

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at the Epistle to the Galatians: Galatians 2

It seems strange to us that two Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ could have such a strong contention between them that it became a matter of public rebuking of one by the other, and ultimately led to a letter being written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and incorporated into the canon of Scripture, in order that all believers on our Lord Jesus Christ could profit by a clear understanding of the principles that were involved. But so it was; Peter and Paul were the two apostles and the Epistle to the Galatians was the letter written. This morning it is our purpose to look into the Galatians 2 but before doing so may I just say a brief word in case any of you missed last week's broadcast.

This letter was written by Paul and is addressed to a company of churches and not to an individual one, and it is noteworthy that he does not include in his introduction any word of commendation as was usual in his letters, even in that to the Corinthian church that had so seriously erred in their behaviour. Then too we can detect a certain coldness in his remarks to them, something that is not apparent in his other writings. The reason is that serious error had invaded all the churches of Galatia and even by 1:6 he had begun his reproof of them. They had allowed another gospel to be proclaimed among themselves and moreover a gospel that was most dishonouring to Christ. It was certainly not the gospel that Paul had preached. Having indicated the matter that would be the subject of his communication, in the latter part of the chapter he states his authority for addressing them in this way. Having reminded them that he was an apostle by direct appointment from the Lord, he gives an account of his early years and how the truth of the gospel was given to him by direct revelation of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 2 he gets to the heart of the trouble. False teachers had infiltrated the churches of Galatia and were seeking to impose Judaistic principles upon the brethren, in particular that Gentile converts must be circumcised. Paul was particularly suited to deal with such evil teaching; he had encountered it before and gives an account of his previous experience. It would seem that Paul, after his conversion had made three journeys to Jerusalem. After his Damascus Road conversion he had gone immediately to Arabia, 1:17, where, no doubt, he received direct from the Lord all the truth concerning the gospel and the Assembly that he was later to make known. His home assembly was Antioch in Syria and according to Acts 11:30 and 12:25 he, accompanied by Barnabas, made another journey to Jerusalem to carry gifts from the former for the relief of the saints who were suffering as a result of a famine. Then as stated in 2:1 he and Barnabas made another journey to the capital the purpose of which we read in Acts 15. Here in our chapter this morning we are told two important facts that are not mentioned in the Acts. The first is that he took Titus with him (verse 1) and secondly that he went up by revelation verse 2. In Acts 15:2 we read that the brethren at Antioch "determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question". Here we have emphasised the Christian motive for the journey but in our chapter we learn that it was also the Lord's command. The reason for their going is clearly stated in 15:1 "And certain men who came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved". This was a monstrous addition to the gospel; indeed it undermined the very foundation of it. Was not the 'one offering' of Christ sufficient for the forgiveness of sins? Did some act of man need to be added to that? And moreover these false teachers were saying that even the Gentile converts needed to be circumcised. This matter had to be resolved and so the question was referred to the brethren in Judea, the very place from which these teachers came. On their way to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas "Passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy unto all the brethren". However no sooner had they arrived "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees, who believed, saying that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses". So the council of Jerusalem was convened and after much disputing Peter took the floor and related how God had clearly told him that even by his mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe, and that God "had put no difference between us and them purifying their hearts by faith". Peter was followed by Barnabas and Paul who declared "what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them". It was clear therefore and confirmed from heaven itself that the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles made no provision for circumcision or the keeping of the law. In this letter to the Galatians he pointed out that in the case of Titus who was with him and himself a Gentile, there had been no compulsion for him to be circumcised, although in view of the fact that Paul uses the word 'compelled' indicates that pressure had been put upon him to be so. After hearing all the evidence James, on behalf of the assembled company, speaks and backing up what had already been said with quotations from the Old Testament judges that the converted Gentiles are not to be troubled by the impositions of the false teachers. In view of the fact that the apostles themselves were present and were parties to the decision that should have been an end to the matter. The Lord Jesus added Gentiles to the church on exactly the same conditions that He added Jews.

Before we pass on may we pause to take note of the wonderful sovereignty of our God in resolving this dispute that had occurred. Here were all the makings of a division in the church. The false teaching had first been promulgated in Judea where it would most likely have been accepted, and had then spread to Antioch, a predominately Gentile assembly where it would surely have been resented. Had the matter not been dealt with how easily there could have arisen a Jewish church in Jerusalem and a Gentile church in Antioch. But no! God, in His wisdom, allowed Paul and Barnabas to be in Antioch to refute this new teaching. They were especially equipped to be able to deal with it. Then He permitted the dispute to arise in the days of the apostles, and finally although the matter was brought to a head in Antioch, it was resolved in Jerusalem. And the grace shown by the brethren there in seeking help from their fellow believers prevented a division, something, that, had it happened, no doubt, Satan would have rejoiced in.

Something else which took place at the council of Jerusalem which is not mentioned in Acts 15 but which Paul refers to here in verses 7 to 10 is that it was recognised that the Lord had appointed Peter to minister the gospel to the Jews and likewise had appointed Paul as the minister to the Gentiles. He writes that on this understanding "James, Peter and John ... gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship". What love and grace is demonstrated by such an action.

It might be as well at this point to say a word as to the wickedness of this teaching that was taking such a hold amongst the various companies of believers. The propagators of it appear to be those mentioned in Acts 15:5, Pharisees who believed but who insisted that the keeping of the law was crucial to salvation. We know that this sect were scrupulous in the observation of the law (or so they imagined) and perhaps they could not believe that God could be pleased with anything that excluded it. The way Paul describes them in verse 4 makes us wonder whether or not they were true believers on the Lord Jesus. The Lord Himself. in John 6 recognised that there were those who took the place of His disciples but in their hearts had not really believed and who subsequently went back and walked no more with Him. Paul speaks of them as the false brethren, for so it should read; they were brought in surreptitiously and they came in surreptitiously. Why? It was to spy out the liberty of the saints, their new-found privilege which they had in Christ Jesus. The result would have been to bring Christians into bondage or as it might be rendered 'abject slavery'. The law "holy, just and good" as it was had failed because of the utter inability of man to keep it – it was a law which said "Do this and thou shalt live". What was needed was a means whereby man could be reconciled to God on a basis completely outside himself, and that was brought about by The Son of God becoming man and laying down His life upon the Cross, thereby paying the full price of our redemption. God is satisfied – henceforth man is not saved on the basis of law but on the basis of grace. "Do this" has become "It is done". It is made ours simply by believing. In the words of Paul himself, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" Law has given way to grace. Paul deals very fully with all this in his letter to the Romans where he concludes in 4:28 "that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law". The great evil in this system was that it made the work of Christ insufficient for the justification of the sinner; something had to be added to it and according to these teachers it was the keeping of the law. The very suggestion of such was blasphemy. Although we may not have this principle presented in specifically the same way today we come very near to it. How many believe that it is incumbent upon man to earn his salvation by his good works? His charitable acts, his moral living etc. In essence he makes his own law and seeks to keep to it, but Paul, when expounding this subject, always refers to 'law', not 'the law'. What he is driving at is that faith alone is both necessary and sufficient, and the keeping of any law, be it God's or man's, is both unrequired and a positive hindrance to bring about our justification.

Paul had experienced these false teachers at Antioch and he had again encountered them at Jerusalem but even the judgement of the apostles and elders there had failed to silence them and now, perhaps some six years later their evil teaching had permeated throughout the churches of Galatia. He had never yielded to their Satanic persuasions, not even for an hour; he was determined that the truth of the gospel would not be compromised. There was an occasion when he had to stand up to Peter on this very issue and he reveals it to his readers in verse 11. It does not appear that Peter had capitulated to the false teaching by wholly reverting to the law particularly with regard to his relationships with Gentiles. Under the law it would have been unthinkable for a Jew to eat with a Gentile but in Antioch the saints who comprised the church there were a mixed company of Jews and Gentiles and frequently enjoyed meals together. Indeed this was a happy way of both enjoying and expressing fellowship. On one occasion Peter visited Antioch and was quite happy to participate in these gatherings but when visitors arrived from Jerusalem, in fact acquaintances of James, whether believers or not we are not told, Peter withdrew his fellowship and refused to eat with the Gentile believers. Whilst at Jerusalem it was proposed that the Gentile believers should not be put under Jewish law, now even the Jewish believers are once again to be subject to the Jewish law. Why did he thus compromise the truth of the gospel? Because he feared the criticism of men, those of the circumcision. This was a terrible act of failure on Peter's part. He was perhaps the chief of the apostles; his actions would be looked to as examples and this act was no exception. Other Jewish believers and even Barnabas who was the companion of Paul, not Peter, and who had initially been chosen with Paul to examine this very issue, were stumbled and followed Peter's action by also withdrawing. Proverbs 29:25 tells us that "The fear of man bringeth a snare" and what a snare it was to poor Peter. He was the original preacher to the Gentiles, it was to the Gentiles that he had made the second use of the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, he himself had declared at the Council of Jerusalem that "we believe that through

the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they (that is the Gentiles)". Acts 15:11. Note that it is 'we as they', not 'they as we'.

No doubt it was in the care of the Lord for His church that Paul was present in Antioch at the time of Peter's failure, and immediately he makes a stand. In Ezekiel 22:30 we read: "I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before Me for the land that I should not destroy it: but I found none". In that day there was no one ready to hold fast, but in this crisis when devastating damage could have been inflicted on the church of God there was such a man – Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ. He would be the one "called the repairer of the breach. The repairer of the paths to dwell in." Isaiah 58:12 In this letter, in the very first verse He establishes his authority. He had not received his apostleship from any man, certainly not Peter, but directly from the Lord; and moreover He had been commissioned to go to the Gentiles whilst Peter went to the Jews, and this had been acknowledged by all the apostles. 2:6 shows how that he bowed to no one in the administration of his calling. From verse 7 onwards he records his confrontation with Peter, pointing out his error and then giving the reasons why it was so important that the truth should be made abundantly clear. "I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" writes Paul. Strong words from one apostle to another. Did he not love him as a brother in Christ? Of course he did, but this was a matter of the truth and it had to be adhered to. How vital this is. Let me quote a passage from the writings of an esteemed brother of the 19th century. "The true Christian's motto should ever be 'maintain the truth at all cost; if union can be promoted in this way so much the better, but maintain the truth'. The principle of expediency, on the contrary may be enunciated 'promote union at all cost; if truth can be maintained as well, so much the better, but promote union'. This latter principle can only be carried out at the expense of all that is divine in the way of testimony".

In the face of this threat to the truth of the gospel and the serious damage that could be done to the Church of God, Paul in verses 15 to 19 gives his reasoning to these Galatians for their help, and his words have been incorporated into the Scriptures for the benefit of us all. He says that they listened to the preaching of the gospel which clearly stated that a man was justified before God solely on the principle of faith and altogether apart from any works of his own. This they accepted. Salvation was solely by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why then were they now acknowledging that it was necessary to keep the law as an additional requisite? By putting themselves under law they only proved that they were sinners, that they still had an old nature; "By the law is the knowledge of sin" Romans 3:20. So whilst they were seeking justification by Christ, they still had to acknowledge that they were sinners. Is then, Paul asks. Christ a minister of sin? God forbid. The very thought is wickedness of the highest order. Paul himself writes in 1 Corinthians "the strength of sin is the law" (15:56). Look to the law and you will never know deliverance from sin. Dear fellow believers, do not let us dwell upon ourselves as poor sinners but rather what God has made us in Christ as recorded in Hebrews 10:14 "For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified". By the re-imposition of law upon our spiritual lives we are building again that which was destroyed and in doing so we make ourselves transgressors or law breakers.

Henceforth we are dead to the law but alive unto God.

In verse 20 Paul no doubt recounts his own experience as to how this truth was made good in his own soul. He is dead to the law that is the law had no jurisdiction over him. How could law apply to a dead man? But how did he come to a realisation of this new situation. In fact, it was 'through the law'. He, as a Jew, had been under the law but then God had quickened him and given him divine light, and he realised his utter powerlessness to keep the law. The law only brought death, not life but in his new condition he is dead to the law but alive unto God.

*Free from the law, oh happy condition,
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission,
Cursed by the law and bruised by the Fall,
Grace hath redeemed us once for all.*

He is dead to the law – dead to sin, as he himself states in His letter to the Romans 6:2. "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer in it"? This dual death is comprehended in the work of Christ. So verse 20. "I am crucified with Christ". Christ has died and Paul died with him. But there is something even more wonderful. Christ is alive and he lives in Paul. His life down here, in the flesh as he puts it, is lived by the faith of the Son of God, or the faith that he had in the Son of God, who loved him and gave himself for him. He now lives, not by keeping the law but by faith. And we as simple believers can say Amen to all that Paul has stated.

The last verse of the chapter is a devastating conclusion to his reasoning. If righteousness may be obtained by the law, the grace of God is being set aside. If such were the case why need Christ have died?

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