone that God is good with the Gentiles. If He wants to give them the Holy Spirit, He will, despite what the Jews think of the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas agree and tell all kinds of stories about how faithful and Spirit-filled the new Gentile Christians are. James also tells everyone that he agrees with Peter and he decides that there are only a few things Gentiles need to avoid.

They shouldn’t worship idols, have sex outside of marriage, eat any animal that hasn’t been ritually slaughtered, or drink animal blood. And so, after some debate, the apostles write up a letter that Paul and Barnabas will circulate to the Gentile believers and in Antioch, everyone is glad to hear the news.

And that’s what’s happening and that’s what Paul is dealing with here in Galatians 2. He’s referring to that very meeting which was held in Jerusalem. He’s dealing with the legalistic Judaizers who were saying you have to believe in Jesus for salvation but you also need to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses.

Now notice he also mentions that he took Barnabas with him, Barnabas whose name means ‘the son of encouragement’, was exactly that, an encouragement. When you read through the Book of Acts you will find him involved in so many things. He personally went with Paul to many places, he was his travelling companion on some of his missionary journeys.

Someone once said, ‘Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you’. Barnabas literally was an encouragement to Paul and all the saints he helped and worked with and we still remember him today for his encouragement.

Paul says that not only was Barnabas with him but **Titus** was with him too. Now Titus was possibly one of the converts from the Antioch of Syria church, since this is the first time we see him in the company of Paul. We know that Paul wrote a letter to Titus and since Paul and Barnabas returned from the first journey to Antioch, we know that Titus, this Gentile believer accompanied Paul to Jerusalem for the meeting of **Acts 15**.

Now notice again that Paul says the message to go to Jerusalem came by **'revelation'**. In other words, God sent Paul to Jerusalem. The significance of the **Acts 15** Jerusalem meeting is seen in the fact that God instructed Paul to be present at this meeting. **But why did God want Paul to attend this meeting?**

Acts 15:1+2 "Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 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."

God sent Paul to Jerusalem to stop the onslaught of Jewish legalism that was invading the church. And it was while Paul was in Jerusalem here in **Acts 15** that he explained to those present the things he's been doing among the Gentiles. He wanted the Galatians to know that he didn't go for the purpose of either receiving instruction from the apostles or to be sent forth by the apostles. He went to announce his mission among the Gentiles that God had commissioned him to do. He went to inform the apostles and that the message he preached wasn't a Gospel plus circumcision and works.

And look at how he described those who were accepted as leaders in the church. **Galatians 2:6** "Those who were held in high esteem." **Galatians 2:9** "Those esteemed as pillars." Now he's obviously talking about Peter, John and James, the Lord's brother. All of whom with the exception of Peter were killed by Herod before that meeting in **Acts 15**. **Acts 12:1+2** "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword."

It's also significant to note that Paul's meeting with the apostles and elders was first in private. **Why?** Well, he simply wanted to make sure that the church hadn't been influenced by the Judaizing teachers before the matter was taken before the church. And that's a lesson we can all learn from, **isn't it?**

Too many times problems are brought before a congregation to be dealt with, without all the facts being made known first. I remember one brother used to complain to me that the church wasn't helping him in his time of need and so I brought it to the church's attention. Only to find out that there were lots of people who have offered him help but he declined it because he didn't want to burden people. Now loved ones you can't have it both ways, you can't be telling some Christians one thing and creating a problem by saying another thing.

Paul says he did it privately because, **"He wanted to be sure he was not running and had not been running his race in vain."** In other words, he wanted to make sure that he and the other apostles were in total agreement in his mission to the Gentiles. That's why he said in **Acts 15:24** **"We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said."**

Paul says us that Titus went to Jerusalem as a representative of the Gentile Christians. Once the legalistic Jewish brethren in the church of Jerusalem realised that he was a Gentile, they compelled him to be circumcised. In the mind of the Judaizing teachers, Titus wasn't saved because he hadn't been circumcised. **Does that sound familiar with some of our brethren's teaching?** You can't be saved unless you've been baptised by a church of Christ minister! You can't be baptised until you know all the church's doctrines and beliefs!

You see Paul was never going to bind anything on anyone, either culturally or religiously and make it a necessity for salvation. He simply didn't allow these false brethren to get away with their theology of binding circumcision and Jewish ceremonies.

Galatians 2:4+5 "This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you". Anyone who seeks to bind their legal requirements on the church will often resort to these extreme measures in order to add support to their position.

And what they are actually trying to do is, put Christians back into bondage.

But Paul says throughout this letter that Christians have been set free from those bondages. **Galatians 3:25** “Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.”

Galatians 4:3 “So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.”

Galatians 4:9 “But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”

Galatians 5:1 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Now please understand when the Bible talks about Christian freedom, it’s not talking about we’re free to do whatever we like, whenever we like. The Bible says we’re free from those old laws of bondage. **James 1:25** “But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do”.

In Christ, there is law to direct the moral behaviour of Christians but it’s a law of choice. God gives us the guidelines and principles but Christians are given the liberty as to how those principles are to be applied. In other words, the law of Christ, gives liberty from the necessity of perfect law-keeping.

Why would anyone want to go back to that kind of system of salvation? **James 2:10** “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” Paul is saying that these Judaizing teachers, were compelling believers to return to a system of law-keeping that didn’t bring justification.

But Paul was having none of it, neither was Barnabas or Titus. They all understood that giving into these false ideas of religion meant they would have to give up their freedom in Christ. **Galatians 5:1+2** “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”

So why wouldn’t they give in? Paul says in order that, ‘the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you’. God’s grace has delivered us from the bondage of having to keep law perfectly in order to be justified before God or to perform meritorious deeds in order to seek atonement for our sin. This is the truth that the Gospel brings freedom to all those who are in bondage.

Loved ones when we are presenting this Gospel to the world, it needs to involve the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Just before Jesus died on the cross, He says in **John 19:30** ‘it is finished’. **And if there were ever a time in history when mankind should use William Wallace’s words just before he was hung, drawn and quartered in London, it was at the cross.** Jesus said, ‘it is finished’ whilst mankind shouts out, ‘freedom’.

Paul continues in **Galatians 2:6-10** “As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favouritism—they added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.”

Paul tells us the purpose of the Jerusalem visit was threefold. Paul wanted the Galatians to know that the leaders in Jerusalem didn’t add to his message of the truth of the Gospel. The leaders in Jerusalem gave Barnabas and him the right hand of fellowship. And finally, the Jerusalem leadership encouraged him to remember the poor, which was something the Judaizing teachers may not have been doing.

There were men of great reputation in the church of Jerusalem, men like Peter, James, Silas and John. But Paul wanted the Galatians to know that God didn’t have respect of persons that was so common among some leaders. **Romans 2:11** “For God does not show favouritism.”

In fact, God, has never been more favourable of one person over another. **Deuteronomy 10:17** “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes”.

We all know that leaders have different abilities of leadership in the church, but not different ranks according to those abilities, or according some supposed authority over their fellow man. When Paul met with these leaders, they didn't add any new truth to what he already knew. But more importantly, they weren't adding works of law or merit to the truth of the Gospel.

Notice that Paul uses the phrase, ‘**the gospel of the uncircumcised.**’ Peter, James and John immediately recognised that Paul was given a mission to the Gentiles. This mission had been given to him as a specific mission in much the same way that Peter was given a specific mission to preach to the Jews. You see the church is made up of different body parts and each one has its own abilities, but not one part is more important than the others.

Romans 12:4 “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function.” In other words, God was working through Paul just as much as He was working through Peter. And God's work through both Paul and Peter was successful. And like I said earlier Peter, James and John recognised that Paul's work among the Gentiles was the work of God.

And when they recognised this, they extended to Paul and Barnabas their full agreement and blessing that they continue their mission to the Gentiles. **And what was that mission?** To preach the truth of the Gospel and bring people into a covenant of freedom in Christ.

What Paul is doing here is arguing that Peter, James and John agreed with his mission that was given to him directly by Jesus. You see because Peter, James and John resided in what seemed to be the seat of Jewish legalism in Jerusalem. The Judaizing teachers falsely assumed that they would side with them on the matter against Paul.

And so, in order to make sure that the Judaizing teachers had no support from the church in Jerusalem, the apostles, elders and the whole church sent the letter we read in **Acts 15:23-29**. **Acts 15:24** “We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.”

In the letter, they stated that the legalistic Judaizing teachers had been given no such authorisation from the Jerusalem church. The legalists were now on their own, they had cut themselves off from the family of believers by their teaching of binding laws where God had not bound.

And isn't that still true today? You will often find that any church which has legalist views of God and His grace are on their own. They don't fellowship with other churches or have anything to do with the other Christians outside their system of religion.

Now remember it wasn't Paul's mission to specifically minister to the poor, it was his mission to preach the Gospel and remember the poor. In accomplishing his mission, he was encouraged by Peter, James and John to remember that we must work together to help those who were the victims of the circumstances.

That's what he's doing when he writes in **1 Corinthians 16:1-4** “Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.”

The unified teaching of both Paul and the other apostles was that both agreed concerning correct teaching, but also correct Christian benevolent behaviour. Because correct teaching will always produce unity among those who seek to do the will of the Father. **Philippians 1:27** “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.”

Now loved ones I realise that this sermon has been more like a Bible study, but it's important for us to remember the background to the letter. You see Jesus didn't come and present you with a Gospel that enslaves you, He came to bring you freedom.

Jesus says in John 8:31+32 “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

There’s a story about how one day the devil was walking along with one of his servants and they saw a man ahead of them pick up something shiny. ‘What did he find?’ asked the servant. ‘A piece of the truth,’ the devil replied. ‘Doesn’t it bother you that he found a piece of the truth?’ asked the servant. To which the devil replied, ‘No, I will see to it that he makes a religion out of it.’

You see loved ones there are many preachers out there who offer partial freedom but offer it at a cost. Televangelist Creflo Dollar has asked 200,000 followers to donate \$300 apiece so he can buy a luxury jet to preach worldwide. He says, ‘We believe it is time to replace this aircraft so that our Pastors and staff can continue to safely and swiftly share the Good News of the Gospel worldwide.’

What’s wrong with using Easy Jet? What’s wrong with Delta airlines? The freedom Jesus offers is a spiritual freedom from the bondage of sin and his people don’t need fancy jets to preach the truth of the Gospel. John 14:6 tells us that Jesus Himself is the Truth. And according to Romans 6:22 and Romans 8:1+2 knowing the Truth will set us free from sin, free from condemnation, and free from death.

Don’t you want to be free? Free from the consequences of your old sins, free from the sin that’s just dragging you down in life. Free from the guilt and shame you’ve been carrying for years. That’s what the Gospel which Paul and the other apostles offers us all, the question is, will you allow Jesus to set you free? Knowing truth means you will know Jesus and knowing Jesus means He will set you free.