

TO PRESERVE THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Galatians 2:1-10

Key Verse: 2:5

We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

In Galatians 1, we learned what the essence of the gospel is—it is the good news of forgiveness of our sins through Jesus' cross and resurrection. We are saved from our sin and death when we believe in Jesus and commit our lives to him. There is no other gospel.

In today's passage, St. Paul tells us about his struggles in preserving the truth of the gospel. He says he did not give in to the pressure to compromise so that the truth of the gospel might remain with the believers. We also live in a society that challenges us to compromise our faith for the sake of fitting in. We are tempted to follow our feelings and the secular trend of our society more than the word of God. I pray that God may help us to learn Paul's faith and courage as we study this passage.

I. PAUL WENT UP TO JERUSALEM (1-5)

Look at verse 1. *Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also.* Paul says that fourteen years later he went up again to Jerusalem. During his mission life among Gentiles, Paul made several trips to the mother church in Jerusalem. We are not sure to which visit he is referring here. Let us review a brief timeline of his mission life. After the Stephen's martyrdom, Paul met the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus. He spent a short time in Damascus, and then went to the Arabian desert to have a quiet time. After three years, he returned to Damascus to preach the gospel there. The Jews in the city conspired to kill him (Ac 9:22), but the brothers there helped him to escape. Then he went to Jerusalem and met Barnabas who introduced him to Peter and James (Ac 9:27). After the brief visit to Jerusalem, he went to Antioch in Syria and then Cilicia where his hometown Tarsus was (1:21; Ac 9:30). He spent several years in Tarsus. Finally, Barnabas went to Tarsus, found Paul, and brought him to Antioch (Ac 11:25) to become a Bible teacher. While in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas visited Jerusalem on a mission to deliver the relief offerings of the believers in Antioch to the brothers in Judea who were suffering from a severe famine (Ac 11:30), and then returned to Antioch (Ac 12:25). Then they were sent out for their first missionary journey along with John Mark (Ac 13:1-3). A year or two later, Paul and Barnabas visited Jerusalem again to meet with the church leaders to deal with the issue of the circumcision group. The apostles and elders convened for public discussions. Peter stood up and told them: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus

that we are saved, just as they are” (Ac 15:8-11). Paul and Barnabas delivered a world mission report telling about the work of God among the Gentiles (Ac 15:12). Finally, James declared, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Ac 15:19). This historic meeting is called the Jerusalem Council.

So which meeting does Paul mean when he said “fourteen years later”? Some Bible scholars say it was the Jerusalem Council. However, Paul says that he met with the church leaders privately (2). Given that the Jerusalem Council was a public event, it is possible that Paul and Barnabas met with the church leaders during their earlier visit to the city on their famine mission.

Either way, there are a couple of very important points we need to think about on his visit to Jerusalem. Look at verses 2-3. *I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.* Paul went to Jerusalem in response to a revelation, meaning he was prompted by the Holy Spirit. It was not just his own idea to fight the issue. He must have prayed a lot about the matter. Then the Spirit of God nudged him to set before the Jewish Christians the true gospel that he preached among the Gentiles. He had a sense of urgency. He feared that he was running or had run his race in vain. Some false brothers had infiltrated the ministry in Antioch to spy on the freedom they had in Christ and to make them slaves to Judaism. This was a serious matter for the fledgling church as they looked to evangelize the world beyond Judea and Samaria to obey Jesus’ supreme command (Ac 1:8).

In their trip to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas took with them Titus, a Greek Christian who was originally from the island of Crete. Titus was a fruit of their Gentile ministry. This man used to worship Greek gods such as Zeus and Hermes. Now he was a changed person by the blood of Jesus. Titus made a full commitment to Jesus Christ. He made a decision to live for Christ. In fact, he later became the bishop of the church of Crete (Tit 1:5). The presence of this disciple of Jesus must have been a powerful testimony that salvation is by God’s grace alone and by faith in Jesus alone. Not even Titus was compelled to be circumcised (4). Why should anyone be compelled to be circumcised?

Why is Paul telling this story to the believers in Galatia now? He was reminding them that this was not a new issue. The Judaizers had tried to infiltrate the believers in Antioch with their false teachings before and now they were trying to enslave the believers in Galatia. Paul wanted them to see clearly what they were up to and what their motive was (“Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them” (Gal 4:17).)

II. "WE DID NOT GIVE IN" (4-5)

Look at verses 4-5. *[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. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.* During his days as one of the spiritual leaders of the Antioch church, Paul had to face enormous pressure from the circumcision group. These false brothers had come from Jerusalem to spy on the freedom the believers had in Christ Jesus. In Acts 13, we see one aspect of what this freedom in Christ meant to them. The church had many Bible teachers with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. They included Jews and Gentiles from places like Jerusalem and Libya in Africa. One had a dark skin complexion (Simeon called Niger). Another had a political background (Manaen). Setting aside their differences, they put their hearts together and freely serve the Lord, worshipping and fasting. They had a world mission vision. Moved by the Holy Spirit, they set apart Barnabas and Paul to place their hands on them and send them out (Ac 13:1-3). Despite the cultural and ethnic barriers among them, these believers in Antioch had the freedom in Christ to serve the Lord willingly and joyfully.

When the circumcision group saw how the believers in Antioch served the Lord freely, they probably felt jealous of them, because they still had to deal with their burdensome baggage of all kinds of rituals from the law of Moses and the traditions of the elders. It was unthinkable to talk with Gentiles, let alone eat with them and study the Bible with them. They were shocked when they saw the believers there ordered for their fellowship meal pizzas with toppings like sausages and anchovies. So they went around and told the young Christians there that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised and obey the law of Moses (Ac 15:1). They tried to shackle the believers with the Jewish laws and traditions to make them slaves. They did this in a sneaky way, behind the backs of St. Paul and other leaders. Paul found out their infiltration when the new Christians began to show doubts about their salvation from sin and death based on their faith in Christ alone.



How did Paul and the other leaders respond to the false brothers' attempt to tear down the work of God? Paul says in verse 5: *We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.* They did not give in to them for a moment. Paul was not willing to compromise with the false brothers. It would have been easy for him to give in to the brothers from the mother church so that his work would be approved by the Jewish Christians and he would have an easier time to do his work. But Paul did not give in to them for the sake of his convenience. His concern was for the Gentile believers. He wanted the truth of the gospel to remain with them. The truth of the gospel is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1Co 15:3-4), and that we are justified by our faith in Christ alone (not by observing the law). Paul was absolute about the essence of the gospel.

But we should not think that Paul was stubborn for no reason. He was adamant in preserving the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But he was flexible on other peripheral matters. For example, later Paul personally circumcised Timothy (Ac 16:3) who was a Jew from his mother side and a Greek from his father side. In fact, Paul did not mind the Jewish Christians circumcise themselves. It was their culture, unrelated to salvation by faith in Jesus. He took an issue with them only when they tried to impose circumcision as a requirement for salvation for the Gentiles. Paul had a shepherd's heart for the Gentile believers and preserving the truth of the gospel crucial, not only for them, but also for the future of Christian missions.

The truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is also being challenged in our time. We are faced with the pressure to give in to political correctness, tolerance and multiculturalism. When we preach that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone and that there is no other way, we are often called narrow-minded bigots. Franklin Graham is quoted as saying in regards to Muslims, "God loves them. I want them to know that they don't have to die in a car bomb, don't have to die in some kind of holy war to be accepted by God. But it's through faith in Jesus Christ and Christ alone." He also said that many Muslim leaders enslave their people, especially women, with legalism. As a result, the U.S. Army rescinded his invitation to speak at the national day of prayer. It was a painful rejection. But Mr. Graham did not waver in his stand for the gospel truth. Likewise, we must not give in to the pressure of this world and stand on the truth of the gospel. To do so, we should study the word of God with a great learning mind as the Bible teachers in Antioch did so that the truth may remain in our hearts and lives. A college in California (Pitzer College) is starting a new department of "secular studies" and creating a new bachelor's degree program—in atheism. They want to study why people turn their backs on God and follow secular trend of this world. In this environment, we should also come to the truth of the word of God with a great learning mind so that we can articulate what we believe and what we preach.

III. AGREEMENT AMONG THE CHURCH LEADERS (6-10)

How did the leaders in Jerusalem respond to Paul and his message? Look at verses 6-7. *As for those who seemed to be important--whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance--those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews.* The Jerusalem leaders added nothing to Paul's message. They did not say to him, "On the scale of 1 to 10, your message gets only a 7. You need to add such and such to your preaching." Instead, they confirmed that the gospel Paul preached was the same gospel they preached. They also saw how God entrusted Paul the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (just as Peter had been commissioned to preach to the Jews).

The Jerusalem church leaders recognized Paul's ministry as the work of God. They accepted him as an apostle to the Gentiles. They recognized the grace upon Paul.

Look at verses 8-10. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

The church leaders' recognition of the ministry among the Gentiles was a blessing for Paul. He didn't have to waste his time and energy to argue with them for theological issues. Instead, he could devote himself fully to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to many people who were still wandering in the darkness of sin.

Paul and the leaders in Jerusalem had differences but they came together to resolve the issues prayerfully and amicably. When the Jerusalem leaders considered the issues at hand prayerfully, they realized that God was working among Gentiles as well as Jews. They were preaching the same gospel. They were trying to serve the same Lord Jesus Christ. Their personal conversion experiences, mission callings, educational backgrounds, their jobs, and personalities were all different. But they had one common denominator that bound them together. It was the good news of Jesus Christ. Because of their different backgrounds, they presented the gospel in different ways. But it was the same gospel.

Many years ago, I had an opportunity to attend a UBF Bible conference in Germany. I was surprised to find how some things were done differently there, compared to those in the U.S. Even the introductions at the beginning of the conference were quite different. The Bible messengers' styles and manners were different. The responses by the audience were different. But amid the differences, one thing remained the same—the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same gospel was preached there. They served the same Lord Jesus Christ as we do.

Later this month, UBF will celebrate its 50th anniversary in Seoul, Korea. Some missionaries and native shepherds will share the work of God in their respective mission fields. No doubt their reports will show how the gospel is preached to different people with different cultures and languages. But again the common thread will be the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same gospel is being preached by our mission coworkers around the world. So no matter how different they may look and different language they speak, we should accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ, embracing our diversity.

Paul did not compromise the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ despite the enormous pressure from the circumcision group. He did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might remain with the believers. Let us pray that we may also preserve the truth of the gospel in our unbelieving generation. Let us come to the word of God with a great learning mind so that we may be very clear on what we believe and share the truth of the gospel with young people of our time.