

3. Understanding the Gospel of Grace – Part 2

In our last lesson, we saw that as Christians we have been set free from the Law. We have been given that freedom so that we can serve one another in love instead of being driven by fear and then driving others by fear. Today, we will learn how God kept Paul separate from the other Jewish Christians because they were all zealous for the law. The Jews were Jewish and the Jews were told to do certain things forever as a part of being Jewish. We saw in our last topic that the Gentiles were never under the Jewish law and they were not to be brought under that law as Christians. The only restrictions that the Lord gave to the Gentiles went back to the first chapters of Genesis long before God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees to become the father of the nation of Israel.

Galatians 1:17-20 tells about the first visit of Paul to the city of Jerusalem after he had spent three years in Arabia being taught the Gospel of grace by the Lord. Those verses say, “Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.)” Here, we see that after the Lord met Paul on the road to Damascus, the Lord guided Paul to go to Arabia, instead of Jerusalem, so that the Lord could teach him the Gospel of grace.

It was only after Paul had been a Christian for three years that he made his first return trip to the city of Jerusalem. However, even on that trip Paul did not spend very long in Jerusalem. We see that Paul only spent fifteen days in Jerusalem. During that time, the only two leaders of the church at Jerusalem that he saw were Peter and James (one of the half-brothers of Christ that was born to Mary and Joseph after the birth of Christ). This is the James that was a key leader in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and also the James that later wrote the book of James. On this trip, Paul did not see any of the other leaders of the church at Jerusalem. This was important because God wanted Paul to make a clear distinction in his own mind between being a Christian and being a Jew who was zealous for the Old Testament law.

In fact, the Lord even allowed opposition to Paul in order to get him out of the city of Jerusalem quickly. Acts 9:29-30 says, “And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.” Here, we see that Paul was forced to flee from Jerusalem because some of the Hellenistic Jews attempted to kill him. It was either get out of Jerusalem or die. As a result, some of the Christians helped him escape to Caesarea so that he could return to his home town of Tarsus.

Paul did not return to visit Jerusalem for eleven more years. Galatians 2:1 says, “Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me.” The last of these eleven years was spent in the city of Antioch. Acts 11:25-26 tells us, “Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And

the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Here, we see that Paul spent the next ten years after his fifteen day visit to Jerusalem in the area of his home town of Tarsus.

This meant that the Lord gave Paul three years of personal instruction in the Gospel of grace in Arabia and then ten more years of development in his own hometown of Tarsus. There Paul was able to spend that time explaining the Gospel of grace to his relatives, friends, co-workers, neighbors and other acquaintances in the area of Tarsus. Since Tarsus was also a university town, he probably had many opportunities to explain the Gospel of grace to people who were attending the university. This would have given him many opportunities to answer questions and learn to more clearly explain the Gospel of grace. The Lord was using this time to help Paul learn to explain the Gospel of grace clearly before he began his public ministry recorded in the book of Acts. This was followed by the year in Antioch and then the Lord finally led Paul back to Jerusalem for another short visit.

Galatians 1:21-24 tells us what Paul was doing during this eleven-year period. Those verses tell us, “Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, ‘He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God in me.” Antioch was the main city in the region of Syria; Tarsus was the main city of Cilicia. As a result, Paul was able to share the Gospel of grace with many Gentiles.

Antioch was the second largest city in the Roman Empire and most of the people in that city were Gentiles. Acts 11:19-21 tells us, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” Here, we see that it was at Antioch that the Gospel began to spread rapidly among the Gentiles.

The church in Jerusalem heard about these Gentiles in Antioch becoming followers of Christ and sent Barnabas to teach them. Barnabas and the other disciples in Jerusalem had been hearing about the ministry of Paul in Tarsus. Barnabas recognized immediately that he needed help teaching these new Gentile believers. He realized that Paul already had ten years of experience teaching Gentile believers in Tarsus and the surrounding region. As a result, that is why we read that Barnabas immediately went to Tarsus to get Paul to help him teach the new Gentile believers in Antioch.

One of the things that Paul taught other believers during this eleven-year period was the way that Christ transforms our lives. This meant that the Gentile disciples had been learning about the freedom that they had in Christ and that Christ had set them free to serve one another in love. As a result of this transformation in the lives of the Gentile believers, the other people gave the believers a new name. Acts 11:26 says, “And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” The word “Christians” means “little

Christ's". This was probably a term to mock the new Christians. However, it was actually a compliment because it meant that the people recognized the transformation that had happened in the lives of these disciples.

The book of Acts also tells us why Barnabas and Paul made a good team to take the Gospel to the Gentiles in other regions. Acts 11:24 says, "For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord." Here, we see that Barnabas became very effective at sharing the Gospel of grace with the Gentiles. Paul later summarized his ministry in Ephesus when he said in Acts 20:20-21, "How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Barnabas was effective at explaining the Gospel. Paul was effective at helping new Christians come to a fuller understanding of the Gospel of grace as he took them with him and showed them how to answer the questions of both Jews and Greeks.

The result of this team ministry was the fact that many people became Christians and then became equipped to lead others to a full understanding of the Gospel of grace. These new Christians also realized the freedom that they had as new Christians to minister to others. Later, Paul and Barnabas each became the leader of a team as they both trained others to share this Gospel of grace. We see the results of such team ministry in Acts 19:10 where we read, "And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks." These new Christians realized that they had the freedom to share the Gospel of grace with the people of their own home areas.

Colossians 2:1-3 says, "For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Paul wrote this letter to Christians in the city of Colosse. Paul had never been to this city. Instead, Epaphras realized that Christ had set him free and gave him a ministry and he took the Gospel back to his home area. Colossians 4:12-13 says, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis." In the same way, we want to help our physical and spiritual children realize that Christ has set them free and they are now free to minister to others. The Lord will use them mightily as they grow to understand the Gospel of grace. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand that the Lord has set them free and given them a ministry that will help others to be set free.