

The Wonder of the Cross

Scripture: Galatians 6:11-18

Code: 48-42

We are finally this morning at our last look at the book of Galatians. We are going to say a temporary farewell to a precious friend, this wonderful epistle that we've been looking at for a long time. So open your Bible to the sixth chapter of Galatians and the last few verses, starting in verse 11. Paul collects some thoughts here from various aspects of his emphasis in this book. They seem, at first, a little bit disjointed, and maybe in some since compared to his intense, rational arguments that drive us through the epistle. They are a little more random, but they are tied around a couple of themes that I'll mention in just a moments, themes with which we have become familiar in Galatians. But let me begin reading at verse 11.

"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

"From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen."

Behind me you see a large cross. That is the symbol of Christianity. That's all the decoration that I ever wanted in this building when we built it back in 1978, just a cross. The cross has been the symbol of Christianity since our Lord's death. It stands atop churches around the world. There are massive crosses around the globe that have in recent years become an offense, more of them than public view being removed. But the cross descends from the top of churches all the way down to people's necks. Beautiful little crosses become jewelry, and we wear them because we believe they symbolize beauty. It's an odd thing, because no one has a guillotine around their neck, at least not as jewelry.

I don't think there's any other torture instrument that's ever been invented by man that someone wears as jewelry or as some kind of adornment or conceives to be beautiful. But that's what happens with the cross. The cross may be the most heinous and horrendous and horrific of all torture instruments ever devised by man. Should be a symbol of shame, but it has become a symbol of love, and joy, and peace, and beauty, and grace, and eternal salvation.

And that is, on its face, odd for a torture instrument to end up so considered. Crucifixion was originally designed by the Persians who became skillful at using it as a way to execute people in a very long, drawn out, torturous way. But it was really perfected by the Romans, who crucified tens of thousands of people. And, in fact, some historians tell us that as many as thirty thousand people were crucified by the Romans in and around the land of Israel around the time of our Lord. So the

Jewish people were used to seeing people hanging on crosses in some part of the process of excruciating, bleeding, and suffocation.

The word “excruciating” actually has Latin roots, and in the middle of it is “crux” which is the Latin word for “cross.” So the very verb “to excruciate” or “excruciating” has in its center the cross. The cross defines what is excruciating.

It was not only an instrument of physical torture, but it was also a tool of degradation. To be suspended on high along a public highway totally naked, nailed by hand and foot, and left to bake in the sun while the gawking crowds looked up, to be attacked by birds and insects and end up as a kind of roadkill was about as degrading as anything that could ever be done to a human being. The Romans basically quelled potential revolt by making sure the roads were lined with crucified victims.

The cross then was a diabolical device to torture criminals to death, with the exception of one cross. One cross was a divine device to deliver sinners from death and endless torture, and that is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we rejoice in that cross. We write songs like “At the Cross,” and “Near the Cross,” and “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “The Wonderful Cross,” and “Hallelujah for the Cross.” And there’s one we sung earlier, “The Power of the Cross.” We heard the choir sing, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” goes back to Isaac Watts in 1707, and he wrote it after reading Galatians 6:14. And the Christian gospel cross is not mythical, and it’s not mystical, and it’s not sentimental, and it’s not merely artistic, it is historical and it is real. And the Bible gives the history of that one cross that has become a symbol of beauty.

The ancient Roman historian Suetonius and Tacitus both wrote that the people called “Christians” were followers of a criminal who was crucified by Pontius Pilate, giving secular affirmation to the biblical account. The cross was offensive. It was offensive to the Jews because there was no way that in their messianic theology they would see their Messiah ending up on a cross, crucified by unclean Gentiles. In spite of Isaiah 53, in spite of Psalm 22, they didn’t expect the Messiah to be crucified. Consequently, the cross was for them a stumbling block, a barrier to believing that Jesus was the Messiah.

To the Greek, or the Gentiles, the cross was just foolishness to imagine that a crucified Jew, rejected by His leaders and His nation, crucified like a common criminal by Roman soldiers in that little place called Jerusalem was, in fact, the eternal, Creator God of the universe and the only Savior of the world was to them a form of idiocy. So the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that the cross is to those who perish foolishness. To the Gentiles, it is foolishness; and to the Jews, it is a stumbling block. But he adds, “But to those who are being saved, it is the power of God, and it is the wisdom of God, because we see in the cross the power of God being displayed, power to crush His own Son with our sins, to fully expel all divine wrath against all who would ever believe through human history, and yet have that power resisted by the perfect power of the Son, so that it didn’t destroy Him; but rather, He came to life three days later.

We see the wisdom of God at the cross, because in wisdom, loving wisdom, He put on punishment on the suffering Savior. If God wanted to have a people in heaven, if God wanted a bride for His Son, if God wanted to bring to glory a redeemed humanity who would forever praise Him, He had to get them to heaven. They weren’t going to ever be able to get there on their own, their sins had to be dealt with, and so He punished His Son for them, and then imputed His Son’s righteousness to us, put our sins on Him, His righteousness on us. In the cross, Jesus died our death, that we might live

His eternal life.

The cross is the determiner of all destiny for everyone really. Listen to Philippians chapter 3 and verse 17: "Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ." You either embrace the cross, glory in the cross, or you're an enemy of the cross. The fact that many are enemies of the cross makes the apostle Paul weep. Why? Because Philippians 3:19 says, "whose end is destruction." What you do at the cross determines your eternal destiny. Embrace the cross and the death of Christ for sin, embrace Him as your Lord and Savior, and you have eternal life. Reject the cross, reject the One who paid for the sins of all who would believe, and your end is eternal, unending destruction. The cross is the determiner of destiny.

Now as we have come to the book of Galatians we have learned much about the cross. Back in chapter 3, verse 1, we were told that Jesus was crucified there. Paul also unfolds the meaning of that. In chapter 2, verse 20, he says that believers were crucified with Him there. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live." When He died, we died. When He came to life, we came to life because we were in Him. We learned that believers then were crucified with Him there in chapter 2, verse 20. And then in chapter 5, verse 24, we learned that our flesh was crucified there. Go back to verse 24 of chapter 5: "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

Something very dramatic happened at the cross. We were there crucified with Him, thus paying the penalty for our sins in and through Him. Our flesh was crucified there. In other words, the dominant, unbreakable power of the flesh to cause us to do nothing but sin was broken; and we who were servants of sin became servants of righteousness. Flesh was crucified there.

Here in chapter 6, verse 14, he says, "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." The cross is everything. Jesus was crucified there. We who believe in Him were crucified there with Him so that our sins are completely paid for. Our flesh was crucified there so that we no longer have the same relation to our humanness. And the world was crucified there so that we no longer have the same relationship to the world.

Everything happened at the cross. That is in contrast to what was being taught in the Galatian churches. Some Jewish teachers had come from Jerusalem and said they believed in the Messiah Jesus, and said they were a part of the church. But they said, "You're not true Christians. You're not real believers. You're not possessors of eternal life, you Galatians. You're not forgiven. You're not going to enter the kingdom. You're not on your way to heaven." Why? "Because Jesus Christ is not enough. Believing in Him is part, but you must be circumcised, and you must follow the prescriptions of the Mosaic ceremonial law."

They were called Judaizers because essentially they were saying, "You can't just go into the realm of salvation, you have to pass through Judaism." And even Gentiles were required to be circumcised and adhere to the Mosaic law. So they believed that you were saved by works as well as by believing in Jesus.

That's a false gospel. In fact, it's so false that Paul says in chapter 1, verse 6, "I'm amazed that

you're quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed," or damned. "As we've said before, so now I say again, if any is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you have received, he is to be accursed," *anathema*, damned.

And a false gospel is saying yes to Christ, but Christ is not enough. It's just as false as saying no to Christ. You can deny Christ, or you can accept Christ and add works, and you end up with the same damning message. You can't come by the law, chapter 3 Paul made that clear. He said all the law does is curse you, verse 10, "As many as are of the works of the law are under a curse." You want to come by way of the law; all it does is curse you, it doesn't save you. "Cursed is everyone who doesn't abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them." If you want to come by law, perfect adherence to the law at all times is required. Therefore, no one is justified by the law, it's impossible. The righteous man lives by faith. "Christ" – verse 13 – "redeemed us from the law, having become a curse for us." He became the curse on the cross.

There are only two possible roads to heaven to God, two gates, two ways, two religious paths. One is the religion of human achievement. You earn your way by your morality, by your goodness, by your religiosity, by ceremonies, rituals, rites. This is the religion of human achievement, you have to do something. And this, by the way, is the category in which all false religions on the planet fit. They're all just different forms of the religion of human achievement. And if you break one law of God one time, as James say, you're guilty of violating all of it and you're cursed. There is no hope for those people who come that way.

The other is the true religion of divine accomplishment, where everything is done by God, and it's offered to us by grace and received by faith, not works. That's what Paul's been dealing with throughout this letter. And in the end here, as we look at verses 11 to 18, just kind of pull the pieces together, I think we can see these two things contrasted one more final time. Verses 11 to 13, we see boasting in the flesh; and in verses 14 to 16, we see boasting in the cross. And I think you'll see the distinction here in just some very interesting ways.

Let's look, first of all, at boasting in the flesh. Paul makes reference to it in verses 11 to 13, and he gets into it in a fascinating way. Verse 11: "See with what large letters I'm writing to you with my own hand." Very unusual for Paul to write a letter with his own hand, didn't normally do that; and normally his letters were written by a scribe, an amanuensis, somebody who took down dictation. The Word of God was coming from him, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it was passed along to a scribe who would write it down.

Now very often Paul would sign his name at the end, as you would do in a letter that you may dictate, have someone type or write down, and then sign your name at the end. That's what he did. He does that at the end of 1 Corinthians, he does it at the end of Colossians, he does it at the end of 2 Thessalonians, he says, "I'm signing off with my own hand." So this was a typical thing for him to do.

Now remember, this is the first letter of all his letters. he is fired up, to put it mildly. He is exercised to the max. He doesn't start this letter with any kind of words that are gracious, and kind, and welcoming, and loving, and embracing. He just blasts them with fury over the false gospel; that's how he starts. He's not about to go find a scribe somewhere. He's not about to delay the writing of this

letter. Once the influences of the Holy Spirit pour into his soul, he launches in this thing and he begins to write. He's not a scribe; professional scribes used cursive, because it was an economy of ink, and there was an economy of material on which they wrote. And it was also true that children were more likely to write large letters, or unseals. So he's writing in a language that is not his normal language, although he certainly was raised in the Gentile-Greek world. But he writes large letters.

There may be another reason he writes large letters. If you'll recall, back in chapter 4, verse 13, he says this: "But you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time." Literally in the Greek it's a physical weakness, some physical infirmity.

What is it? Well, down in verse 15 of chapter 4, he says, "I bear you witness that, if possible, you'd have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." Now why does he say that? Why is he referring to his eyes? Well, look, in the ancient world, when your eyes went bad, they went bad. There was no way to correct that. And I think Paul is saying, "You loved me enough to have given me your good eyes, if it were possible." So it may well be that not only is he not a professional scribe, not only is he writing out of urgency – which made, perhaps, those large letters a little more scrawly as he writes them with a passion in his heart – but he's got eye problems, which is another reason he writes largely.

So he's pointing them to this document that is the book of Galatians. And it's, perhaps, unattractive. It's not professionally written. It doesn't look like something a hired scribe would do. It looks very amateurish. And it reflects the scrawlings of a man with bad eyesight. And like every preacher who can't resist a good illustration, he sees in his own writing a metaphor, and he says this in verse 12: "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised." Stop there.

Concern about the looks of something, concern about the professional character of it never is Paul's issue. In 1 Corinthians 2, he said, "I didn't come to you with superiority of speech or fancy words." Second Corinthians 10, they said about him his speech was contemptible. In a world that prized oration, he was a seed-picker, they said, he was a low life. He wasn't a professional scribe. He wasn't a high-sounding orator. He didn't come with men's wisdom. That's what enamored them.

Paul is looking at his letter and saying, "Because of my poor eyesight, you know how hard it is for me to write with my own hand. But what I have to say is so important and so urgent, and I couldn't wait, and I didn't have any help, and so I went ahead and wrote. And unlike the Judaizers who would care about the looks of something, I don't care at all about the looks of anything. I've never tried to impress you with my scholarship, my personal skills, superficial formalities. When I came to you, you accepted my message with gladness, although my bodily presence was unattractive. And this letter is not written in an attractive way either, but it is the truth, and it is the gospel, and it is from God."

There were a lot of dangers in the ancient world; one of them was forgery, and Paul in his first letter may also have had that in mind. In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, he refers to someone who wrote a letter to the Thessalonians forged under his name to confuse them about the day of the Lord. So for all those reasons, he writes his own letter, and he couldn't care less about the show. That's never been important to him.

And with that he introduces again the Judaizers boasting in the flesh. Verse 12: "Those who desire to

make a good showing in the flesh.” This reminds me of them, those who preach the false gospel. This is a fatal blow at the Judaizers. He’s done with doctrine. He has dismantled their doctrine, and now he wants to say a few things about their motives: Why do they do what they do?

Motive Number One is pride, “to make a good showing in the flesh.” That’s what legalists do, they show off. I’ve said this sometimes through the years. Seems to me that the more paraphernalia they wear, the more they declare their hypocrisy. The more it’s for show, the less it’s reality. They make a good showing in the flesh. They want to make an outward impression of being holy and virtuous.

This was a way of life for legalistic Jews. It’s a way of life for pious people in false religion. With the Jews back in Matthew 6 when our Lord was giving the Sermon on the Mount, He said, “You are full of pride. Your pride is seen in your giving, you blow a trumpet before you put your offering in. Your pride is seen in your praying, you make a public display of your praying. Your pride is even seen in your fasting, as you look sickly; all of this to draw some kind of attention to yourself.”

In Luke chapter 16, several passages in Luke speak directly to these Jewish people who were caught up in proud religion. “The Pharisees,” – Luke 16:14 – “who were lovers of money, were scoffing at Jesus, mocking Him. He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men,’ – there it is – “you justify yourself in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.” You’re proud, self-promotion is detestable to God.

Chapter 18, “Two men went into the temple to pray: one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying like this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I’m not like the other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’” That was what Pharisees did.

In the twentieth chapter of Luke and verse 45, “The people were listening, Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, love respectful greetings in the market places, chief seats in the synagogues, places of honor at banquets, who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.’” The greater your spiritual pride, the greater your eternal condemnation. You’d be better off to be irreligious than to be proudly religious.

Jesus said, “You have substituted the traditions of men for the commandments of God.” Paul in Galatians refers to this kind of religion as being engaged with weak and worthless elemental things, chapter 4, verse 9. “Elemental things,” what do you mean by that? Ceremonies, rituals, circumcision, foods, fasts. Worthless, elemental things. Any religion which is unwilling to accept Jesus Christ as the only and all-sufficient Savior is an indulgence in the flesh, giving in to man’s sinful conceit, which dominates his unregenerate heart and the imagination that you can find your way to God somehow by your own goodness or religious behavior. That is a damning lie, and that is the lie that characterizes every false religion.

So the first motive for them was pride, put on a show. That’s why they were boasting in their flesh. Second motive was cowardice, verse 12: “They try to compel you, you Galatians. They want you to be circumcised simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”

They had a problem, they were Jewish. They had come from the land of Israel, and even from Jerusalem. For some reason they had acknowledge, at least superficially, that Jesus was the Messiah. So they had gained some entrance into the church. And they are now showing up as if they represent the apostles to the Galatian churches, and they're telling all these believers who have already begun in the Spirit that they're not really believers and they're not really God's children, because they haven't been circumcised. "You need to be circumcised." Why were they doing that? Because they didn't want to be persecuted by the Jews for the cross of Christ.

I guess in some ways there were Jews who would sort of tolerate it if you believed in Jesus but held onto Judaism. But to believe in Jesus and let go of Moses would be to become persecuted. When I talk about persecution I'm talking probably about personal persecution. But it wouldn't just be the persecution in families and among friends. We all know the Jews in Jerusalem and Israel persecuted the believers in Jesus Christ; they wound up slaughtering them.

So there was a big price to declare yourself a follower of Jesus Christ. Trying to find some middle ground apparently, they decided that they could follow Christ. And maybe they were compelled by the realities of His miracles and His resurrection and those things. But like those readers of the book of Hebrews, they didn't want to let go and come all the way. And so they were in that equally damning position of trying to hold on to law and works, and faith and grace.

And what offended them was the cross. A dead Messiah? Yes, that offended them. But what offended them probably more was that the cross declares that you are a sinner. The cross declares that you deserve to die. The cross declares that you cannot please God, whoever you are. The cross declares that you deserve to be punished. The cross declares that you deserve to be punished, but God has punished Christ in your place. The cross declares you are a sinner, you are a sinner, you are a sinner who is both unwilling and unable to please God.

"Your righteousness," – says Isaiah – "is filthy rags. There's none righteous enough, no, not one." The cross says you're helpless, hopeless; embodies the whole doctrine of substitutionary atonement by the perfect sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ. To believe in the cross genuinely encompasses a repentance, doesn't it?

These Judaizers had lined up with the church somehow, accepting Jesus and something about Jesus, but were still tares sown among the wheat. They were emissaries of Satan. They were attempting to escape persecution from the Jews who had rejected Jesus by kind of hanging on, which is exactly what the readers in the book of Hebrews were doing. By outwardly identifying with a visible church they had become resented by their Jewish family and friends. And some had thought they had certainly joined a heretical cult. But if they hung on to Moses and hung on to the law, maybe they could survive.

And additionally, the Romans had actually legalized Judaism. So if they continued to hang on to Judaism they wouldn't get persecuted by the Romans either; whereas the Romans saw Christianity as a threat to Caesar, because all Romans knew that Caesar was lord. And if you said Jesus is Lord you were an insurrectionist. Christians were burned like torches in garden parties for Caesar. So proud religionists are also cowardly. They held on in order to escape the persecution that comes to those who abandon themselves to the gospel of the cross.

There's a third characteristic that shows up in their boasting in the flesh, and that's their hypocrisy, verse 13: "For those who are circumcised do not even keep the law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh." They want to show you off like some kind of convert when they can't even keep the law themselves. They are phonies.

They may be super-zealous, they may be fastidious, they may go through the rituals and the rites, wear all the garb and the garments and never miss an assembly of people gathered for some ceremony; but they can't keep the law. They want you to keep the law; they can't keep the law. Nobody can keep the law. That's why our Lord in Matthew 23 said they're white sepulchers. They're painted white like a tomb on the outside; inside, they're full of dead men's bones. They're complete hypocrites.

In Romans chapter 2, verse 17, Paul says, "If you bear the name 'Jew' and rely on the law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you are yourself a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore," – speaking to those Jews who felt that way – "you, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, through your breaking the law, you dishonor God?" This is characteristic of all false religionists. They parade their superficial morality, and God knows they are lawbreakers and nothing more.

Pride, cowardice, hypocrisy come together to define people in false religion. Paul's saying to the Galatians, "You don't want to be a part of that. You don't want anything to do with that." They don't want the cross, because nothing in the history of the world cuts down human pride like the cross. It pops the balloon of the inflated ego. At the foot of the cross we shrink to true size; and sinners don't like that. So Paul says, as he looks at his scrawling letters, "They remind me of those who have corrupted you for show, boasting in the flesh."

On the other hand, second point, he will boast only in the cross, verse 14: "May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the religion of grace. He will be broken at the foot of the cross. He will be made small at the foot of the cross. He will be cut down by the cross. The cross says, "You can't save yourself." The cross says, "God had to save you by offering His own Son, placing your sins on Him, punishing Him in your place. You deserve hell; the Father gave that hell to Christ in three hours of darkness."

"May it never be," he says. *Mē genoito* in the Greek, which is the strongest negative idiom in the Greek language, sometimes translated, "God forbid. No, no, no, no, not possible that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"I can't boast about myself. I can't boast about my righteousness. I can't boast about my morality. I can't boast about my goodness. I can simply boast that God graciously, mercifully loved me enough to put my sins on His Son who died in my place."

The cross is everything to us. The cross is where we see the glorious attributes of God coming together. The cross is the means of our redemption. The cross is the magnet that draws us to love

the Savior. The cross is part of our fellowship, the fellowship of suffering. The cross is our message.

Why did he surrender to the cross? Reason Number One: The cross frees us from the world's bondage, verse 14, "through which" – that is through the cross – "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

"The world is passing away," – 1 John – "the world is passing away, and everything in it, and it was carrying me down the path of death along with it." And by "world" we simply mean "the *kosmos*." *Kosmos* is the Greek word that has as an opposite word "chaos." Chaos is disorder, *kosmos* is order. Any kind of system, any kind of system encompassing all the systems of theology, philosophy, or any other human patterns of thought, religion.

"I was bound to the system. I was bound to the world." Judaism, which started out as a revelation from God, in the Old Testament had become a false religion. "But I and the system have parted company. The Devil is no longer my master. The god of this world is no longer my God, he's no longer my King. The world belongs to the Devil. The whole world lies in the lap of Evil One. So" – Paul says – "I have been freed from the flesh. I have been freed from the world by the cross."

Just a marvelous, full understanding of what the cross did. "The cross" – verse 15 – "has made me a new creation. Neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision. All that religion is gone, it's meaningless. The cross not only has caused me to die to the world and the world to me, I'm separated from the system that is perishing. Not only that, I am a new creation. The power of the cross to separate me from the world, the power of the cross to enable me to do what the flesh cannot do. I now am a new creation, old things have passed away, everything has become new," 2 Corinthians 5:17.

"The frustration of religious self-effort, the frustration of works is gone. The frustration of being incapable of getting to where I wanted to go, no matter how religious, is all gone. I'm a new creation." In the language of John, "I've been born again. I died to the world; I died to my own flesh. I'm a new creation. I have a new heart, I have a new spirit," – in the language of Jeremiah 31 – "I'm a new creation. I have a new capacity to love God, to fulfill His will."

And then he adds another thought: "The power of the cross separated me from the world. The power of the cross separated me from the flesh. The power of the cross brought me the blessings of salvation." They're implied in the words of verse 16: "Those who will walk by this rule, this principle," – meaning the principle of looking at the cross, the principle of grace and faith as demonstrated in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ – "those who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them." What happens is when you leave the law behind and works and you come to the cross, all of a sudden your life is flooded with peace: peace with God and the peace of God, that's positive; mercy from God, that's negative. Peace is God giving you what you don't deserve. Mercy is holding back from you what you do deserve.

"I found then that at the cross I died to the world, I died to the flesh, and I have been given the blessings of salvation and all their fullness. My life is peace and all of its positives. Mercy: that means the negating of all that is bad. And not just me," – Paul says – "but upon the Israel of God." This is a direct hit at these Judaizing false teachers; they are not the Israel of God. They are the Israel of Israel, but they're not the Israel of God.

What does he mean by the phrase “the Israel of God”? He means Jews who are real believers, Jews who really belong to God. Romans 2 said, “Not every Jew is a true Jew,” Romans 2:28 and 29. “The only true Jews are those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Philippians 3:3, Paul says it as explicitly as he can, “We are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” The Israel of God are believing Jews, saved Jews, who are the true Jews. So those of us who are the true Jews have been flooded with all heavenly blessing.

So Paul makes this final contrast: they boast in the flesh, he boasts in the cross. And then his final words, verse 17, “From now on let no one cause trouble for me.” I’ve felt like saying that a lot, particularly recently. “From now on let no one cause trouble for me.”

Who’s he talking to? Everybody. Talking to the people in the church who are making his life miserable because they’re listening to the false teachers. He’s talking to the false teachers who are attacking him. But on what basis, Paul? Why should we leave you alone? “For I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.” Whoa. “I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus”? What does that mean? “I have the scars for my service to Christ.”

You know, in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 when he was defending his apostleship, he defends it by saying, “I was beaten with rods, I was whipped, I was thrown in prison,” and he goes through this whole litany of things. “And these are the marks of Christ, these are the brand-marks of Christ. Don’t add any more suffering to me.”

He was stoned, by the way, in Galatia at Lystra; he had scars from that. “Look, I’m branded” – he says – “with the scars of an apostle.” Colossians 1:24, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” What do you mean? “They can’t, they can’t hit Christ, He’s not here, so they hit me in His place. So I bear in my body the marks of Jesus. The reason I am beaten, the reason I am abused is not because of something I’ve done, it’s because of who I represent. These are my apostolic credentials. Don’t question my authority, I have the marks of Jesus.”

In the ancient world slaves were branded. In the ancient world criminals were branded as a mark of identification for life. In the ancient world soldiers were branded to demonstrate their allegiance. Religious devotees were branded. And people who were hated, vilified, social pariahs were branded.

Paul says, “I’m all of that. I’m a slave a Christ, a soldier of Christ, devoted to Him. I’m a criminal as far as the world is concerned, and I’m hated because I have Jesus branded on me.” Every scar he ever got was a brand, a brand for Christ. “These are the scars of Jesus. Don’t trouble me; I represent Him, and I have the scars to prove it.”

And then a final farewell: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.” And so say I.

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