

Boasting in the Cross



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 6:11–18, Rom. 6:1–6, 12:1–8, 2 Cor. 4:10, 5:17, 11:23–29.*

Memory Text: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (*Galatians 6:14, ESV*).

This study of Galatians has been intense. That is because the letter itself is intense. Knowing Paul's calling, knowing the truth of what he preached (after all, as he said numerous times, that truth came from the Lord), Paul wrote with the inspired passion of the Old Testament prophets, of an Isaiah, a Jeremiah, a Hosea. Just as they pleaded with the people of God in their time to turn away from their error, Paul here is doing the same with those in his time.

We can see this similarity is true when considering that no matter how different the immediate circumstances were, in the end the words of Jeremiah could just as easily apply to the Galatians as they did to those in Jeremiah's day: “Thus saith the LORD, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD” (*Jer. 9:23, 24*).

Nowhere do our “glorious” human wisdom, our riches, or our might appear more clearly in all their futility and vanity than before the cross of Christ—the focus of Paul's letter to his erring flock in Galatia.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 30.

Paul's Own Hand

Compare Paul's closing remarks in Galatians 6:11–18 to the final remarks he makes in his other letters. In what way is the ending of Galatians similar to and different from them? (See the final remarks in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians.)

Paul's closing remarks are not always uniform, but a number of common elements appear in them: (1) greetings to specific individuals, (2) a final exhortation, (3) a personal signature, and (4) a closing benediction. When these typical features are compared to Paul's final remarks in Galatians, two significant differences appear.

First, unlike many of Paul's letters, Galatians contains no personal greetings. Why? As with the absence of the traditional thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter, this is probably a further indication of the strained relationship between Paul and the Galatians. Paul is polite but formal.

Second, we must remember that it was Paul's custom to dictate his letters to a scribe (*Rom. 16:22*). Then, after finishing, Paul often would take the pen himself and write a few brief words with his own hand to end the letter (*1 Cor. 16:21*). In Galatians, however, Paul deviates from his practice. When he takes the pen from the scribe, Paul is still so concerned with the circumstances in Galatia that he ends up writing more instead. He simply cannot put the pen down until he pleads with the Galatians once more to turn from their foolish ways.

In Galatians 6:11 Paul stresses that he wrote the letter with large letters. We really don't know why. Some have speculated that Paul was not referring to the size of the letters but to their misshaped form. They suggest that perhaps Paul's hands were either so crippled from persecution or gnarled from tent making that he could not form his letters with precision. Others believe his comments provide further evidence of his poor eyesight. Though both views are possible, it seems far less speculative to conclude simply that Paul was intentionally writing with large letters in order to underscore and reemphasize his point, similar to the way we might emphasize an important word or concept by underlining it, putting it in *italics*, or writing it in CAPITAL LETTERS.

Whatever the reason, Paul certainly wanted the readers to heed his warning and admonitions.

Boasting in the Flesh

Read Galatians 6:12, 13. What is Paul saying in these verses?

Although Paul has hinted previously about the agenda and motivation of his opponents (see *Gal. 1:7, 4:17*), his remarks in Galatians 6:12, 13 are the first explicit comments he makes about his opponents. He describes them as wanting “to make a good showing in the flesh” (*ESV*). The phrase “a good showing” in Greek literally means to put on “a good face.” In fact, the word for “face” is the same in Greek as the word for an actor’s mask, and this word was even used figuratively to refer to the role played by an actor. In other words, Paul is saying that these people were like actors seeking the approval of an audience. In a culture based on honor and shame, conformity was essential. Those teaching the errors appear to have been seeking to improve their own honor rating as a display for their fellow Jews in Galatia and other Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem.

Paul makes an important point about one of their motives: the desire to avoid persecution. Though persecution can certainly be understood in its more dramatic forms involving physical abuse, it can be just as damaging even in its more “mild” forms of harassment and exclusion. Paul and other fanatical zealots in Judea had once carried out the former type (*Gal. 1:13*), but the latter also had its effect on Christians.

The Jewish religious leaders had significant political influence in many areas. They had the official sanction of Rome; hence, many Jewish believers were eager to maintain good relations with them. By circumcising Gentiles and teaching them to observe the torah, the troublemakers in Galatia could find a point of common ground with the local Jews. Not only would this allow the troublemakers to maintain friendly contact with the synagogues, but they could even strengthen their ties with the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who had a growing suspicion about the work being done with the Gentiles (*Acts 21:20, 21*). No doubt, too, all these acts could have made their witness to the Jews more effective.

Whatever situation Paul has in mind, his meaning is clear: “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (*2 Tim. 3:12*).

Think through the reason these people had for teaching their errors. It sounds pretty reasonable, all things considered. What should this tell us about how even the “best” of motives can lead us astray if we aren’t careful? When was the last time you ended up doing wrong things for the right motives?

Boasting in the Cross (*Gal. 6:14*)

“But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (*Gal. 6:14*).

Having exposed the motives that prompted some to insist on circumcision, Paul presents his gospel message to the Galatians one final time, though only in summary form. For Paul, the gospel is based on two fundamental tenets: (1) the centrality of the Cross (*Gal. 6:14*) and (2) the doctrine of justification (*Gal. 6:15*). In today’s study the focus is on the former.

Because we live in the twenty-first century, it is difficult for us to comprehend the shock that Paul’s comments about the Cross (*Gal. 6:14*) originally conveyed. Today the cross of Christ is a common and cherished symbol that evokes positive feelings for most people. In Paul’s day, however, the Cross was not something to boast in but something to be despised. Jews found the idea of a crucified Messiah offensive, and Romans found crucifixion so repulsive that it was not even mentioned as a form of punishment suitable for a Roman citizen.

The contempt with which the ancient world looked upon the cross of Christ is clearly seen in the earliest drawing of the crucifixion on record. Dating back to the early second century, a piece of ancient graffiti depicts the crucifixion of a man with the head of a donkey. Below the cross and adjacent to a drawing of a man with his hands raised in worship, an inscription reads, “Alexander worships his god.” The point is clear: the cross of Christ is deemed ridiculous. It is in this context that Paul boldly declares that he can boast in nothing other than the cross of Christ!

What difference did the cross of Christ make in Paul’s relationship to the world? *Gal. 6:14, Rom. 6:1–6, 12:1–8, Phil. 3:8.*

The cross of Christ changes everything for the believer. It challenges us not only to reevaluate how we view ourselves but also how we relate to the world. The world—this present evil age and all that it entails (*1 John 2:16*)—stands in opposition to God. Because we have died with Christ, the world no longer has the enslaving power it once held over us, and the old life that we once lived for the world is no longer. Following Paul’s analogy, the break between the believer and the world should be as if the two died to each other.

What has the Cross done to affect your relationship to the world? What difference has it made in your life? How differently do you live now than you did before giving yourself to the Lord, who died for you?

A New Creation

Having emphasized the centrality of the cross of Christ to the Christian life, Paul now emphasizes the second fundamental tenet of his gospel message: justification by faith.

As we have seen all quarter, Paul has basically pitted circumcision against the gospel. Yet, he's not against the practice itself. Paul has made several strong statements against circumcision (*see Gal. 5:2–4*), but he does not want the Galatians to conclude that being uncircumcised is more pleasing to God than being circumcised. That is not his point, because one can be just as legalistic about what one does as about what one doesn't do. Spiritually speaking, the issue of circumcision by itself is irrelevant. True religion is not rooted in external behavior but in the condition of the human heart. As Jesus Himself said, a person can look wonderful on the outside but be spiritually rotten on the inside (*Matt. 23:27*).

What does it mean to be a new creation? *Gal. 6:15, 2 Cor. 5:17*. **How** have you yourself experienced what this means?

Ktisis is the Greek word translated “creation.” It can refer either to an individual “creature” (*Heb. 4:13*) or to all of the “created” order itself (*Rom. 8:22*). In either case, the word implies the action of a Creator. This is Paul's point. Becoming a “new creature” is not something that can be brought about by any human effort—whether by circumcision or anything else. Jesus refers to this process as the “new birth” (*John 3:5–8*). It is the divine act in which God takes a person who is spiritually dead and breathes spiritual life into him. This is yet another metaphor to describe the saving act that Paul typically describes as justification by faith.

Paul refers to this new creation experience in detail in 2 Corinthians 5:17. In this verse, Paul explains that becoming a new creation means more than just a change in our status in the books of heaven; it brings about a change in our everyday lives. As Timothy George notes, it “involves the whole process of conversion: the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit leading to repentance and faith, the daily process of mortification and vivification, continual growth in holiness leading to eventual conformity to the image of Christ.”—*Galatians*, p. 438.

Becoming a new creature, however, is not what justifies us. This radical change is, instead, the unmistakable manifestation of what it means to be justified.

Final Remarks *(Gal. 6:16–18)*

Paul bestows his blessing on those who, he says, “follow this rule” (*Gal. 6:16, NIV, NRSV*). Given the context, what “rule” do you think Paul is talking about?

The word translated as “rule” literally refers to a straight rod or bar used by masons or carpenters for measuring. The word eventually took on a figurative meaning referring to the rules or standards by which a person evaluates something. For example, when people talk about the New Testament canon, they are referring to the 27 books in the New Testament, which are seen as authoritative for determining both the belief and practice of the church. Therefore, if a teaching does not “measure up” to what is found in these books, it is not accepted.

What are the “marks of the Lord Jesus” that Paul bears on his body? What does he mean when he writes that no one should “trouble” him because of them? Might Galatians 6:14 help answer this question? *Gal. 6:17, 2 Cor. 4:10, 11:23–29.*

The word *mark* comes from the Greek word *stigmata*, from which the English word *stigma* also is derived. Paul may be referring to the common practice of the branding of slaves with the insignia of their master as a form of identification or to the practice in some mystery religions where a devotee branded himself or herself as a sign of devotion. In any case, “by ‘the marks of the Lord Jesus’ Paul doubtless refers to the scars left upon his body by persecution and hardship (*see 2 Cor. 4:10, 11:24–27*). His opponents now insist on compelling his Gentile converts to accept the mark of circumcision as a token of their submission to Judaism. But Paul has marks that indicate whose slave he has become, and for him there is no other loyalty than to Christ. . . . The scars Paul had received from his enemies while in the service of his Master spoke most eloquently of his devotion to Christ.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 989 (italics added).

What are the “marks,” physical or otherwise, that you have because of your faith in Jesus? In other words, what has your faith cost you?

Further Thought: “The cross of Calvary challenges, and will finally vanquish every earthly and hellish power. In the cross all influence centers, and from it all influence goes forth. It is the great center of attraction; for on it Christ gave up His life for the human race. This sacrifice was offered for the purpose of restoring man to his original perfection. Yea, more, it was offered to give him an entire transformation of character, making him more than a conqueror.

“Those who in the strength of Christ overcome the great enemy of God and man, will occupy a position in the heavenly courts above angels who have never fallen.

“Christ declares, ‘I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.’ If the cross does not find an influence in its favor, it creates an influence. Through generation succeeding generation, the truth for this time is revealed as present truth. Christ on the cross was the medium whereby mercy and truth met together, and righteousness and peace kissed each other. This is the means that is to move the world (MS 56, 1899).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1113.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What significance do you find in the fact that Paul both begins and ends his letter with reference to God’s grace? Compare *Gal. 1:3* and *6:18*.
- 2 In light of Paul’s statement about having been “crucified . . . to the world” (*Gal. 6:14*), what relationship should Christians have with the world today? How should Christians relate to issues dealing with the environment, racism, abortion, etc., if they have died to the world?
- 3 How does a person know if he or she has experienced the “new creation” that Paul writes about?
- 4 Based on what you have learned this quarter, how would you summarize Paul’s views on the following topics: the law, works of law, justification by faith, the old and new covenants, the work of Christ, and the nature of the Christian life?

Summary: True religion does not consist of outward behavior alone but in the condition of the heart. When the heart is surrendered to God, a person’s life will more and more reflect the character of Christ as he or she grows in faith. The heart must be subdued by Christ; when that happens, all else will follow.