

LESSON THREE

(2:1-10)

The Jerusalem Council (2:1-5)

1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 But because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage -- 5 to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

At last, the showdown! Back in Jerusalem where it all began, the great question would be settled: Must a Christian first of all keep the Old Testament law? The legalists were prepared to gun down Paul and his gospel of freedom. Paul was prepared to lay before everyone what God had been doing through him among the Gentiles. The other apostles were prepared to listen and discern the will of God in the matter.

V. 1 After Fourteen Years I Went Up Again To Jerusalem - During this space of fourteen years, Paul and Barnabas first labored in the church in Antioch. Then, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, they were sent out on what we call the First Missionary Journey. On this journey they passed through the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, making Christians and establishing churches. This area was called Galatia on Roman maps. Probably some of the very readers of this epistle became Christians because of this First Missionary Journey.

A careful reading of Acts, however, discloses another visit to Jerusalem by Paul (Acts 11:30). Why is there no mention of this trip in Galatians? (Certain critics, as one might expect, charge that the author here is guilty of either error or outright deception.) Surely the correct view is simply that Paul omitted mention of this trip because it was not relevant to the issue. This trip to Jerusalem had nothing to do with Paul's gospel or his apostleship. They were making delivery of money for famine relief, and that was all. If Paul had detailed everything he did during this fourteen year period, the epistle to the Galatians would have been very much longer!

With Barnabas, Taking Titus Along - Barnabas had been a fellow preacher with Paul, and went more or less as an equal. Titus was one of several helpers and was taken along not as a preacher of equal standing, but as a case in point. Titus was a Greek, not a Jew, and had never been circumcised. Would he now, as a Christian, have to submit to this legal rite in order to be acceptable to God?

V. 2 I Went Up By Revelation - Paul himself felt no compelling need to obtain the approval of the Jerusalem apostles. He knew his gospel was from God, and that was enough. However, it must have seemed better in heaven's wisdom to bring all the leaders together and have them take a united stand on this issue. When the will of God on this meeting was revealed, Paul and Barnabas were appointed by the church in Antioch to go to Jerusalem (Acts 15: 1-4).

I Laid Before Them (But Privately Before Those Who Were Of Repute) - Simple courtesy and common decency demanded that Paul first meet privately with the other leaders and discuss the issue with them. Little would be gained by waiting for a public confrontation and then dropping the matter on them like a bombshell. Paul was certainly not overawed by their rank or importance (see also verse 6), but he did want to be fair and give them a chance to perceive the truth of the matter. Paul approached them with the attitude of a man who has nothing to fear from a close inspection and thorough testing.

Lest Somehow I Should Be Running Or Had Run In Vain - Even if the decision of the leaders had gone against Paul, it would not have proved Paul wrong. He was right, and he knew it! "Running in vain" does not refer to the chance that his gospel was wrong, but to the possibility that the Jew-Gentile unity he had labored to achieve would be destroyed.

V. 3 Titus . . . was not compelled to be circumcised - The agreement that Gentile Christians like Titus did not need the rite of circumcision freed them from the whole burden of the old covenant. This landmark case carried with it two important corollaries. First, women would now enter into the covenant relationship with God on an equal basis with men. They had been physically ineligible for circumcision under the old covenant and were considered to be inferior, but now in Christ "there is neither male nor female." (Gal. 3:28) Second, the whole system of legalism was dealt a death blow. The self-righteous law-keepers could no longer boast. Salvation was a free gift of God to all who would humbly accept it through faith in Jesus Christ.

Though He Was A Greek - Paul could have easily left Titus at home to avoid any controversy, but he wanted to bring the problem to a head. Since Titus was present, it was no mere theological debate. It was a very practical question, and one that could not be left hanging: Must Titus be circumcised, or not?

V. 4 False Brethren Secretly Brought In - Certain men were only pretending to belong to Christ. They were "pseudo" brothers, who had smuggled themselves in. In an interesting parallel the Greek historian Strabo wrote of the enemies of a city who were "secretly brought in" by traitors within. The Judaizers in Jerusalem were false in their pretensions and were lying about their aims.

Who Slipped In To Spy Out Our Freedom - The Judaizers were envious of the happy freedom the Gentile Christians had. They infiltrated the conference, hoping somehow to lay bare and destroy this freedom. No Christian, thought the Judaizers, had any right to be so free and happy! The ironic point of it all was this: The Judaizers could be just as free from legalism and just as happy in Christ themselves. They did not want to have this freedom; however, they just wanted to deprive others of it.

That They Might Bring Us Into Bondage - To add legalism to the Christian system is literally to "enslave" the believers. The intensive word used here by Paul means "to break the spirit of someone, and reduce him to slavery."

V. 5 We Did Not Yield Submission Even For A Moment - Paul, who became all things to all people (I Cor. 9:22), would not budge an inch on this issue. While he would gladly compromise on cultural matters, and give up his rights to protect a weaker brother (I Cor. 8:13), Paul refused to yield in any way to the principle of legalism. Legalism is like crabgrass - once it gets a foothold, it just keeps growing and spreading until it takes over completely.

How does this apply to us today? When should we give in and when should we stand our ground with the brother who objects to eating in the church basement, or to wearing blue jeans in worship, or to playing the piano? If we are dealing with a weaker brother who is in danger of losing his faith, we should be prepared to give up our rights. If we are dealing with a would-be dictator who is in danger of losing only his temper, we should stand our ground to preserve the truth of the gospel's freedom.

That The Truth Of The Gospel Might Be Preserved For You - Two things should be observed about Paul's stand. He was defending a principle of Christian freedom, not a personal privilege. And he was doing it for others, not himself.

The Right Hand of Fellowship (2:6-10)

6 And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) - those, I say, who were of repute added nothing to me; 7 but on the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised 8 (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), 9 and when

they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; 10 only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.

V. 6 Those Who Were Reputed To Be Something - Paul cared little about a man's reputation, what a man is reputed to be. While some people may have tried to treat James, Cephas, and John like "Big Shots," Paul did not. In speaking this way Paul was not belittling the leaders. Rather, he was rejecting human appraisals.

(What They Were Makes No Difference To Me; - Paul showed an admirable balance in his approach. He showed the proper respect for leadership by meeting first with them privately, but also showed that he was not overawed by their position. Lesser men tend to fall from this balance, either stooping and bowing to lick the boots of leaders, or treating them with contempt.

God Shows No Partiality) - God is not impressed by a man's office or reputation. The original Greek phrase says, "God does not take a man's face." He is neither impressed nor influenced by reputation, wealth (James 2:1), or nationality (Rom. 2:11). God is like the idealized statute of justice which is blindfolded, so that the verdict of law will not be determined by things such as "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female."

Who Were Of Repute Added Nothing To Me - Here is the main point of these verses: The Jerusalem apostles found no defect in Paul's gospel. It was the same gospel they had received from the Lord. Nothing needed to be added (such as circumcision), and nothing could be taken away.

V. 7 But On The Contrary, When They Saw - The only changing of position was done by the "pillars." Paul left the conference preaching the same gospel he had come with. It was the leaders who gained new insight into God's plan.

I Had Been Entrusted - The deciding factor in the decision of the apostles was not that they liked Paul, or liked his gospel. The critical truth was that the gospel had come from God. To Paul, as a faithful steward (I Cor. 4:1-2), the sacred message had been entrusted. The only right basis for judgment was this: Is it from God?

Gospel To The Uncircumcised - As noted previously, Paul never preached exclusively to the Gentiles. It was only after the Jews rejected him in each city that he sadly excluded them from his work. Likewise in the case of Peter, there was occasional crossing of ethnic lines, as in the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10 and 11). Nevertheless, it was God's strategy to send Paul to Gentiles, and Peter to Jews, and this was seen to be good by the conference.

V. 8 For He Who Worked - It was God who was working in (literally "energizing") both Peter and Paul. They wisely recognized that both their ministries were equally valid in God's kingdom. Neither disparaged the other for being sent in a different direction.

V. 9 The Grace That Was Given To Me - Paul did not mean by this that he now possessed a quantity of magical grace to be dispensed on the heads of those who kneel before him. What he had been given was a job, a mission. This was "the grace that was given" to him. (See also Eph. 3:1-7). Here, as always, the free gift of God's grace carries with it the idea of a response and a responsibility (See Eph. 2:8 and 10).

James And Cephas And John, Who Were Reputed To Be Pillars - This is James the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:19), not James the son of Zebedee, who had been killed by Herod (Acts 12:2). It was common in the ancient world to refer to proved and trustworthy men as "pillars." The pillar is a main supporting part of a structure, just as is the foundation (Eph. 2:20).

Gave To Me And Barnabas - Paul and Barnabas were the two preachers of the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:2ff). They represented the gospel's evangelistic thrust among the Gentiles. Even after they no longer traveled as a team, both preached God's grace to Gentiles (Acts 15:36-41).

The Right Hand Of Fellowship - The Greek word *koinonia* means a state of sharing of partnership. It is even used frequently of marriage, the most intimate of human relationships. In its general use in scripture it refers to the life which all Christians have in common in Christ. We share this life with God and Jesus, and we also share it with one another (I John 1:3). In this sense of the word, it is not necessary that a Christian endorse every action or opinion of his brother to have fellowship with him. The mere fact that they both are sons of God brings them together in the same family.

In this passage, however, fellowship seems to have a special meaning. When the apostles extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas, they were accepting them as partners. What is more, they were accepting, approving, and endorsing the gospel which Paul and Barnabas were preaching. This formal stamp of approval on their work is something more than the general fellowship among Christian people.

It should be noted that Paul did not go to Jerusalem as a subordinate seeking the approval of his superiors. He went, and was accepted, as an apostle among apostles. These leaders all recognized their equal roles on God's team.

V. 10 Only They Would Have Us Remember The Poor - The saints in Judea were still suffering the effects of widespread famine (Acts 11:27-30). Paul and Barnabas had already brought contributions at least once before (Acts 11:30), and Paul would continue to gather funds for this case (as in II Cor. 8:1 - 9:15).

Which Very Thing I Was Eager To Do - The separation of Paul and Peter in their labors certainly did not mean that the Gentile Christians were separated from Jewish Christians. They realized that they were fellow members of God's household (Eph. 2:19), and were eager to use any opportunity to assist one another (Gal. 6:10).

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Paul take Titus along?
2. Why was circumcision such an important issue?
3. Why did Paul meet the leaders privately?
4. How does Acts 15 describe the "false brethren" who opposed Paul at the Jerusalem Council?
5. What was Paul's attitude toward "those of repute?"
6. Explain the literal meaning of "God shows no partiality."
7. How did Cephas (Peter) contribute to the Council in Acts 15?
8. What was the conclusion of James in Acts 15?

9. What is meant by “grace” in verse nine?
10. Explain the “right hand of fellowship.”
11. Why should the leaders have considered it necessary to ask that Paul and the Gentiles “remember the poor”?

ABA REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Briefly discuss Paul’s First Missionary Journey.
2. What is known about Titus, and what would he prove regarding the controversy over circumcision?
3. What is meant by “running or had run in vain” in Gal. 2:2?
4. Why is Paul’s teaching on circumcision so important to women?
5. What impact did Paul’s teaching on circumcision have upon the whole system of legalism?
6. Why would the Judaizers send false believers to spy on Paul and the Gentile Christians?
7. How does legalism bring one “into bondage”?
8. How does the teaching of Gal. 2:5 apply to believers today?
9. What lessons can be learned from Gal. 2:6 regarding the treatment of prominent religious leaders?
10. “It was God’s strategy to send Paul to the _____ and Peter to the _____.”
11. “...the free gift of God’s grace carries with it the idea of a _____ and a _____.”
12. What is the meaning of the Greek word “koinonia,” and how did this apply to Paul and Barnabas?