

Galatians 6:14 – Reading Galatians 6:11-18.

Paul is writing to churches throughout the Roman province of Galatia, made up mostly of those who were not Jews. Paul had started these churches through his own missionary preaching ministry. But now, Jewish teachers had come along and were telling these Christians that if they really wanted to be part of the people of God, they needed to be circumcised and to keep the whole of the Jewish law. They needed, in effect, to become Jewish. It is things like circumcision and the eating of kosher food that are the key markers of the people of God – the things that distinguish you from the rest of the world.

Paul is greatly disturbed by what is going on in these churches full of Christians he loves. He sees that these young believers are being drawn away from simple faith in Jesus Christ and in him alone. So he writes this letter.

There is much in this letter that is biographical. Paul talks about his own life and experience. He was a Jew and a Pharisee – learned in the Old Testament Scriptures and their interpretation. He had boasted about the fact that he was circumcised; he had boasted in his carefulness to keep all the Jewish laws and traditions. And he had thought that the claim that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, was ludicrous and blasphemous. The Messiah was expected to restore the kingdom to Israel – a great and glorious kingdom like that of David. But this Jesus had been crucified by the Romans. He had been made the object of mockery and scorn as they crucified him with a placard above his head “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”. This troublesome and defeated teacher could not be the Messiah. So Paul persecuted the Christian church, seeking to stamp out this blasphemy.

But God had other ideas for him. Paul encountered the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus and his whole world was turned upside down. He now knew that Jesus *was* the Messiah, for he had met him and had seen his glory. And now he preached the faith that he had once sought to destroy.

How did Paul now understand the cross? He now understood that, as Jesus had said, the Messiah *had* to suffer and die. He died not because of anything wrong that he had done, but because of the wrongs we have done – and often continue to do. He died, Paul believed, because of the failure of Israel. God has not treated us as our sins deserved but, in Jesus Christ, has come to redeem us. John expresses it like this in his letter, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10) This is the measure of God’s love for us. This is how much he would give to have us as his own. And Paul expresses it similarly in Romans 5:8 “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And in this letter to the Galatians he expresses it in a deeply personal manner when he says, “I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20)

The cross, which was once for Paul a stumbling-block and a blasphemy, is now at the heart of his faith. He is no longer offended by the cross, he boasts in the cross – he glories in the cross. And the cross is central to his preaching. He writes to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2

He now boasts solely in the cross of Christ because:

- It is the central evidence of God’s love – Father and Son
- It is the source of forgiveness and reconciliation – “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” 2 Cor. 5:19
- The cross gives us reason to rejoice in the hope of glory, “Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Romans 4:25-5:2

- The beginning of a new creation – Galatians 6:15. God’s future has broken into the present. Paul’s faith is not just in pie in the sky when you die but in the reality of a transformation that has begun now and will be completed at Christ’s return – a transformation that shall embrace all creation.

Is this cross also our confidence and boast and comfort – the heart of our faith; the measure of God’s love; the ground of our acceptance and assurance?

We sing the praise of Him Who died,
Of Him Who died upon the cross;
The sinner’s hope let men deride,
For this we count the world but loss.

Inscribed upon the cross we see
In shining letters, “God is Love”;
He bears our sins upon the tree;
He brings us mercy from above.

The cross! it takes our guilt away;
It holds the fainting spirit up;
It cheers with hope the gloomy day,
And sweetens every bitter cup.

It makes the coward spirit brave,
And nerves the feeble arm for fight;
It takes the terror from the grave,
And gilds the bed of death with light.

The balm of life, the cure of woe,
The measure and the pledge of love,
The sinner’s refuge here below,
The angels’ theme in Heav’n above.

But the cross also has painful implications for the disciple of a crucified Messiah, it our calling

- Gal 2:20a – I have been crucified with Christ
- Gal 6:14 – the world crucified to me and I to the world

Paul knows that to follow Christ means also suffering for Christ – suffering with Christ. He bears in his own body the marks of Jesus. It means the loss of all things for the sake of the gospel – that he might gain all things

How does the death of the Lord Jesus, the cross of Christ, shape the way we live – dying to this world and living the life of the new creation?

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
save in the death of Christ, my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them through his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Peter Misselbrook
Christ Church Downend
13/3/2016