

XVII. Glorifying in the Cross

June 13/14, 2012

Galatians 6:11-18

Aim: To glory in the cross of Jesus Christ, whereby He saves us from our sins and grants us all the heavenly blessings that are in Christ, rather than to boast in our own merits.

The last section of Galatians is more than a hastily written postscript, the afterthought of an apostle. Instead, these verses constitute a summary of the entire letter. They place circumcision over against the cross, showing that justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone means boasting in the cross alone. To understand this is to understand Galatians. More than that, it is to understand the gospel.

In the final eight verses of the epistle, Paul refers or alludes three times to the cross of Christ. There can be no doubt that he intended to leave his readers with their gaze fixed upon 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2), for here lies the remedy for all error.

A. Boasting (Gal. 6:11-15)

In Galatians 6:11-15, the apostle Paul reminds us that we should glory in Christ above everything else. Having completed his exhortations, he concludes his letter to the Galatians. In the conclusion he summarizes the key message of the book in terms of two types of religionists: one who boasts in the flesh and one who boasts in the cross.

1. Boasting in the Flesh (6:11-13)

Paul begins by exposing the false religionist who boasts in the flesh.

a) Paul's Emphasis (6:11)

See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!

We are now to imagine that visually, something unexpected occurs at this point in the letter. The handwriting suddenly becomes much larger and the reason is that though a secretary (*amanuensis*) wrote the letter on Paul's behalf, at this point Paul takes a pen in hand and begins to write himself. Perhaps he had intended initially just to sign his name, 'Paul,' and add a benediction (as occurs in verse 18), but he suddenly feels the need to reiterate what he has been saying in the letter. And there is something very strange about Paul's handwriting. He draws attention to the 'large (capital) letters.'

Paul carefully draws attention to his conclusion. Normally he dictated his letters. He probably signed them in his own hand, but he had a secretary that took his dictation. In this letter, however, Paul writes the summary paragraph and draws attention to the fact that he is writing it. He writes in large letters in order to emphasize the importance of the conclusion of this letter, even drawing attention to the size of the script. Some scholars suggest that 'large letters' refers to Greek uncials, a type of large, unconnected block letters, which, because they were easily seen, were used for public notices. Paul called attention to the large letters as a means of emphasizing content rather than form.

Some suggest that the apostle Paul had difficulty with a pen. Although he was a brilliant, well read man, he had secretaries and did not have to worry about writing. Others suggest that the

Galatians – Lesson 17

large letters were connected with a problem with his eyesight that developed during his preaching tour in Galatia (cp. 4:15). However, most commentators believe that Paul was simply emphasizing how strongly he felt about his message to the Galatian churches. Whatever may be the cause behind the size of the script, the very fact that he wrote the conclusion himself and draws attention to the size of the letters accentuates the conclusion. The size of the letters would have somewhat the effect of bold-face type in a modern book. It is as if he is saying, 'LOOK, I DON'T WANT YOU TO MISUNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS I AM SAYING TO YOU, SO I AM WRITING TO YOU IN CAPITAL LETTERS!'

b) Judaizers' Motivations (6:12-13)

Taken in its immediate context, Paul's emphasis may have had a more pointed purpose, namely to underline the difference in attitude between himself and the Judaizers. He pulls together the theme of the book of Galatians, indicting the Judaizers. Although they confessed to believe in Christ, they taught that Christ's work alone was insufficient for the remission of sins. Paul directs some blistering accusations against the Judaizers in Galatia who had sought the support of some of the brethren in Jerusalem. In this short passage he delineates four of their motives.

(1) Sycophants (6:12a, 13b)

As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh...but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

First, they arrogantly promoted themselves. Their desire was 'to make a good showing in the flesh,' that is, to win the applause of their fellow Jews by bringing the Gentile churches under the law of Moses. Their motivation was religious pride. We find here an echo of what he said in chapter 5 about vain ambition. He says they want applause; they want fame; they want to be recognized as great teachers and spiritual leaders. They desire to boast in their followers as trophies. The motivation in Galatia was to 'make a good showing' among those in Jerusalem who would congratulate them for upholding and promoting the 'orthodox' way. Here 'the flesh' has reference to the works of their humanness and self-effort apart from the Spirit. How they would be praised for their missionary zeal!

The verb 'to glory' is not one we use much today, but several different words are needed to express its content in modern terms. It signifies pride, pleasure, satisfaction, rejoicing, and exultation. It suggests that the heart and mind are so taken up with the object of glorification that a person is all but lost in its contemplation.

The object of the Judaizers' glorification was a Gentile church which (as they hoped) embraced the old covenant through circumcision and submission to the law. Their real concern was not for the message (the law), but only for results and the self-esteem they brought (see v. 13).

This was a strange boast to make, and it shows how important circumcision had become to the Jews. Apparently, the more foreskins they collected, the more impressed people would be back home in Jerusalem. The Judaizers were not really concerned about whether or not the Galatians kept God's law; they just wanted to brag about how many converts they had made. Their ministry was all for show. Showing off is one of the differences between true and false religion. False religion gets caught up in externals, like attendance figures and worship rituals. It is what churches are after when they seek to entertain rather than to edify, or when they base salvation on what people do for God rather than on what God has done for them.

Galatians – Lesson 17

True religion is inward. Although it always works its way out, it starts within, where the Holy Spirit regenerates a sinner's heart. The problem with making something like circumcision the essence of Christianity is that it is only an outward sign. True religion is not based on outward works; it is based on inward faith.

We must always be alert to the dangers of personal pride and self-aggrandizement in Christian service. Success and reputation can easily go to our heads. We need to seek the praise of God rather than that of man, for the latter can be a snare.

(2) Bullies (6:12b)

...these would compel you to be circumcised...

To reinforce their own legalistic religiosity, the Judaizers also tried to 'compel' others in the churches to be circumcised as a necessary element in obtaining salvation. Paul accuses them of using *force* in their attempts to have Gentiles circumcised (though he does not mean physical but moral pressure).

(3) Cowards (6:12c)

...only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.

Despite their 'good showing' in the eyes of their admirers, the truth about the Judaizers was unsavory. They were motivated by the fear of their fellow Jews. They were not only proud but cowardly. They advocated legalism to protect their lives and material welfare as well as to feed fleshly egos. They were not willing to pay the price of persecution in order to be identified with Jesus Christ.

Paul accuses them of being ashamed of the cross, of avoiding the scandal of the cross. The cross was foolishness and a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). The crucifixion of Christ was a scandal in the ancient world. The Judaizers sought to make Christ more palatable and to make themselves more acceptable to the Jews as Jewish Christians. Basically, he says, they added Jewish elements to the message, attempting to tone it down in order to remove the problem of persecution, to remove the offense of the cross.

The Judaizers identified themselves with the church but not with the cross and therefore not truly with Christ. They recognized Jesus as the Messiah and proclaimed allegiance to Him, but they had no part in Him because they refused to receive His finished work on the cross on their behalf. Their trust was in their own human works, represented by circumcision, rather than in God's provision of salvation by grace through the power of the cross of Christ.

When used in a soteriological context as here, 'the cross' does not refer to the pieces of wood on which Jesus was hung but to the entire work of divine redemption that His death on the cross accomplished. It is not the fact that Jesus was crucified like a common criminal that is the offense of the cross, but the truth of the substitutionary atonement, which allows no place for human pride, status, or achievement.

The Judaizers had no allegiance to the cross of Christ. Their concern was for their safety, not for their salvation, and they hoped that adherence to outward forms such as circumcision would minimize the offense to other Jews and to Gentiles and would thereby give them protection from persecution. By teaching obedience to the Mosaic law and the rite of circumcision they hoped to blunt criticism, alienation, and rejection by fellow Jews. A Jew who became a Christian was

Galatians – Lesson 17

often subject to social ostracism and financial ruin. He was put out of the synagogue and often out of his household. Fellow Jews refused to do business with him, and he often found it difficult to buy food and clothing even if he had money to pay for them.

When we think of the sufferings of the early church, we often think of all the persecution that came from the Romans. However, the first attacks came from the Jews. As the church spread through Asia Minor, Jewish persecution spread with it. But there was one easy way to avoid it, and this was to become circumcised. What made devout Jews angry was people who failed to maintain the proper boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. Yet even Gentiles were welcome *if* they agreed to join God's covenant by circumcision. The Judaizers said that circumcision was necessary to belong to God's covenant, but their real motivation was fear. They were afraid of what other Jews would say and do if they found out that they were worshiping with Gentiles. It would be much easier to deny their involvement with Christianity if they could say that the Gentiles in their house church kept the law of Moses. If only the Gentiles would agree to be circumcised like Jews, it would solve everything. Deep down, they were not willing to be persecuted with the cause of Christ. Christians inevitably face this temptation because the cross has a way of inviting persecution.

The Judaizers also hoped that identifying themselves with the law of Moses would help them keep the protected status Jews then enjoyed in the Roman Empire. Because their leader has been crucified under Roman law, Christians were frequently under suspicion by Roman officials and often experienced harassment that Jews did not.

That is what all works and sacramental religion does. They substitute for the offense of the cross the dignity of human worth and righteousness, or the beauty and glory of church practices. All such attempts debase the Savior.

(4) Hypocrites (6:13a)

For not even those who are circumcised keep the law...

Finally, Paul says they are hypocrites; they are driven by a double standard. Like the Scribes and Pharisees rebuked by the Savior in Matthew 23:1-13, the Judaizers were not living by that which they required from others.

Hypocrisy is inseparable from cowardice, because if a person were not afraid of what other people might say or do, he would have no reason for pretending to be something he is not. The Judaizers who were circumcised did not even sincerely try to live by the standards of the Mosaic Law, much less by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were not even honest Jews, much less genuine Christians.

Not only was circumcision a strange subject for the Judaizers to boast about, but it was also an empty boast. It was supposed to be a sign of total commitment to God's law. The Judaizers said of the Gentiles, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses' (Acts 15:5). The irony was that the Judaizers couldn't even keep the law themselves! It was a case of hypocrisy. The legalists were lawless. The problem of course, is that no one can keep God's law perfectly. The problem with the law is not the law; the problem with the law is sin. The law saves only those who keep it, which no one does.

The charge Paul is making is thus fourfold: they were *sycophants*, *bullies*, *hypocrites*, and *cowards* to boot! No wonder the apostle Paul opposed the Judaizers at every turn. They were

Galatians – Lesson 17

the very worst kind of preachers. They were unwilling to endure persecution for the cause of Christ. They sought the glory of their own success. They never practiced what they preached. Worst of all, by trusting in circumcision rather than in the cross, they denied the free grace of the gospel.

2. Boasting in the Cross (6:14-15)

Having ruled out any form of self-confident boasting in our own obedience to the law, Paul now opens the door to the only legitimate boasting a Christian can do. The best antidote for boasting in the flesh is to boast in Christ. The true religionist boasts in Christ.

a) *The Cross (6:14a)*

But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...

‘May it never be’ translates *mē genoito*, a strong negative that carries the idea of virtual impossibility. Paul uses the same phrase numerous times in the book of Romans to firmly reject various false interpretations of the gospel (see 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15). He uses it here to tell the Galatians that it was inconceivable for him even to think of boasting in anything but the cross.

Although *kauchaomai* (‘to boast’) often refers to evil boasting, it here carries the idea of good glorying or rejoicing, as it does in Romans 5:2, 3, 11 (‘exult’) and Philippians 3:3 (‘glory’). By definition, the English word ‘boasting’ is an expression of pride, which was the furthest thing from Paul’s intent. It is difficult to capture the meaning of the Greek word because there is no precise equivalent in English. It means something more than bragging. The Greek term carries the basic meaning of praise, and whether it represents a sin or a virtue depends on whether self or God is being praised.

There was so much, humanly speaking, in which Paul might have found satisfaction. He had considerably more to boast about than the Judaizers (Phil. 3:4-10). He could have glorified in his learning, his literary gifts, his power as a preacher, his travels, his evident success as a missionary, the esteem in which he was held by countless believers, his high standing as an apostle. But Paul sought and found his joy and satisfaction as an apostle. He saw the emptiness of boasting in his own achievements or in the praises of men. The only achievement worthy of his boasting was the saving work of Christ.

We might expect Paul to say that he boasts in Jesus Christ, or in the love of God. That would make more sense than to boast of a method of corporal and capital punishment. Left uninterpreted, the cross of Jesus Christ makes no sense at all – still less would there be any sense in anyone boasting in it. To many in Paul’s day (and our own), the cross signaled the defeat of Jesus Christ. It demonstrated failure!

Christians are used to thinking about the cross as something noble, or even beautiful, but to ancient people it was nearly the ugliest thing imaginable—the ultimate humiliation. The Romans considered the cross degrading, disgusting, despicable, detestable, and disgraceful. The word *crux* was unmentionable in polite Roman society; even when one was being condemned to death by crucifixion the sentence used an archaic formula which served as a sort of euphemism: ‘hang him on the unlucky tree.’ What a strange thing to boast about! The cross should have been an embarrassment to the early church. The very thing that most people considered too obscene to whisper in polite company, Christians were broadcasting in the streets.

Galatians – Lesson 17

How then, can Paul boast in the cross? The answer lies in what the cross *means*. By the term ‘cross’ Paul is not referring to the wooden vehicle of crucifixion. He is using a figure of speech, using the instrument of the Savior’s atoning work to depict the gospel. On the cross Christ was *redeeming* us – paying the ransom price to set us free. The cross is *propitiatory*. Words like *redemption, propitiation, substitution, satisfaction, and reconciliation* provide the cross with an explanation that makes Paul’s boasting of it not only understandable but compulsory. The cross signals the greatness of God’s love for us in His determination to save us when the cost was the death of His only Son.

The cross is not just *something* to boast about; it is the *only thing* to boast about. The cross is the only thing to boast about because it means that God loves us enough to die for us, that He saved us through the death of His own dear Son. It means that we have been redeemed, that Christ has paid the whole price for our salvation. The cross means that we have forgiveness for our sins, that Christ offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice to take away our guilt. It means that we are justified, that God now accepts us as righteous in His sight. His wrath has been turned away, and now we stand innocent before him.

To glory in the cross is to stop trusting in our own merits—our church attendance, worship style, devotional habits, social involvement, theological orthodoxy, or number of converts—and to start trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ alone. The Galatians had to make a choice between the cross and circumcision. It was either one or the other, but it could not be both. Circumcision was a way of claiming a share in one’s own salvation, but the cross says that Jesus paid it all: His sacrifice is the total basis for our salvation. Thus there is no way to boast about what we have done and what Christ has done at the same time.

b) The Old World (6:14b)

...by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Boasting in the cross means more than simply believing that Jesus died for your sins; it also means living a crucified life. Paul gives us two reasons why he glories in the cross. First, the cross separates him from the world. He means that through the cross, the world (the world system with its values and temptations) has lost its appeal, its charm. He once clung to the world; namely his self-righteousness, his Judaism (cp. Phil. 3:7).

‘The world’ translates *kosmos* (the opposite of *kaos*, from which we get the English ‘chaos’) and speaks of an ordered system. Our word ‘cosmetic’ (derived from *kosmos*) has the basic meaning of covering up disorder with something that brings order. In the New Testament *kosmos* refers to the order of the evil world system ruled by Satan and his agents. The life of a person apart from Jesus Christ is the life of a victim of that system. It is a meaningless life, a life with no hopeful plan, purpose, or reason for being. It is also a life ruled by the flesh, which naturally and inevitably follows the system of evil promoted by the world, whether in gross immorality or simply in day-to-day self-gratification. In one way or another, every unbeliever is in bondage to the futilities and frustrations of the world. The person who belongs to Jesus Christ, however, is freed from the world’s evil and hopelessness.

What Paul means is that the world (that is, the world as a way of life apart from Jesus Christ) has nothing to offer him now that he has Jesus Christ. He found no lasting satisfaction in anything the world had to offer. If we possess the world but do not have Christ, we have nothing. If we have Christ and nothing else, we have everything.

Galatians – Lesson 17

The ‘world’ refers to all the godless values and hopeless pleasures of the present age. It is unredeemed humanity dominated by sin. It is the world apart from God, the mind-set of the self seeking its own desire. But the cross strikes a deathblow to all such worldliness. As Christians we no longer think the way the world thinks, talk the way the world talks, or misbehave the way the world misbehaves. We no longer take comfort in the comforts the world has to offer. We no longer value what the world values. We no longer care what the world thinks at all because we have been crucified to the world.

Among men, such things as riches, reputation, achievements, social standing and success are greatly valued. The believer, however, is dead to such blandishments, desiring the praise of God rather than the plaudits of man. He is dead, therefore, to the opinions and values of the world, though alive to the will and requirements of God. To be ‘crucified to the world,’ therefore, is no negative stance, but an inevitable result of our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Being crucified to the world is simply another way to describe what Paul was talking about back at the end of the previous chapter (5:24). Paul has already told us to crucify the flesh, to mortify it, to put it to death. Now he tells us that the world needs to join our flesh on the cross. Whether the sinful nature is called ‘the flesh’ or ‘the world,’ the point is the same: our sin needs to be nailed to the cross and left there to die.

Moreover, he says that the world despises him. When Paul says he is crucified to the world, he is not thinking of how he regarded the world but how the world regarded him. And the world thought of him as a fool—in much the same way as they had regarded Jesus Christ. The world wants nothing to do with him; the Jews want nothing to do with him, because he exalts Christ as the only way of salvation. When a Jew or Moslem is baptized, he becomes dead to his family; he is cut off. Similarly, Paul is cut off from the world. Paul says, ‘I have died to the world and they hate me.’ He was not ashamed of that. Thus, Paul says the cross severs all old and sinful relationships; it changes our affinities; it changes that which attracts us; it changes the way those outside of Christ respond to us.

c) The New Creation (6:15)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

Second, Paul asserts that by the cross alone we are reconciled to God. Here the apostle powerfully reasserts the main theme of his epistle. Religious externals mean nothing; the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ, bringing new life to the soul, is everything. Notice the contrast. He says that both circumcision and uncircumcision are unimportant. Why? Because they do not reconcile us to God. Circumcision is merely an outward symbol which retains no significance under the new covenant. True believers, whether Jew or Gentile, are united in Christ and all difference between them has been expunged. The really important thing is being a new creation. Through the message of the cross, sinners become new creatures. God transforms them by regeneration (2 Cor. 5:17). Through union with Christ in His death and resurrection, and by the instrumentality of the indwelling Holy Spirit, believers are new creations.

If this world has nothing to offer him and treats him with contempt, what does it matter? God is preparing him (and every Christian) for a new world! In the end, circumcision, to which these troublemakers in Galatia and Jerusalem had attached such importance, was of no value. Circumcision and uncircumcision together represent the world systems of religion, which is constituted by Jewish legalism and all the countless forms of cults and paganism. All of those

Galatians – Lesson 17

systems rely on the flesh, and consequently none of them is of any value for salvation. Thus Paul rejects all religion that is merely outward, consisting in rituals, rules, law-keeping, and human contrivances. True faith in Christ is inward. What is really important is the new creation that God is going to bring about. This new creation has, in effect, already begun in the life of a Christian (cp. 2 Cor. 5:17).

It is surprising to hear Paul say that circumcision didn't matter. He had said it once before (5:6). Nevertheless, it is surprising to hear him say it because the whole reason for his writing to the Galatians in the first place was because circumcision *did* matter. However, circumcision mattered to Paul only because it mattered to the Judaizers, who were making it a matter of salvation. In and of itself, however, circumcision means nothing. What does count is a new creation, the inward transformation by which the Holy Spirit turns a sinner into a whole new person. The theological term for this inward transformation is *regeneration*. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit makes the believer a new creature in Christ.

As far as salvation is concerned, the only thing that matters is whether this change has taken (and is taking) place. It matters not whether a person is a circumcised Jew or an uncircumcised Gentile; what matters is whether or not a person is a regenerated Christian, a new creature in Christ.

We may rightly infer that baptism, which replaces circumcision, does not make us new creatures. Baptism is necessary, because God has commanded us to be baptized. It marks our relation to Christ and His church, and if we are new creatures, it testifies to us of our union with Christ. Baptism, however, does not convert or regenerate.

Therefore, Paul gloried in the cross, and every true Christian must glory in the cross.

B. Blessing (Gal. 6:16-18)

Although Paul begins sharply, the book itself shines with love. He addresses them as his brethren and as his little children. Although he expresses himself in the shrillest tone, he cannot disguise his love for them. As he concludes the book, he makes clear his love for them, ending with tender words of apostolic blessing.

1. The Blessing (6:16b, 18)

...peace and mercy be upon them...the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul declares a threefold blessing in verses 16 and 18. In verse 16, he pronounces peace and mercy and, in verse 18, grace. These three blessings are often united in Scripture; they summarize the fruit of the gospel in the lives of God's people. Paul begins his letter to the Galatians with the pronouncement of grace and peace.

The 'peace' of the Lord Jesus Christ is a reference to the wholeness, the joy, and the contentment that are ours in Christ Jesus. It is a fruit of the Spirit. This peace is threefold. First, it is an objective peace with God. He has reconciled us to Himself; He has laid down His weapons. On the basis of Christ's sacrifice and our justification, God has turned away His wrath. We are no longer at enmity with God. Second, it is the subjective peace of conscience. To know that one is at peace with God is to enjoy the peace of conscience. Third, when we are at peace with God, we are enabled to live at peace with one another. We do not need to contend for our own rights;

Galatians – Lesson 17

rather, we can live together with a quiet and gentle spirit. This peace is the first apostolic blessing.

‘Mercy’ is the second blessing the apostle declares. Mercy is the pity of God joined with appropriate acts as he addresses the miseries of our lives. The term is related to that rich Old Testament concept of loving-kindness. This is the covenant love of God, which is the spring of God’s mercy to us. He is a Father and He loves us in the covenant as children. He does not deal with us according to our sins, but in His loving-kindness and compassion, He patiently bears with us and upholds us. Hence, the mercy of God is that which softens, sustains, and delivers us from the miseries and the consequences of our sins.

The third benefit is ‘grace.’ Notice that it is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ; Paul uses these three main names of the Savior in order to teach that He is the sovereign God, who became man in order to save His people from their sins. Moreover, He is God’s anointed prophet, priest, and king. In Him is everything we need to be saved. He has purchased for us all the benefits of grace, the objective realities of justification, adoption, and sanctification—the power to die to sin and to be renewed in the image of Christ Jesus; the subjective realities of assurance of God’s love, of boldness in prayer, of confidence, and of joy in the Holy Spirit. Christ has purchased and continues to distribute to us all these gracious benefits.

These three things together summarize the benefits of the gospel.

2. The Recipients (6:16-18)

To whom do these blessings belong?

a) Rule Walkers (6:16a)

And as many as walk according to this rule...

In his closing, Paul only greets those who ‘walk by this rule’ and not everyone who has professed the faith in Galatia. The issue over circumcision has been an important one, so much so that Paul is excluding those who have insisted upon it from his farewell greeting. This blessing is conditional. Peace and mercy are only for those who ‘walk by this rule.’ A rule is a norm or principle. In this case, what Paul means by ‘rule’ is salvation through the cross alone.

The term ‘walk’ means to follow after or to agree with, in other words, to follow after this rule. *Kanōn* (‘rule’) has the basic idea of measurement and was often used in the sense of a principle or standard. What is this rule? This is the rule of justification by faith alone, the standard of gospel salvation and holiness that Paul has delineated in this book. The only ‘rule’ that is valid in the sight of God is just this principle of new life in Christ. He now says that all who have rejected the false gospel of the Judaizers shall enjoy God’s blessing. Moreover, he clarifies their position by using two titles that define the recipients of God’s blessing – ‘Israel of God’ and ‘brethren.’

b) Israel of God (6:16c)

...and upon the Israel of God.

Because of the issues in this letter about who belongs to the people of God, he calls them ‘the Israel of God.’ This is a common way to address the covenant people. Here he addresses a congregation made up mostly of converted Gentiles, Israel. The Judaizers claimed that these people had to become Jews physically via circumcision to be part of Israel. Paul has shown that

Galatians – Lesson 17

all who believe in Christ are the true seed of Abraham (3:29). Israel is the church. It matters not whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised. If, by faith, you are in union with Christ Jesus, you are God's Israel.

Paul uses 'the Israel of God' to refer not merely to Jews, but to all true children of Abraham, whether Jews or Gentiles. It is a way of saying that the church is the new Israel. The promises that God made to Israel are fulfilled in the true spiritual Israel, which is the church of Jesus Christ. God has one people in Christ, and what unites them is the cross. We share a common boast in the cross, and in the cross alone.

Some take 'the Israel of God' to signify a separate category of believers, namely Jewish Christians, but this is unlikely to be Paul's intention. For one thing, he has just been emphasizing the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ, and is unlikely here to imply that a division of some sort still exists. It is more likely that Paul is driving home once again on of the main messages of the epistle, namely that the true descendants of Abraham, the heirs of faith, are not those who follow the law but those who embrace the gospel 'rule' that he has just enunciated. Thus the 'Israel of God' is the church of Christ, made up of all who walk by the rule of faith in Christ.

'Israel of God' and 'those who walk by this rule' are parallel phrases, and both identify the true church of Jesus Christ – made up of converted Jews and Gentiles. Paul sees the New Testament church as a continuation of Old Testament Israel. The church is 'the commonwealth of Israel' (Eph. 2:12). For Paul, there is only one plan of salvation and one people of God.

Here Paul destroys the idea that God has two people, Israel and the church. No! Here he calls the church Israel. There are not two people. There is the one people of God. We are the children of Abraham; we are God's Israel.

c) Brethren (6:18)

Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul is expressing by the term 'brethren' (a term that includes men and women) those who belong to God's family, God's adopted children, and the co-heirs of the Lord Jesus Christ. So this term is another way of talking about those who follow the rule or walk by the rule. He has never lost sight of the fact that his readers are believers in Christ, whatever their frailty and in spite of the threat of apostasy that hung over them as long as they persisted in error. His one concern is to restore them to faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul combines a plural pronoun ('your', plural) with a singular noun ('spirit,' singular). After alluding to the strife and tensions in Galatia, it may be that he now wants to think of them as a singular entity – the one body of Christ, who walk according to the 'rule' of the gospel.

d) Body Marks (6:17)

From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.

At the outset of the epistle Paul wrote of the Judaizers, 'There are some who trouble you' (1:7). Now he states what has been implicit throughout, that whoever troubles the churches of Galatia, troubles the apostle also.

The apostle Paul was a member of God's true Israel, and he had the battle scars to prove it. This statement was partly a warning to Paul's old enemies, the Judaizers. The apostle finally had enough, and thus he warned his opponents not to cause him any more trouble. This statement is

Galatians – Lesson 17

also a warning to every Christian, however, for it shows what kind of treatment we can expect for boasting in the cross. Soon or later, every Christian who glories in the cross will face opposition.

Although the word translated ‘marks’ is the Greek word *stigmata*, Paul is not referring to anything mystical or bizarre. It does not mean, as some people have wrongly supposed, that Christians can receive exactly the same wounds that Christ received on the cross. Rather, he is talking about the physical scars he bore from beatings and other injuries sustained in the course of his preaching ministry. Paul bore on his back the ‘marks of Jesus.’ Any time the apostle took off his shirt, the cost of discipleship would be visible to all around him.

If we ask why Paul was such a marked man, the answer is that people were offended by his preaching of the cross. As he had already mentioned (5:11), he was persecuted for boasting in the cross rather than boasting in circumcision. As far as the Judaizers were concerned, the badge of true religion was the mark made by circumcision. But the apostle Paul had a different insignia, one that came from glorying in the cross, and not in himself. He was bruised and beating for boasting in the cross. His scars were a badge of his faith in Jesus Christ. In the Greek world, the word *stigmata* was sometimes used to refer to the branding of a slave. Such usage would be appropriate in Paul’s case because his scars marked him as a servant of God.

Paul saw his sufferings not just as misfortunes that had to be endured. In the sovereign providence of God, they served a genuine and necessary purpose. In Paul’s mind, the things he suffered were a necessary part of his ministry, enabling him to follow in the footsteps of Christ. This is why he perceived his scars as a proof of his ministry and thus of his God-given authority as a teacher of the truth.

With this brusque statement, Paul sweeps aside the Judaizers. He does not want one more word from them. He has exposed them as cursed, false teachers. He emphasizes this statement by pointing to his suffering for the cross of Christ. He says his body bears testimony that he has been persecuted; persecution is the very thing the false teachers have sought to avoid (6:12).

For next time: End of Study on Galatians.