

## Lesson 3

# Circumcision, Salvation, and the True Gospel

## *Galatians 2.1-10*

### Introduction

Wherever Paul went, he faced backlash for what he preached. In Galatia the church was being attacked from within from false teachers who sought to add human works to the requirements of salvation, i.e., Jesus + works. They did not deny the need for Christ in salvation, but also maintained that there were works necessary on our part to complete salvation. The Judaizing teachers claimed that Paul's wasn't an authentic gospel. He was accused of teaching a watered down, easy gospel. His status as an apostle was also being challenged. Was he a real apostle like the rest? Did he have authority over the church like Peter or John or the others? Paul wrote this epistle to preserve the truth of the gospel and defend against these false teachers who attacked both the gospel Paul preached and the man Paul was.

In chapter 1, we read Paul's defense of his ministry and message. He heard the gospel from the risen Christ himself. No man had revealed it to him. What he received was the full and authentic gospel and anyone who taught differently was to be under a curse. He was not a man pleaser .... Everything he did was for the glory of God. Now, in chapter 2, he continues his defense as he details his visit to Jerusalem.

#### **Galatians 2:1-5**

**1** Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.

**2** I went up according to a revelation and presented to them the gospel I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those recognized as leaders. I wanted to be sure I was not running, and had not been running, in vain.

**3** But not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.

**4** This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus in order to enslave us.

**5** But we did not give up and submit to these people for even a moment, so that the truth of the gospel would be preserved for you.

### **Another Trip to Jerusalem**

After Paul's conversion in Damascus (Acts 9, 22, 26), he had no contact with any of the other apostles until after three years. Acts 9.26-28 records a brief fifteen-day visit there where he met Peter and James. A second visit to Jerusalem happened around 46 as he and Barnabas delivered famine relief to the believers in Judea (Acts 11.27-30; 12.24-25). Now, 14 years after his first visit with Peter and James, he went back to Jerusalem, this time under the compulsion of a revelation from God. The point of mentioning this lengthy time span is that Paul wanted to prove that he was well established in preaching the gospel even before the Jerusalem conference and his first missionary journey that covered areas of southern Galatia.

Many tie this visit with the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, probably in 48 or 49. Luke records the historical account here:

Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom

prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.” After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue, Acts 15.1-2.

Barnabas and Titus went with Paul to Jerusalem. Titus was an uncircumcised Gentile. He came along to be a “test case.” Would he be required to be circumcised to be saved? Upon their arrival, Paul publicly taught the gospel that he declared to the Gentiles (see also Acts 15:4-5). Not only did Paul preach in public, but also, he held private meetings with the apostles and Jerusalem church leadership, (2.2b).

Luke tells us these meetings were tense and filled with debate (Acts 15:6-7a). The Judaizing teachers (former Pharisees) were passionate in their belief and determined to push their way through. Acts 15:5 indicates that they tried to force Titus to be circumcised. Back in Galatia, these false teachers implied that Paul’s gospel was different from the wishes of the Jerusalem apostles and if the saints at Jerusalem knew this, they would disapprove of what Paul taught. In the Galatian text, Paul clearly dispels this notion. The Gentiles did not have to be circumcised to be saved. In fact, the Jerusalem leadership accepted Titus and extended full fellowship to him (2:3).

Those who insisted on teaching the necessity of keeping works for salvation are referred to as *false brethren* (2:4). Even though they were genuine in their belief, they *really* believed circumcision was necessary to be pleasing to God; they were still *false brethren* teaching *false doctrine*. If they continued down the path they pursued, they would be lost (1:8-9; 2 John 9). It does seem that there were at least a few Christians involved who possessed improper motives. Paul makes note of how the Judaizing teachers were brought in covertly for the purpose of influencing people away from the truth. The language used in 2:4 seems to indicate that these Christians regarded Paul and the Gentiles as adversaries. Despite their pressure, Paul would not yield. He was concerned about the preservation of the gospel. This must be our concern today as well.

It is also interesting to note a contrast between liberty and bondage presented in 2:4. Freedom is found in the gospel of Christ. Those in a relationship with Christ trust in Him for salvation through grace. For the Christian, works of faith are a product of our salvation, 5:22-24. This stands in contrast to the system of bondage to which the Judaizing teachers sought to have the Galatians settle for. Law demands perfect obedience for salvation to be possible, one failure in part constitutes a failure in all, James 2:10. *Bondage* has reference to being made a slave. The Judaizing teachers wanted the Gentiles to be slaves to law.

## Paul Validated

When Paul went to Jerusalem, he received no addition to or changes in the doctrine he preached. All recognized it came from God. All recognized it was the same doctrine as espoused by the Jerusalem church. This is why *those who are in high reputation added nothing*, 2:6. Full fellowship was extended to Paul. The Jerusalem leadership was convinced that Paul’s apostleship was equal to theirs. It seems that Peter viewed Paul’s writing as having apostolic authority, 2 Peter 3:15-16.

**Galatians 2:6–10**

**6** Now from those recognized as important (what they once were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism)—they added nothing to me.

**7** On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter was for the circumcised,

**8** since the one at work in Peter for an apostleship to the circumcised was also at work in me for the Gentiles.

**9** When James, Cephas, and John—those recognized as pillars—acknowledged the grace that had been given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to me and Barnabas, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

**10** They asked only that we would remember the poor, which I had made every effort to do.

The apostles in Jerusalem didn't augment or diminish Paul's message. They refrained from enforcing circumcision on Titus and acknowledged the purity of Paul's gospel. Recognizing it as the divine revelation they themselves had received, they affirmed the legitimacy of Paul's mission. While Paul shared the gospel with the uncircumcised, Peter did the same with the circumcised. Distinct audiences, yet a shared message of Christ's redemptive power. This unity in message still echoes today as the gospel is preached across the globe.

How did this consensus emerge? Galatians 1 demonstrates that the gospel is not man-made but divinely delivered. God designated Paul, Peter, James, and John as its carriers, aiming to deliver it everywhere. Paul's writing is noteworthy. In verse 7, he says he was "entrusted" with the gospel, paralleling Peter. By verse 8, he notes how God's hand was at work in both their ministries. Verse 9 points to the grace extended to him.

**What Can We Take Away?****Gospel Ministry as Divine Trust**

In Galatians 1:16, Paul recalls God's revelation of His Son to him, marking his conversion. This divine revelation was more than just an epiphany; it denoted a calling. Through salvation, Paul was assigned a divine duty - not merely a job, but a sacred trust. He says:

On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter was for the

circumcised, 2:7.

It's awe-inspiring to consider that the Almighty entrusted His grand plan of salvation to imperfect beings. This divine strategy our redemption via Christ's blood and our being commissioned to the gospel story. It underscores the transformative power of the God we worship.

**Gospel Ministry as God's Instrumentality**

God's intention for salvation has always encompassed both Jews and Gentiles. After the resurrection, the mission to reach out to the Gentiles was fully revealed, with Paul at its helm and Peter continuing outreach to the Jews. In Galatians, Paul underscores their roles as conduits of God's message.

since the one at work in Peter for an apostleship to the circumcised was also at work in me for the Gentiles, 2:8.

Neither the message nor the mission was theirs; they were merely its stewards. Their distinct personalities remained intact, yet they were vessels, chosen and molded by God. The essence of the gospel is salvation independent of human effort, solely resting on the sacrifice of Christ. Thus, any work in His name is not about earning divine favor but is a heartfelt response to His grace. Ultimately, all glory reverts to God.

### **The Gospel as Divine Generosity**

Paul's transformation is a testament to grace. Formerly a staunch law-abiding Pharisaical Jew, his encounter with Christ changed everything. Instead of seeing the gospel as a reward for his piety, he accepted it as an unmerited gift. This mindset differentiated Paul from the Galatians' false teachers. His allegiance was solely to the gospel's integrity. Even when adversaries tried to discredit him, Paul's defense was fueled by his passion for preserving the gospel's purity. The question then emerges for all believers: What drives our allegiance to the gospel?

### **For Thought and Reflection**

1. How did the false teachers in Galatia challenge the fundamental teachings of Paul regarding salvation?
2. Why was Paul's status as an apostle in question? What arguments did he present in defense of his apostleship?
3. What significance does Paul attribute to the duration between his visits to Jerusalem in establishing his credentials as an authentic preacher of the gospel?
4. How does the account of Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile, illustrate the central debate regarding the necessity of works (specifically circumcision) for salvation?
5. In the context of the debate, how did the leadership of the Jerusalem church respond to Paul's teachings and the issue of Titus' circumcision? See also the Acts 15 account.

6. How do Paul's interactions with the Judaizing teachers in Jerusalem underscore the importance of preserving the integrity of the gospel message?
  
7. In Galatians 2:4, there's a contrast drawn between liberty in the gospel and the bondage of the law. How does this distinction relate to the broader debate on faith versus works in Christian theology?
  
8. How do the apostles in Jerusalem validate the authenticity and consistency of Paul's message with their own teachings?
  
9. Reflecting on Paul's assertion that he was "entrusted" with the gospel, what responsibilities and expectations come with being entrusted with such a divine message?
  
10. Considering Paul's transformation from a Pharisee to a passionate advocate for the purity of the gospel, what lessons can modern believers draw about the nature of grace and the essence of the gospel message?