

The Gospel in Galatians

Lesson 14: "Boasting in the Cross"

We've all heard the story about the town that was built on the edge of a cliff. People were forever falling off the cliff. So the caring townspeople decided to build a hospital and get an ambulance. Yet people still fell off the cliff. Then someone had a bright idea. Build a fence on the cliff!

Young people who have been raised in the church, Sabbath school, and Christian education are leaving--three quarters of them by age eighteen. And parents weep their eyes out. The main reason for this is "legalism." Why not build a fence? Give them the Good News.

We have been studying the book of Galatians for fourteen weeks. The 1888 message was launched by the book of Galatians. [1] It is the message of the True Witness to the Laodicean church. [2]

Paul is really fired up about the problem of legalism in his parting remarks in the book of Galatians. Legalism is a word constantly bandied about, but what does it mean? Legalism is that old covenant motivation to do something in order to be saved because of "group think." Paul says "they constrain you" (Gal. 6:12). The Galatians are compelled to conform to group standards based on fear. "The Pharisees which believed" made a good outward show of constantly talking about their success rate (Acts 15:5; Gal. 6:13).

They have the evidence that teaching "obedience" works. Their faith, which works all right according to outward conformity, is the rigid Pharisee-like obedience that takes a smug delight in the "all that the Lord hath spoken *we* will do" attitude, very pleased with ourselves. Look at those who are circumcised (Gal. 6:13).

You know you're in the atmosphere of "legalism" if you must take the initiative in your salvation. The atmosphere of "grace" is, God has taken the initiative in your salvation.

Does your heart crave the joy that filled the hearts of the early apostles? Yes! We are not satisfied with a dull, unenthusiastic, leaden kind of spiritual experience, common as it may be. What did the apostles have that we don't seem to have? They saw the significance of the cross of Christ!

To "glory ... in the cross" is not an exercise in futility (Gal. 6:14). To talk about the cross all the time is not riding a "hobbyhorse." The disciples saw the significance of the cross of Christ. There is something about Christ's sacrifice that is yet to stir Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and the world (Rev. 18:1). [3] Christ declares, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

There is a "vicarious" view of the atonement that leaves the heart "lukewarm." It's the idea that a billionaire has paid your legal debt of \$1000. You're thankful. But it was no "skin off his back" because that was nothing for him.

Oh yes, some say that Jesus experienced physical torture and social rejection, but He never fully identified with sinners. His was a "vicarious" atonement. With this idea of the atonement the heart is left in its naturally selfish attitude toward God.

Self-centeredness is the spirit of the old covenant that has plagued humanity all these thousands of years and finally led to the crucifixion of the Son of God. The old covenant spirit of self-sufficiency hates the *agape*-love of one who identifies with the Crucified One.

If Paul had preached circumcision, it would have put circumcision in the place of Christ. That would have led to the rejection of the grace of Christ, Christ and Him crucified. In the preaching of circumcision the offense of the cross would have ceased, and the persecution with it.

If you preach legalism, it's impossible to be persecuted. The persecuting is done by Ishmael not by Isaac (Gal. 4:29). So if you preach the gospel you will have to face persecution (Gal. 6:17).

It was the offence of the cross that caused the disciples to flee, and Peter to deny his Lord. It was not that they loved Christ any the less, but because they were unexpectedly brought face to face with a condition which they had not foreseen. They had not taken the shame of the cross into consideration when they followed Christ.

Jesus had told them of it repeatedly, in order that they might be prepared for this very time, but the disciples did not comprehend His words. They had not counted the cost.

The disciples had been willing to accept Jesus as King, even though He was in poverty, and was hated and rejected by the priests and elders, because His power was visibly manifested before them. So when Jesus seemed to have no power at all in the hands of the mob and on the cross, the disciples failed.

It was not until later that the apostles "saw" in the atonement something that brought them great joy and fired their zeal to share the Good News. Christ's atonement was a "shared experience" with sinners, not merely a death in "exchange" for sinners.

He "was made to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). He felt in His conscience the self-condemnation of sin. The cross was the lightning rod for all the curses that Satan could throw at Christ because of sin. His heart was crushed by the load of sin. He felt cursed of God (Gal. 3:13). Thus His cry of dereliction on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

He died the second death. Ellen G. White describes it thus: "Christ felt the anguish which the sinner must feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 753). That "anguish" is described in Rev. 20:12-15 as the horror the lost will sense in the final irrevocable judgment. Horror worse than any physical pain could be!

The apostles' message had the power built-in. Nobody needed to be whipped into action. The motivating force was greater than that of a steam engine, for the power was implicit in the news about the sacrifice of the Son of God.

Thus Paul could write: "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). The power was not magic, certainly not mysteriously impossible for our day. The internal-combustion "engine" was the *agape* of Christ which "constrained" the apostles (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

It is the message of the cross which reveals the love of God and gives birth to "a new creature" (Gal. 6:15). E. J. Waggoner wrote: "The new birth completely supersedes the old. 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new. ...' He who takes God for the portion of his inheritance has a power working in him for righteousness is much stronger than the power of inherited tendencies to evil, as our heavenly Father is greater than our earthly parents." [4] Simple, but simply, profoundly true!

Rejoice in your new heavenly Father! He is infinitely more powerful in lifting you above sin than your earthly father was in passing on to you the condemnation he had received from the fallen Adam.

--Paul E. Penno

Endnotes:

[1] See E. J. Waggoner, *The Gospel in the Book of Galatians* (1888).

[2] The shaking is "caused by the straight testimony called forth by the counsel of the True Witness to the Laodiceans" (*Early Writings*, 270). "The message given us by A. T. Jones, and E. J. Waggoner is the message of God to the Laodicean church, and woe be unto anyone who professes to believe the truth and yet does not reflect to others the God-given rays. ..." (*The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 1052).

[3] "The cross of Calvary challenges, and will finally vanquish every earthly and hellish power. ... This is the means that is to move the world" (Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1113; MS 56, 1899).

[4] *The Everlasting Covenant*, p. 66; International Tract Society, Ltd., 1900.