

United By The Gospel

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[0:00] Imagine that all of it is great. All with a massive stage, and on that stage are two Steinway grand pianos, about 10 yards apart, one stage right, the other is stage left.

An eight-year-old walks on the stage, and she draws herself close to one of those Steinways, the Steinway stage right. She surveys all the 88 keys, and with her right index finger, she strikes middle C.

And everyone is amazed, because Steinway on stage left resonates middle C back.

When you strike middle C, on one piano, it resonates middle C in an unmanned piano.

I'm no pianist, but I know middle C is central and vital to any song played on a piano. The gospel is to the church, as middle C is to a piano and playing music.

[1:27] And this morning, we're going to look at a historic meeting, in which the Apostle Paul journeys to Jerusalem, and he strikes the middle C of the gospel, surrounded by men of influence.

James, and Cephas, and John. And he strikes middle C to see what happens, and it resonates with these three men.

wholehearted gospel resonance. This morning, I want to make a case for you, that the gospel of Jesus Christ must be what unites us as a church above all else.

It's what unites us. The gospel is our middle C as a church in which we play all of our music. So here's, I'm going to walk us through it.

I'm going to walk you through Galatians chapter 2, 1 through 10. It's a historic account. And so what I'm going to want you to see is the kind of the historic background to this meeting that took place.

[2:43] And then I want you to show you a courtroom drama that takes place at that meeting. Paul has a star witness. And then I want you to see how this courtroom drama unfolds in the extending of the right hand of fellowship.

It is this snapshot with words that needs to be in your minds. So I'm going to walk you through it. I'm going to make a point, and I'm going to try to apply this in four ways if I've got time.

So let's look at the background of this historic meeting. And it's in verses 1 and 2 of Galatians chapter 2. We read first, then after 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem.

14 years. 14 years after his conversion. And so earlier in chapter 1, we learned that Paul was dramatically converted by Christ on the road to Damascus.

It was something that God, Christ had done. And then three years after that, he goes up to Jerusalem for the first time for an informal visit with Peter for just over two weeks.

[3:57] And then there's this passage of time. Ten plus years until Paul goes back to Jerusalem. And when he goes back to Jerusalem, he's not traveling alone.

Which brings me to the next thing I want you to see. He brings Barnabas with him. And he takes Titus along with him. It's the makings of a good joke.

It would go like this. Have you heard the one about the apostle who brings a circumcised Jew and an uncircumcised Gentile to Jerusalem to talk to a bunch of other apostles? But what you need to understand is this is no joke.

This is strategic. We'll come back to that in a little bit. But what you need to see is Paul has a mixed traveling group going to Jerusalem 14 years after his conversion.

And then we see why Paul went. Verse 2 I went up because of a revelation. God had directly disclosed to the apostle Paul I want you going to Jerusalem now.

[5:12] Now we're not told here in Galatians 2 what that revelation actually was. So it could be a revelation that is unrecorded for us. It's something that was distinct that happened to Paul.

Or it could be something that's revealed to us. And my hunch is that this is actually a reference to a prophecy recorded in Acts chapter 11 verses 27 through 30.

There's this prophet who comes down from Jerusalem. His name is Agabus. And Agabus comes to the church in Antioch where Paul and Barnabas were. The church of Antioch was primarily a Gentile church.

And this prophet comes down and he reveals something to this church that there was a famine coming. And the response of this church these Gentiles converted to Christ was to gather financial help and send it with Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem.

that's what I think is actually going on here. The point of it though is that God has called this meeting in Jerusalem.

[6:28] God initiated this meeting in Jerusalem 14 years after Paul's conversion. This is God's doing which means God wanted this meeting to happen which means God has a purpose for this meeting.

and his purpose is to unite his people in the gospel of Jesus Christ. A little bit more background it's who Paul and his companions go to meet with.

We see this in verse 2 again. I went up because of a revelation and set before them who is this them? Well parenthetically in the ESV we're told though privately from those who seemed influential.

If you look down at verse 6 we read and from those who seemed to be influential and then just a little bit further down in verse 6 I say who seemed influential and then if you go down to verse 9 who seemed to be pillars there is a group of men in Jerusalem that Paul Barnabas and Titus are going to meet.

Paul actually names them in verse 9. They are James Cephas aka Peter and John all three men have New Testament books with their name on it.

[7:52] That's who they're going to meet. Now if you notice it's an interesting way to describe these people these who seemed influential it's like Paul is distancing himself from them and he is.

On the one hand he's not denying their authority on the other hand he's not deifying them either and what he's doing is he is maintaining his own apostleship that he himself has been set apart by Christ himself to proclaim a gospel to the Gentiles.

That was important for the Galatians to hear. In other words the apostle Paul is not in the back pocket of these Jerusalem men of influence.

well the reason why Paul is going up to Jerusalem is because this is a private meeting.

Did you notice that in verse 2? Though privately before those whom seemed influential in that parenthesis. In other words this isn't a public meeting. This isn't the council of Jerusalem that we read about in Acts 15 that happened in 50 AD.

[9:05] this is a private meeting that took place before that. But both meetings were dealing with the same thing. The question that was being raised at this time in the early church was this was it necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved?

Did a Gentile who's not a Jew who's not circumcised did they need to become a Jew first in order to be saved to become a Christian? In other words do they need to obey the Mosaic law in order to be a Christian?

That was the issue at hand and that's why God is sending Paul up to Jerusalem and when Paul gets to Jerusalem he is going to hit the middle sea of the gospel at this private meeting and see where the chips fall.

Which brings me to the focus of this meeting. He says I went up to I went up because of a revelation and set before them the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles.

He's there because of the gospel. On one hand the circumstances surrounded circumcision but Paul has recognized the real issue at hand is not circumcision it is the very nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself.

[10:43] What is necessary for a sinner to be saved? Does a Gentile sinner need to believe in Jesus plus be circumcised or eat kosher foods or observe Jewish holy days in order to be made right with God?

Paul is going up to say nothing of that sort. Paul is going to proclaim a gospel that he lays out for us in chapter 1 verse 4 that this gospel is Christ who has given himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age and to place us into God's family all by his grace by faith alone in God's grace alone works can have nothing to do with it because it's a salvation of God from beginning to end that phrase that we read I set before them the gospel that I proclaim that phrase is used in the end of the book of Acts of Festus laying out Paul's case before King Agrippa in other words

Paul is going up to Jerusalem to meet with these influential men in order to lay out a case for the gospel of grace and what we're going to see in a second is he's got a star witness but before we get there I just want to point out one thing it seems as though something's weighing on Paul look at the end of verse two I went up to Jerusalem by way of a revelation to set before these men of influence of the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain that's an interesting thing for Paul to say when he uses running language it's a way of him describing his gospel labor his ministry the hard work involved with that and he's asking the question hey

I'm wondering if this is all worth it and one can think when you read this that hey apostle Paul hold on a second are you having second thoughts about the gospel because that's kind of what it sounds like are you wondering if you're running in vain what do you mean you think you got the wrong gospel but that's not what he's saying and there are a couple reasons why that makes no sense the first is this it's been 14 years since he was converted and commissioned by Christ to preach the gospel that's a little long to have some unresolved questions about the nature of the gospel second in chapter 1 verses 11 and 12 Paul makes it very clear that this gospel is not man's gospel but a revelation of God that was given to him Paul has no questions about the nature and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ so what's he concerned about he's concerned about the practical outcome of this meeting and here's why these men who seemed influential these apostles in Jerusalem if they had any reservations about the gospel that

Paul was preaching he could open the door he could open the door to false teachers in Galatia making a claim something like this a false teacher would say yeah we heard about what the Jerusalem apostles were saying that they didn't really buy Paul's gospel and so Galatians don't buy into what Paul is preaching to you believe what we're saying that you don't only need to believe in Jesus but you need to be circumcised too in order to be saved Paul is very concerned about what the outcome would be of this meeting on Gentile churches he knows that this could result in Christian Gentiles being enslaved by a false gospel but he's also concerned about the overall unity of the church because if these apostles don't fully embrace this gospel that he preaches the very foundation of the church that's going to open the door to a dividing of the church to now two churches you've got the

[15:42] Gentile church and you've got the Jewish church so what Paul is actually concerned about is what's at stake the unity and the health of the church of Christ that's why he says he's fearing that he may have labored in vain if these men don't fully agree to Paul's gospel it means slavery and division for the church universal that would have been laboring in vain so we've got a sense of the background of what's going on here that's a lot to pack into two verses I realize that but what we see going on here is we have Paul Barnabas Titus going to Jerusalem because God has sent them in order to have a meeting with James Cephas and John in order to hit the middle sea of the gospel because there's a lot riding on it and so now in verses three and five we have a courtroom drama unfold

Paul makes his case for the gospel of grace if we can just go back to verse two we see I went up because of a revelation and set before them the gospel that I proclaim I have laid my I laid my case out before them that this is a gospel of grace received by faith alone there's no place for works we can't add anything to our salvation this is an invitation only meeting remember that Paul then in verse three makes his appeal to his star witness Titus imagine Paul calling Titus to stand before this group of men in whom this meeting has been called by God imagine this Paul Titus are you a

Gentile

Titus says yes Titus are you circumcised Titus says no Titus are you saved yes I am Paul how how are you saved Titus Titus replies something like I was saved only by trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on my behalf Jesus gave himself for my sin in order to pluck me out of this world and place me into the family of God he set me free by faith alone and God's grace alone Paul Titus what difference then would it make for you to be circumcised Titus responds it would make no difference because it was by God's grace alone that I have been adopted into his family he caused his spirit to come and dwell in me and his spirit bears witness to my spirit that

I am his son and a brother to everyone in this room who proclaims Christ he's given me a new heart and there's nothing that I desire more than to live a life of faithful obedience for the glory of my risen savior not in order to earn my salvation but because I have been saved he died for me so that I could live for him Paul circumcision does not give me a new heart it does not place me into the new people of God the church only the gospel does that could you imagine being at a meeting like that did it happen this way to be honest with you I don't know but I can see with my eyes the result but even Titus was not forced to be circumcised could you imagine the apostle

Paul going up to James the brother of Jesus James do you think that Titus needs to be circumcised in order to be saved James no salvation is by faith alone in God's grace alone in Christ alone Peter does Titus need to be circumcised in order to be saved does he need to do anything in addition to believing in Jesus in order to be rescued by the grace of God Peter says absolutely not that is enough to John Paul says does Titus John need to be circumcised in order to be saved to be set free to which John says no circumcision that doesn't save anybody only God's grace in the cross of Jesus Christ only believing that is someone saved the apostle

[21:06] Paul is striking the middle sea of the gospel at this meeting private meeting in Jerusalem and none of these apostles are requiring Titus to be circumcised because the gospel doesn't require Titus to be circumcised God doesn't require Titus to be circumcised God doesn't require any of us in this room to do anything in addition to believing in the finished work of Christ in order to be saved that is good news that is the gospel but not everyone at this meeting was in agreement because in verses 4 and 5 we read about some false brothers secretly brought in that the Greek there is just yet because of false brothers who snuck in false brothers is pseudo Christians guys that are just looking the part it's kind of like this have you ever been to a conference and you get a lanyard and your name is printed on a lanyard these guys heard about this private meeting and they had these lanyards made outside of this meeting and their names printed on it and they are kind of like and walked into this meeting it says they slipped in in order to spy out our freedom

I know what it's like to slip in I practiced a lot of slipping in when I was in high school my parents were asleep I slipped in past my curfew because I didn't want them to wake up I didn't want to deal with it these false brothers slipped in but they didn't slip in in order to because they were past their curfew they were slipping in to spy out they were undercover agents there was a group called the Judaizers this is a group of false teachers who are saying that you need to become a Gentile need to become a Jew first to be practicing the law first before they become right with God it's by your works in addition to your faith that you're made right with God and Paul is completely repudiating that he's no no no no no that's not it at all these false brothers slipped into this meeting in order to spy out what

Paul says our freedom in Christ freedom from having to earn God's favor through our obedience freedom from having to perform and impress God so that he would be like oh come on in here's something special he says no no no no no they came to spy out the freedom we have in Christ that it's by grace alone in Christ alone by faith alone these false brothers with these fake lanyards they weren't there to learn they weren't there to benefit they weren't there to contribute they were there so that they might bring us into slavery they were there to proclaim a false gospel to enslave people to they were bringing in the law again verse five to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment

Paul says sounds like these false brothers try to make a case against Titus sounds like they wanted to cross examine him say no no no no no no you need to be circumcised too buddy and Paul says

hey we didn't put up with that junk for a moment don't you wish the Holy Spirit recorded for us what happened next what the apostles did with these Judaizers these enslavers I can imagine Paul you men are preaching a different gospel you must either repent or be damned because you're enslaving those who listen to you and we're not going to have it here rips their lanyards off and says now leave Paul is recognizing that these false brothers like the false teachers in

Galatia were a threat to the freedom we have in Christ freedom from living under the law freedom to live for God by grace and we're told at the end of verse 5 why Paul confronts these false teachers so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you the you are the Galatians it's a plural you you all Paul is saying hey all this happened in order to preserve to protect the truth of the gospel the gospel message is built on reality the truth of what Christ has done the true freedom that comes through this message he says we did this to preserve this gospel for you Gentile Christians in Galatia and for us Gentile Christians in Kenosha 2000 years later you feeling the love this meeting happened so that we could live in the freedom

[26:50] Christ purchased for us at the cross so at this historic meeting Paul lays out a case for the gospel of grace brings forward his star witness and defends it against these false claims that will just enslave everybody who professes Christ Christ and he makes a pretty successful case given what happens next from James Peter and John something historic happens and you should have this photograph of it in your mind in verses 6 through 10 we have the historic handshake of gospel unity if you look at verse 9 and when James and Cephas and John who seemed to be pillars perceived the grace that it was given to me they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me they extend the right hand of fellowship it's essentially saying we're in it we totally agree with everything that you're proclaiming we're on board we're in this together to bring this gospel to everyone everywhere now it's interesting what precedes verse 9 because there's a little bit of an argument a case negatively in verse 6

Paul says this he says I say that these men who seemed influential you know in God's eyes no big deal and so in my eyes it's no big deal but those who seemed influential added nothing to me kind of sounds snarky but what he's saying is this hey I made my case and James Peter and John they smelled nothing off of it they didn't add anything to it nothing needed to be adjusted nothing needed to be taken away or added they had nothing to add nothing was off that's the negative argument part of the argument and then positively he says in verse 7 through 9 that they didn't see anything off and what they did see was God's grace in me in verse 7 we read this 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 for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry for the to the circumcised worked also through me my apostolic ministry to the Gentiles what Paul is saying here is they recognized it they saw God at work in me just as they saw God at work in Peter they saw God at work in me and in verse 9 we read perceiving seeing the grace that was given to me these these three men the reputed pillars they are not pronouncing that Paul is an apostle they're not authorizing his apostolic ministry they are simply recognizing God's grace in his calling of Paul as an apostle and so having nothing to add and seeing

God's power his grace at work in Paul to entrust him with the gospel to proclaim to the Gentiles they say let's shake on it we're all on the same page baby snapshot it's the snapshot snapshot of gospel unity one God one gospel two men going to two very different people groups all according to God's glorious plan to pronounce announce his grace in Christ that can only be received by faith to all people everywhere you know what's interesting is that Paul went into this meeting concerned that he had labored in vain but God had ordained this meeting to unite his church around the one true gospel of grace and when Paul hits that middle sea these men of repute are like yes and amen let's shake on it baby

Paul had not been running in vain and now he realizes he is certainly not running alone but we can't miss verse 10 with the right hand of fellowship James Cephas and John they make this appeal to Paul you see in verse 10 only they asked as they're shaking their hands only they asked they asked us to remember the poor the poor that they're most likely referencing are not all poor people everywhere but a more specific group of materially impoverished people it's the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem these

[32:50] Jewish Christians who have converted to Christ this famine that Agabus had prophesied of it was hitting the region and these apostles to the Jews shaking the hands of this apostle to the Gentiles says hey remember the materially impoverished brothers and sisters in Jerusalem it's like hey we're one in Christ and you know what Paul says it was the very thing I was eager to do wouldn't you have loved to be there if it's true that this is all tied to this revelation this prophecy of Agabus imagine this they're shaking hands James Cephas John say hey don't forget about the poor and Paul shaking their hands saying yeah we we're on middle sea baby and he goes oh by the way

I've got this check for twenty thousand dollars from the Gentile church in Antioch and it is for you it demonstrates the unity Paul was eager to do it it's one of the reasons why God sent him there this unity of helping one another in need flows from the gospel God had orchestrated the whole thing this primarily Jewish church in need being helped by a primarily Gentile church with means one God one gospel one church they're all singing off of all playing off of the middle sea of the gospel together talk about putting your money where your mouth is this really happened this way it's striking incredibly encouraging that God would be orchestrating things like this okay so we've seen the background we've seen the courtroom drama we've seen the historic handshake here's the point of it all the gospel of

Jesus Christ the gospel of Jesus Christ is what must unite us above all else that's what we see happening in the early church and it's what must be happening in our church it must be the thing that unites us there's nothing else that can unite us it's the only thing that does unite us in the eyes of God so let me just point you to four ways that we seek to be united in the gospel together the first is what happens here on a Sunday morning the gospel is what unites us here on a Sunday morning the whole reason why we're gathering together the primary reason why you're here is because of Jesus it's not because of where we live it's not because of the time of day it's because of Jesus has done for each of us that unites us so here's how you think about the Sunday morning service it's a weekly gospel unifier from the time we greet one another in the name of the Lord that's a gospel greeting the songs that we sing they are gospel rich songs not only do we sing that but the people around us hear us singing that and Colossians 3 it ministers to one another when we have public confession together or we observe the Lord's supper together those are all ways in which we are able to run to the gospel together whoever is in this pulpit preaching Sunday after Sunday they are going to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ from all the pages of the scriptures because all the pages of the scriptures point to

Jesus Christ so what you need to think about this Sunday morning gathering is it is a gospel unifier a gospel refresher and you need it week after week it's got to be a priority because it unites us in what matters most the gospel so every Sunday here in this building we are striking the middle sea of the gospel it's the only thing that can unite us above all else the second way in which we are united by the gospel is much more personal if if the first point was kind of middle sea corporately this point is middle sea personally we must get the gospel into the crank house of our hearts we got to live it

[38:25] I've got some suggestions here there's some very helpful books to read I have four gospel primers up here by Milton Vincent very helpful ways to learn how to rehearse the gospel to yourself every day but I want to show you my favorite way and it doesn't have to do with reading a book like that it's looking into the book would you turn with me to Ephesians chapter two could you were to regularly do this exercise that I'm suggesting I've shown you this before in Ephesians chapter two one through ten we have gospel and what I'm suggesting is you take the you and make it a me and I was dead in the trespasses and sins in which I once walked following the course of this world following the prince of the power of the air the spirit that is disobedience among whom

I once lived in the passions of my flesh carrying out the desires of my body and my mind I was by child a child of wrath like the rest of mankind it's who I was it's who you were but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved me even when I was dead in my trespasses made me alive together with Christ by grace I have been saved and he raised me up with him and

seated me with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness towards me in Christ Jesus for by grace I have been saved through faith and this is not my own doing it's the gift of God not a result of my works so that I wouldn't have to boast for I am his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that I should walk in them you see how that works could you imagine doing that a couple times a week for a month you're going to find yourself the gospel in your crank house this is who

I am by God's grace it's true the truth of the gospel well I think I'm running out of time the third way life groups gospel unions brothers and sisters life group leaders learn to strike the middle sea of the gospel every time your life group gathers give them the gospel remind them of the gospel rehearse the gospel together it's really easy as a life group to focus on your differences it's easy to do things like this I don't like this person I'm not going this person stinks I don't want to go because I can't believe he said this about me honey why are we doing this life group thing here's why you're doing it because it is a gospel union it reminds you that you belong to

Christ along with these other people all around that room do you know what happens when a life group is experiencing gospel unity there's a hunger for God's word there's a growing depth of relationships there's a joyful desire to obey Jesus and all he commanded and there is a mission mindedness it's the middle C for a small group of Christians in our church lastly when the gospel is resonating in our souls we will be looking for opportunities to help other Christians in real need when a need arises it's going to be the very thing that we're eager to do because we're united to them in Christ that might be an individual Christian that might be another church here in Kenosha or around the world let's be looking for opportunities brothers and sisters the gospel is our middle C as a church it's from where we sing it's from where we serve it's why we gather the gospel must unite us above all else let's pray God in heaven we do ask that you would use Galatians 2 1 through 10 to form your mind in our church that we would be a church with the gospel at the center of who we are informing all that we do as long as we're here God would you fan into flame our love for you and our love for others through the gospel of Jesus Christ and it's his name I pray Amen amen