

Defending the Gospel of Grace

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[0 : 00] So we find here a report from a meeting. And as a general rule, reports from meetings don't tend to make for very riveting reading.

And so we may come to Galatians 2 and think, this whole meeting seems kind of distant and remote and of limited interest to me.

But I hope we'll see that the outcome of this meeting has huge implications for us. In fact, Tim Keller, the pastor in New York, says that God protected all of us that day in this meeting.

So important is it? So we're going to think about why the implications of this meeting matter. Maybe to help us with that. You can find, I'm sure on public record somewhere, details of the Potsdam Agreement, or of what took place at the Yalta Conference, or how the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 came to be.

Again, I'm going to guess that not many of us will have a particular interest in those details. But the fact is, those meetings helped to form the basis of the peace and the freedom that we enjoy in our world today.

[1 : 22] Those meetings were really important in terms of carving a future marked by peace and freedom after World War II.

And so likewise, when we come here to Paul's second visit to Jerusalem as a follower of Jesus, we find here the way of peace to God is made clear through this meeting.

That freedom in Jesus Christ through the gospel of grace is secured for the whole church, for us, through this meeting. So it's very relevant at stake at this meeting.

Is this question, will there be one church or will there be two? One, as John Stott puts it, was the vision of the church in Jerusalem big enough to see that the gospel of Christ was not a reform movement within Judaism, but to see it as good news for the world and the church of Christ as the international family of God.

In other words, was there going to be a situation where everybody would be forced to become Jewish, or will the church in Jerusalem recognize the grace of God to people regardless of culture without the need to become Jewish?

[2 : 42] That's a big question. And also tied up to this meeting, would there be one gospel or two? It takes us back to one of the underlying themes going on and the reason why Paul wrote this letter.

In chapter 1, verse 6 to 7, he introduces us to those who are teaching a false gospel. Those who are saying, you need Jesus and you need to be following the Jewish ceremonial law in order to be accepted by God.

Would the Jerusalem Council say, yes, that's absolutely right? Or would they follow Paul's gospel delivered directly from Jesus that says that acceptance is through God's loving kindness and sending Jesus as Savior alone?

You don't need any of those Jewish ceremonies. So that's the reason why the meeting is important. Let's see how it plays out as we work our way through the text.

First of all, we'll deal with the details in the first couple of verses as Paul defends his gospel. It's always helpful to ask questions of the Bible. So let's ask our interrogation questions here.

[3 : 52] First of all, where does the meeting happen? Verse 1, we're told it happens in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the center of the early Christian faith. Jerusalem as the mother church.

Jerusalem, the place where Christians at that time were still attending the temple. We're still going to pray at the set times of prayer. So it was still very much connected to Jewish religious practices.

When did the meeting take place? Again, verse 1, we're told it happened 14 years later, 14 years after the conversion of Paul.

So we can date it to sometime around 46 AD perhaps. This is 11 years after his very brief 15-day visit to Jerusalem that he talked about in chapter 1, verse 18.

Again, this is another way of Paul reminding the people, I was independent of the apostles. They didn't teach me the Bible. They didn't teach me the gospel that I'm sharing. I was chosen by Jesus directly.

[4 : 54] Who was involved in the meeting? Well, there was Paul, obviously. And we've heard in chapter 1 of his testimony of God changing his life by sending Jesus.

He had been a persecutor of the church, but God chose him. God revealed his son in him. And now he's on this mission to the Gentiles. Also there with Paul is Barnabas.

Barnabas, who was also on that Gentile mission with Paul. And significantly, Paul says, I took Titus along also. We'll think a little bit about Titus in a moment.

Titus is a Greek. So he is a product of this Gentile mission. He is somebody who is uncircumcised. So he's not following the Jewish ceremonial law.

So he becomes a test case for the church in Jerusalem. Church in Jerusalem, what are you going to do with Titus? So on the one hand, they've got these visitors, Paul and Barnabas and Titus.

[5 : 50] And then we've got Peter, James and John, the pillars of the church, the leaders of the church. So in verse 2, now we're told halfway through that he brought the gospel, presented the gospel privately to those who seem to be leaders.

And then in verse 9, we meet James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars. So these are the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. So this is a conference between these two groups of people.

Now, why does Paul arrive in Jerusalem? Verse 2, I went in response to a revelation. What's that about?

We find out in Acts chapter 11. As it happens, we'll be studying this passage this evening. Acts chapter 11, verses 27 to 30. There's a man called Agabus, a New Testament prophet.

And led by the Spirit, he predicts that there'll be a great famine spreading throughout the Roman Empire. And the church in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas are, they decide that they want to send a gift to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

[6 : 59] So Paul is there because he's delivering this gift. And as he's there, he takes the chance to meet with the leaders. Now, this is important because he's saying to them, remember this, it was God that sent us to Jerusalem.

It's not as if Peter and James and John are calling him up to appear before them. This isn't Paul being taken to the headmaster's office because he stepped out of line, in other words.

And what does he do at this meeting? What's this meeting all about? Again, reading into verse 2. He set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles.

Notice the tense. The gospel I preach. This is his continuing message. This is important for the people in Galatia. That gospel that I've been sharing for 14 years.

That gospel that I presented to Peter and James and John in Jerusalem. Is the same gospel that I'm bringing to you. Is the same gospel that you find in this letter.

[8 : 05] But something perhaps surprising. Is he highlights the fact that he did this privately. Verse 2, continuing. I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders.

For fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Now that might sound as if Paul is concerned that he's somehow, perhaps, got his message wrong.

And so he's coming to Peter, James and John for clarification. But that's not what's going on. After all, in chapter 1, he's been very clear on the fact that he received his gospel directly from the Lord Jesus.

He is so confident in the truth of the gospel he's preaching. That he would say, verses 6 to 9. If I deviate even slightly, let me be eternally condemned.

He's absolutely persuaded that he has the true gospel. So that's not his concern. His concern is that there are these false teachers who are trying to undermine his gospel.

[9 : 08] And his concern is that if the Jerusalem church doesn't say very clearly, Paul is right and they are wrong, then his ministry will lack fruitfulness. Because there will always be those doubts and questions.

Are there two gospels? Which gospel should I listen to? So his concern in this meeting is, will Jerusalem take a clear stand for the gospel of grace alone?

So that's the heart of the issue. So it can seem kind of distant and remote in some respects. But the heart of the issue is, what is the essence of the gospel? Is it the message of the false teachers?

Yes, you need Jesus. But you also need moral and religious performance if you want God to accept you. If you want to be part of the kingdom, then you need to have all these practices set up before you can join.

Or is it Paul's gospel from Jesus? That Jesus has done everything for us. That he has lived perfectly fulfilling the law that we can't. And he's died as a sacrifice, as a substitute for us, to bring us to God.

[10 : 10] And that's a gift of grace, not something we earn or deserve. And the outcome of the meeting will show us how things fall. So the outcome is that grace wins.

The gospel of grace wins. And we see this in two ways. First of all, we see that Paul's friend, Titus, is welcomed. So again, the story of Titus may seem small, but it's very significant in what it represents.

So Titus, as we said, was a Greek. He was uncircumcised, but he's a Christian. In the church in Antioch, which was made up of Jews and Gentiles, he was accepted into fellowship.

So the question is, now that he's come to Jerusalem, what's going to happen? Will they accept that he's been saved by Jesus or will they demand something else? And we're told in verse 4 that there's a threat because there are spies.

This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. There are some people, these false teachers, sometimes known as Judaizers, who want this to stop, who want Paul's message of salvation by grace alone to stop.

- [11 : 35] They have a slogan in Acts chapter 15 and verse 1. They lay their slogan out. Unless you're circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.
- So that's their alternative gospel. And so they're attacking Paul, saying, Paul's messed up the gospel. He's messed up the connection between Jesus and the law and Jerusalem church.
- You need to fix this. You need to step in. So what's the outcome? Verse 3. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.
- Titus is welcome without the need for ceremonies. The big point, grace is recognized as the only condition for membership. In Antioch and in Jerusalem and for everywhere.
- The Jerusalem church know and affirm the gospel equation that we spoke about, that it's Jesus plus nothing that equals everything. They affirm that message that we're saved by Jesus alone, that we don't contribute, we don't bring our works to the table.
- [12 : 41] In actual fact, the point of those Old Testament ceremonial laws were to be a reminder that you cannot be holy enough. You cannot make yourself acceptable to a perfectly holy God.
- So these false teachers are actually getting that upside down, thinking that those laws were there so that we might climb the ladder to get to God. So they're giving a false message.
- They're giving a false hope. And that message is rejected by the church in Jerusalem as Titus is welcomed. Because Paul knows, and the church in Jerusalem knows, that trying to save ourselves by our works is like being on a treadmill, going nowhere.
- We desperately perhaps want to get to know God. We'd love to be a friend of God. But if we're thinking that we have to make our way there, we will find ourselves exhausted and desperately disappointed.
- Thinking that we can prove ourselves, that we can earn our way to God is, to use Paul's word, slavery. It's a false hope.
- [13 : 54] We can't go up to God. He is too perfect and too holy. But in the gospel, the wonderful news is that God and Jesus has come down to us.
- In grace, he has provided all that was lacking. He has come to save us. And Paul is relentless in defending this.
- So in verse 5, he says, we didn't give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. Saved by grace alone is gospel truth. Anything else is a dangerous lie.
- And Paul will not allow anybody to distort that message. Faith in Jesus alone is true freedom. Anything else is slavery, Paul says.
- And so he draws a line in the sand he will not cross. And he wants the Jerusalem church to stand clearly with him as they do. And so the gospel of grace is defended through the outcome of this meeting.
- [14 : 56] Now there's one implication for us to think through as we think about Titus being welcomed in Jerusalem. Because we live in a wonderful time in history, I think.
- You know, we have so many opportunities for education and travel. And we've got new cultures moving around all the time. New people coming and going. A place like Edinburgh, especially in a couple of weeks.
- There'll be so many different cultures and so many different nations. And gospel churches have a great chance to show the power of the gospel in our very makeup.
- We can say the gospel of God's grace is so powerful. And the reconciling work of Jesus is so profound that look at the people who make up this church.

It would be a wonderful thing if people could walk in and say, Well, here are rich and poor and they're enjoying fellowship together. Here are different nations and different cultures, sometimes with historic hostilities.

[15 : 55] And they know and they love one another. Here's a majority culture that loves to welcome minorities in. That as a church, in our church life and culture, we can give living proof to the power of God's grace.

And again, I've said this before, but one of the things I'm so thankful for about Buclue, because we've got this location, we've got this history. There is this wonderful heritage of welcoming Christians and non-Christians from all around the world.

It's been going for a long time. That's a great thing to give thanks to God for. And so what we need to do as a church is we need to be clear that there is only one gospel message for every kind of person.

So we believe in exclusive truth, as does everybody. We believe that Jesus is the only way to be saved, the only way to have our sins forgiven, the only way to peace with God. But at the same time, we want to remain absolutely open to whoever comes through our doors.

We want to be so careful not to put any barriers in the way to people coming to fellowship with us or coming to faith in the Lord Jesus. So we've got this exclusive truth.

[17 : 09] But that exclusive truth is about a gospel of grace. So it makes us an inclusive community, or at least it should, so that we can celebrate grace together. I wonder, most of us are just a bit old enough to remember perhaps watching when the Berlin Wall was torn down live on TV.

Do you remember those scenes as people came with the sledgehammers and the wrecking ball came? And that barrier dividing a city, dividing even families, was ripped down as freedom broke out.

Well, the gospel of grace has greater power. It can explode all the barriers between different kinds of people. That's what we're finding here, that Greeks and Jews did not hang out together except for the gospel of grace.

And so Titus is welcome as a reminder of the power of the gospel to break down those barriers. So let's never give up the gospel. The second way that we see that grace wins is not just that Paul's friend Titus is welcome, but that Paul's gospel is welcomed.

So again, we've said it before, there's this accusation coming from the false teachers. That whereas there are these super apostles, Peter and James and John over in Jerusalem, and they've got the true gospel.

[18 : 32] They're saying to the people in Galatia, that Paul that you're hearing from, he's got a lesser gospel. He's got a mixed up gospel. He's maybe a second class apostle. But there's the gospel of Peter, and there's the gospel of Paul.

Paul is wrong, they're accusing. They're saying we need to teach Jesus plus the laws of Moses for people to be saved. And so even as Paul describes the meeting, and as we look at his language, I think he's trying to correct that thinking.

So look at the way Paul writes about Peter and James and John. In verse 2, middle of verse 2, I did this privately, presented the gospel privately to those who seemed to be leaders.

And then in verse 6, as for those who seemed to be important, whatever they were, it makes no difference to me. God does not judge by external appearance. And then in verse 9, James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars.

Now he's not being rude. He's not being arrogant. He's not trying to demean Peter, James, and John. He is saying God doesn't judge by external appearance that we're all saved by grace.

[19 : 40] We all have equal standing as apostles. Therefore, you can listen to me. And we'll discover from the outcome that they recognize Paul equally with them as an apostle.

So in chapter 1, the emphasis for Paul is, I was independent of the apostles. They didn't teach me the gospel. I received it directly from Jesus. Now his emphasis is, my gospel is identical to theirs.

There's only one gospel for the whole world. And we see that in the language as he reports on this meeting. The end of verse 6, those men added nothing to my message.

Verse 7 and 8, we see that it's the same God recognized to be at work in Peter's mission to the Jews and Paul's mission to the Gentiles.

That there are two different audiences, but there is one gospel. That's a really important practical point for us. That the substance of the gospel remains unchanging.

[20 : 47] That must be the case. But our presentation of that gospel varies depending who we're talking to. So we're talking to our kids. And we speak about the gospel in one way.

We talk to somebody from another culture, maybe from another religious background, who's never read the Bible before. We might talk about the gospel a different way to them. To people who were brought up in church, we speak the gospel in a different way to them.

The substance is the same. But the way we talk about it varies. And that's what we see in the book of Acts. That's what we see in the ministry to Jews and Gentiles.

And that's something that can be true for us too in the way that we talk to people. As we get to know what's their worldview, what have they discovered so far, what's their understanding, what are their thoughts on Jesus, and we can shape how we present the unchanging gospel to them.

They're also, verse 9, welcomed into fellowship. And they were given the right hand of fellowship because they recognized the grace given to me.

[21 : 53] They recognized God at work in and through Paul. And then in verse 10, something that may seem slightly out of tangent, but ties in with why Paul was there in the first place.

All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. So remember, Paul is there sent by Antioch to bring a gift to the poor.

And so this is a way for the church to say, let's make sure that we keep that same solidarity where we're caring for one another, where we're caring for the poor. And Paul says, I was eager to do that.

We've got the same heart on that matter. We care for the poor. We love one another wherever we're from. Again and again, the point is being made by Paul. There's only one gospel.

There's only one way of salvation. Whoever we are. And that's the way of the cross of Jesus. That's the way of grace. And like Paul, God's church is called to maintain that truth, to guard that truth with our lives, to defend that truth against error, and to live out that gospel in our lives, in our fellowship, in the way that we offer hospitality, in the way we practice reconciliation with those who wrong us.

[23 : 20] Why? Because freedom in Christ is everything. And without the message of grace, we have nothing. It's this wonderful, life-changing truth that Paul defends, and we are called to defend.

Some of you, I guess, will have seen, perhaps many times, depending on your levels of patriotism, the movie Braveheart, from the 90s.

Lots of heart-stirring scenes in that movie. One that came to mind this week, thinking about this theme, was that scene where William Wallace is on his horse before the troops, Scottish troops about to go into battle against Edward's army, and the troops are looking a bit scared, a bit shaky.

They're quite a ragtag bunch. And William Wallace delivers one of those great speeches where he says, you know, they may take our lands, I've got sore throats, I'm not going to shout, but they will never take our freedom.

This week, as I was reading, I came across words from Martin Luther, 16th century reformation, that echo that call for the Christian church.

[24 : 35] When Martin Luther was writing, the church was beginning to be persecuted for trusting in the Bible alone and trusting in salvation by grace through Jesus Christ alone.

And here is what Martin Luther says. Here's his call to freedom. He says, We will suffer our goods to be taken away, our name, our life, and all that we have, but the gospel, our faith, Jesus Christ, we will never suffer to be taken from us.

Freedom in Christ was everything to Paul, to Martin Luther, may it be everything to us as a church.■■■■■ by even book O that we have for a trial, and the word from Sh got■, are not regarding the power of the faith and the command■■, because we are participating in space in the Bible.

We have to hold on the people in the Bible, and listen to all that we have on this way. Do not understand the words that you are going to heaven to keep and have if you are really to stop and follow on this■.