

THE CROSS AT THE CENTER

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

We've come to the end of a good journey through the book of Galatians, the short but powerful New-Testament document that has often been used of God for revolution, breakthrough, and hope. We can distill three themes from the book.

The first theme, in the opening chapters, proclaims that God has spoken clearly and authoritatively in his word. We can know his mind. He has told us what is true. We can rely on what he said, and we can measure everything else by his word. Such a message is critically important in the midst of the current era, which suggests there is no such thing as truth.

The second theme establishes the nature of salvation. Did you receive the Spirit; did new life begin? If so, was it because you heard with faith, or because you accomplished what was needed by the works of the law, by your own efforts? Paul's brilliant argument for the importance of faith in the presence of the Spirit, as opposed to self-effort, is the core of the book.

The third theme, in the final chapters, encourages holiness. How do our lives change? "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (5:16). We were made to be different, and by the power and influence of God's Spirit, we become different people.

Let's read the final verses of the book. Galatians 6:11-18:

See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.

Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

Paul's practice, and that of his contemporaries, would be to dictate any important document to a secretary who would write it down. Writing supplies like parchments were difficult to come by, so professional scribes usually wrote in very small, precise letters. In verse 11, the apostle, not being a professional scribe, comments on his larger, more awkward handwriting. The reference to large letters also may refer to his bad eyesight (see 4:13-15).

Paul's ordinary practice would be to take up the pen, write a word of blessing, and sign his name. But in this case he writes for some length, pouring himself out to the Galatians in these final words. "This is so important, I need you to understand it, so I'm writing it myself. Don't miss this!" He has returned to an argument that is personal,

focused on himself and his opponents. Most people I know who come to faith are persuaded because they see the reality of the gospel in someone's life. And Paul is trying again to let his readers clearly see him and those who oppose him, so they can make a healthy and godly choice.

There is a tendency among humans to choose between wrong options; that is, to frame the question wrongly. That's the wonderful insight of 6:15: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." We are often being given a choice between meticulously moral, legalistic religion, and libertine lawlessness, as if those were the only options. But this book clearly stands against both. What is right and true, the better option advocated since the beginning, is a new creation, God's redoing life, intervening by death and resurrection. It is the option of becoming someone completely different from either what we were or from what we would be if we did our best to change.

Let's consider the argument Paul makes by contrasting himself and his opponents.

Unspiritual religion

The first to be examined are his opponents. Verse 12 says they "want to make a good impression outwardly." Their commission in life is to make things look better. In chapter 1 the tension was "the approval of men, or of God" (verse 10). Human observers can see only the outside, really. So if it is to them that one caters, then one should improve what is observable by standards and measurements. Jesus challenged the Pharisees, "You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but they are full of greed and self-indulgence inside" (Matthew 23:25).

I used to have a coffee cup that I kept on my desk. It had an attractive design in colors I liked. No doubt I failed to wash it out every time I used it, but in addition it probably was not glazed well, because eventually the coffee stains became permanent. It was nasty-looking inside. I stopped keeping it on my desk, where a person could see down into the cup. But the outside was still good-looking, so I put it on a shelf at eye level.

Paul says of his opponents that they are afraid to be persecuted for the cross. You can't tell Jesus' story without the cross. However, these folks wanted the news of the cross to be told as an account of heroism in the face of bad times. "Jesus faced hardship with courage and we ought to be inspired to do the same. He had deep inner strength, and we ought to be moved to gather up our deep inner strength and face life the way he did." You won't get persecuted for a message like that. But it is an affront to preach the message of the cross as it really is. Jesus died not to show us his courage, but to show us that we deserved to die. He died in our place; it was our sins that caused his blood to be shed. If we preach the cross truly, there will be rejection, resistance, challenge, persecution. We will be marginalized and misunderstood. We will be laughed at. These folks wanted none of that. They wanted a version of Jesus' message that would promote human effort, not crucify it.

Paul says three more things about his opponents that clearly reveal their motives. "Do you know what concerns them? First of all—not you!"

Perhaps you know someone who was once attracted to a cult of some sort. Almost always, the attraction to a tightly controlled environment, especially for lonely people, is this ploy: "We love you as no one else has. Your loneliness has hidden the winsome and remarkable inner you. But we can see it clearly. So join our group, where the delightful person inside you will be given status and all the encouragement you've always deserved."

This is the most remarkable elixir: "I always knew that I was more terrific than other people noticed! Finally, somebody has figured it out! They love me! And their interest in me seems genuine and selfless!" But before long such new converts are ignored and used. Where did the understanding, the interest, the sensitivity to their needs go? It turns out that from the beginning there was no genuine love. The religious snake-oil salesman pretended to love them in order to ensnare them.

Second, Paul says of his enemies, “They intend to boast in your flesh.” Paul is referring to his opponents’ intention to take control of others by using religious authority. They will gather subordinates, keep track of their numbers, and boast of them. It’s like a pyramid scheme. They get to rise higher only as there are people under them whom they can oversee and control. They are interested in their followers only as a means to build themselves up.

The third thing Paul observes about these opponents is their hypocrisy. In some ways this is the most arresting of all. “They are telling you to live with restrictions and accept burdens that they will not accept themselves. Behind closed doors they laugh at earnest fools like you who take up all this ritual, repression, denial, and fear in trying to be religious. They don’t do it! The very things they commend with their words, they deny in their behavior.” Nothing in the Christian church has been more ruinous to the cause of Christ in our day than the discovery of bold spokespersons for righteousness, ethics, truth, God, and the Bible who close the doors and laugh at the truth, and do not live it themselves.

Remember Paul’s argument in chapter 2. When Peter came to Antioch, although he had originally lived in freedom to eat with Gentiles, when the party of the circumcision came, he began to restrict his freedom, fearing the grief they would give him when he went back to Jerusalem. The kernel of Paul’s argument in challenging Peter was, “Peter, you’re a Christian, aren’t you? Now why are you and I Christians? Because otherwise we would have had to keep the whole law, which we failed at, although we did our best. We are Christians because we needed a Savior. Why in the world are you calling on Gentile Christians to do what you couldn’t do? That’s hypocrisy!”

Commanding others to act in ways you can’t act yourself is an awful detriment to the cause of Christ. And that’s what Paul observes in his opponents. Jesus castigated the Pharisees for the same thing: “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matthew 23:4).

Now, having showed the Galatians one option—self-interest, using people, hypocrisy—Paul turns in verse 14 to an examination of himself.

A new creation

“I’m going to tell you about myself as representative of another kind of person. May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! I’m not going to boast of controlling others, of the size of the circle of people who look up to me. I’m going to boast about just one thing: the love of God! I will boast about the Son of God who gave up his throne in glory, became human, suffered as a criminal, and was executed because he loved people like you and me. I will boast of what the cross has done for me: I am a new creation!”

This new creation comes through death and resurrection. You get to say no to both religious rules and self-indulgence because you have become an entirely different person with a different allegiance. You have a new reason to live, a new passion for life, a new source of strength. “I no longer relate to the world the same way,” Paul continues. “I don’t expect it to pay off. The world has been crucified to me and I to the world. It doesn’t persuade me or own me anymore. And it doesn’t respect me or have much use for me anymore. But I will boast of this: Because I have Christ, I have everything. The cross is at the center. This is my passion!”

In Hebrews 2:15 it says that those who fear death are subject to slavery all of their lives. We know our frailty, our inadequacy. We know that the experiment is going to fail, and our best efforts aren’t going to work. “Senior moments” seem less funny to me all the time. The machine is breaking down. The possibilities are fewer. There is something looming out there that is the end of things, and I am more aware of it. Fearing death even from childhood makes a person a slave to their desires or to what they abhor. We run from death, or we pretend it’s not there.

The alternative is to have someone who will die for us, in whom we can die and be given life. This language is a complete affront on one level. It certainly was an affront in upper-crust Roman society. The Roman practice of crucifying criminals was spoken of in euphemisms, the way we say “restroom” instead of “toilet.” It doesn’t sound as crude and hard and impolite. But the cross was in fact a bloody instrument of torture and execution. That is what Paul says he boasts of. He not only doesn’t avoid mentioning it, he proclaims it! “What Christ has done for me is the heart of the matter! I speak of nothing else.”

The cross stands for the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. The logical conclusion is not the end of all things but resurrection and life itself. Remember in 2:20 Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

The contrast is intended to be very clear: those who make a good showing outwardly, vs. the one who boasts only of what the Savior has done for him. Those who advocate circumcision vs. the one who does not choose either circumcision or uncircumcision, but insists on a new creation, who insists that this life is unfixable but the love of God is greater than that, who finds hope in union with Christ.

The final words of this book in some ways could easily be overlooked, especially 6:17. It seems to be an odd tag-on. Yet it is a wonderful visual challenge that in some ways gathers up the whole.

The marks of Jesus

“Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” What were those marks? Circumcision is a mark, a ritual scarring, sort of a tattoo. It is a ritual cutting oneself off, being made different. It is accomplished by those who choose it. Their status is marked by it, and they can glory in it. But Paul says, “The scars on my body came from following Christ, not from promoting myself by a ritual of my own choice. Do you want to see scars? Let me show you where stones from the mob in Lystra left marks on me. Do you want to see scars where I was chained and beaten in Philippi? I was subject to mob violence again in Thessalonica....” In 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 he gives an extraordinary list of shipwrecks, beatings, robberies, and so on that he suffered. “These people can speak of themselves, promote their appearance, claim standing by their own efforts. My scars come from walking faithfully with Christ in a relationship that is obedient and filled with love.”

Gritty, real, hard, human lives need power from God to change. This is not just theory, a line on your résumé identifying an interest in religion without costing you anything. Paul had no use for that. He said, “If these people are giving you grief, tell them to stop it until they have scars like mine, until they enter the real world with hard people, violence, and pain. Would they take the gospel for Jesus’ sake to places nobody else wants to go? If you listen to folks like that, religion will always be cliquish, effete, and frightened.” With the gospel you end up with scars, as Jesus did.

Paul declares simply, “I have Jesus, and I need (and want) nothing else. Although I didn’t intend to, I have become scarred as he was. These scars are my badge—and not one I’ve given myself. I consider them an honor and privilege.”

The choice is before us: religious formalism, hypocrisy, externals, self-promotion—or a new creation: to die with Christ, to be raised with Christ, to be persecuted with Christ, to be glorified with Christ. By the grace of God may our study of this book lead to our becoming the kind of people we were created to be.

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