

Bragging About the Cross of Jesus



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 23

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 6:11–18; Romans 6:1–6; Romans 12:1–8; 2 Corinthians 4:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 2 Corinthians 11:23–29.

MEMORY VERSE: “I do not want to be proud of anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the cross, the ways of this world are dead to me, and I am dead to them” (Galatians 6:14, NLV).

PAUL WRITES with all the strong feeling of an Old Testament prophet. A prophet is a special messenger sent by God to His people. Such prophets included Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea. These men begged God's people to turn away from their sins and wrong thinking. Paul in his own day gives the same message to God's people.

True, the situation Jeremiah was dealing with may have been very different from the one in Paul's time. But the words of Jeremiah just as easily could have been written to the Galatians: “The LORD says, ‘Do not let wise people brag about how wise they are. Do not let strong people boast about how strong they are. Do not let rich people brag about how rich they are. But here is what the one who brags should boast about. They should brag that they have the understanding to know me. . . . No matter what I do on earth, I am always kind, fair and right’ ” (Jeremiah 9:23, 24, NIV).

Before the Cross of Jesus, all our greatness is nothing. And the Cross is at the heart of Paul's letter to the flock in Galatia who has wandered away from the truth.



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PAUL'S OWN HAND (Galatians 6:11–18)

Read Paul's words at the end of his letter in Galatians 6:11–18. Now read his final words at the end of some of his other letters. How is the ending of Galatians the same as, or different from, Paul's other letters? (For example, read Paul's closing words at the end of Romans; 1 and 2 Corinthians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; and 1 and 2 Thessalonians.)

Paul's final words are not always the same at the end of each of his letters. But sometimes they are. For example: (1) Paul greets certain individuals by name. (2) He makes a final appeal or asks his readers to do something. (3) Paul signs his name. And (4) he closes with a special blessing. These four parts appear at the end of most of Paul's letters. But in Galatians there are two important differences.

First, Galatians contains no personal greetings. Why? We learned earlier this quarter that words of thanksgiving also are missing from this letter. The fact that both parts are missing may point to Paul's difficult relationship with the Galatians. Paul is polite, but not too friendly.

Second, we must remember that Paul spoke his letters aloud to a scribe (Romans 16:22). The scribe would write down Paul's words. Then Paul would take the pen himself and write a few short words with his own hand to end the letter (1 Corinthians 16:21). But in his letter to the Galatians, something different happens. Paul takes the pen from the scribe. Then he ends up writing much more than he planned. Why? Because he is so concerned with what is happening in Galatia. He cannot put the pen down until he begs the Galatians once more to turn from their foolish ways.

In Galatians 6:11, Paul says he wrote with large letters. Some think the fact that Paul wrote in large letters means his hands were so crippled from beatings. Or they think his hands had become so twisted from tent making that he could not form his letters carefully. Others think his words are proof of his poor eyesight. Both ideas may be true. But it seems that what Paul really meant by writing in big letters was to let his readers know how serious he was about his point. We might do the same thing in an e-mail when we want to make a point. For example, we might underline our point or put it in *italics* or write it in CAPITAL LETTERS. Whatever the reason, Paul wanted his readers to pay careful attention to his warning, his advice, and his scolding.



Paul cannot put the pen down until he begs the Galatians once more to turn from their foolish ways.

BRAGGING ABOUT OUR OWN STRENGTH (Galatians 6:12, 13)

What is Paul saying in Galatians 6:12, 13?

Paul already has given us a hint about the reasons behind his enemies' attacks in Galatians 1:7. But his words in Galatians 6:12, 13 are his first words about his enemies themselves. He says they "are worried about how things look on the outside" (NIRV). The wording "how things look" in Greek means to put on "a good face." In fact, the word for "face" in Greek is the same as the word for an actor's mask. This word was used as a word picture for the part played by an actor. So, Paul is saying his attackers were the same as actors who wanted an audience's praise. His attackers wanted to look good before the Jews in Galatia.

Paul makes an important point about one of their reasons for wanting to look good. They wanted to avoid suffering for their faith. We often think of suffering as something that causes us terrible pain or harm. But being attacked for one's faith can involve "smaller" forms of suffering, too. For example, society can shut a person out for his or her faith and make life very hard for him or her. Paul and others in Judea once did far worse than that to Christians. But lesser forms of suffering for one's faith also can cause real pain.

Jewish religious leaders still had a lot of power in people's lives. They had Rome's approval. So, many Jewish believers wanted to get along well with them. And the troublemakers in Galatia found a point on which both they and the Jewish leaders could agree. And that was requiring non-Jewish believers to be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy is cut off. Teaching that non-Jews should be circumcised would allow Paul's attackers to continue to have good relations with the synagogue.

We cannot be sure which of these situations Paul meant in his letter. But we can be sure about his meaning. It is clear: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be treated badly" (2 Timothy 3:12, NIRV).

Think about why Paul's attackers taught their lies. Their reasons seem good. But what should this fact tell us about how even the best reasons can lead us away from God if we are not careful? When have you ended up doing wrong things for the right reasons?



Paul's attackers wanted to put on "a good face." The word for "face" is the same in Greek for an actor's mask.

BRAGGING ONLY ABOUT THE CROSS OF JESUS (Galatians 6:14)

First, Paul shows the real reasons behind why his attackers want non-Jewish believers to be circumcised. Then he gives his gospel message to the Galatians one last time. For Paul, the gospel centers on two important teachings: (1) the Cross (Galatians 6:14) and (2) a new life in Christ (Galatians 6:15). Another name for this second teaching is justification. Today, we will look at the first of the two teachings.

It is hard for us to realize how shocking Paul's words about the Cross were at the time (Galatians 6:14). Today, the Cross of Christ is a beloved symbol among Christians. But in Paul's day, a cross was not something to brag about. Instead, it was hated and despised. So the idea of a Savior dying on a cross was terrible for a Jew. And no Roman was to be put to death on a cross as a punishment.

The disgust people felt for crosses in Paul's day clearly is seen in the earliest drawing on record of a crucifixion. Crucifixion is the act of putting someone to death on a cross. This drawing dates back to the early 2nd century A.D. It shows the crucifixion of a man with the head of a donkey. The man's hands are raised in worship. Below the cross, there are these words: "Alexander worships his god." The point is clear: the Cross of Christ is thought to be foolish. Paul's world is ruled by such negative thinking. And in this world, Paul boldly says that he can brag about nothing except the Cross of Christ!



In Paul's day, the cross was not something to brag about.

Read Galatians 6:14; Romans 6:1–6; Romans 12:1–8; and Philippians 3:8. What difference did the Cross of Christ make in Paul's relationship to the world?

The Cross of Christ changes everything for the believer. It asks us to change how we view ourselves and our relationship to the world. The world stands against God (1 John 2:16). But we have died with Christ. And so, the world no longer has the power to make us slaves. The old lives we once lived for the world are over. Paul's word picture shows this truth. The believer dies to the world.

What has the Cross done to affect your relationship to the world? What difference has it made in your life? The Lord died for you. So, how differently do you live now than before giving yourself to Him?

THE NEW CREATION (Galatians 6:15)

First, Paul shows that the Cross of Christ is the center of the Christian life. Next, Paul talks about the second important teaching of his gospel message: justification by faith. As we learned yesterday, justification is another way of saying being made right with God and living a new life in Christ.

All quarter we have studied how Paul has shown the gospel and circumcision to be against each other. Paul has made several strong statements against circumcision (Galatians 5:2–4). But he does not want the Galatians to think not being circumcised is more pleasing to God than being circumcised. That is not his point. True religion is rooted less in what we do and more in the thoughts and feelings of the heart. Jesus said that a person can look wonderful on the outside. But spiritually he or she can be rotten on the inside (Matthew 23:27).

Read Galatians 6:15 and 2 Corinthians 5:17. What does it mean to be a new creation? How have you experienced what this truth means?

Ktisis is the Greek word translated as “creation.” It can mean: (1) only one “created” thing or creature (Hebrews 4:13). Or (2) it can mean all the “created” world (Romans 8:22). Either example points to the action of a Creator. And that is Paul’s point. Becoming a “new creature” does not happen by any human effort. Instead, it is a divine act. God takes a person who is spiritually dead, and He breathes life into him or her. This act is one more word picture Paul uses to explain justification by faith.

Paul talks more about this new-creation experience in 2 Corinthians 5:17. In this verse, Paul explains that becoming a new creation means far more than having our names written in the books of heaven. Instead, it brings about change in our lives today. Timothy George writes about this change: “It involves the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us away from sin. He strengthens our faith. This change also involves dying daily to self and living again in Christ. We always will be growing in holiness. And God’s holiness in us will change us to become like Him.” —Adapted, *Galatians*, page 438.

But becoming a new creature does not take away our sin. Instead, our change is proof we are forgiven.



God takes a person who is spiritually dead and breathes life into him or her.

PAUL'S FINAL THOUGHTS (Galatians 6:16)

Paul gives his blessing to “all who follow this rule” (Galatians 6:16, NIV). Given what you already know about the situation, what “rule” do you suppose Paul means?

The word translated as “rule” in Galatians 6:16 points to a straight rod or bar. Stone builders and carpenters used this bar for measuring. The word “rule” soon came to be used as a word picture for the rules or standards a person used to measure the value of something. For example, the 27 books of the New Testament are viewed as a standard for how Christians should behave and for what they should believe. Suppose a teaching does not “measure up” to what is found in these books. Then it is not to be accepted.

Read Galatians 6:17; 2 Corinthians 4:10; and 2 Corinthians 11:23–29. What are the “marks that show I belong to Jesus” (Galatians 6:17, NIV) that Paul carries on his body? What does he mean when he writes, “From now on, let no one cause trouble for me” because of these marks? How might Galatians 6:14 help answer these questions?



Paul's scars speak more powerfully of his loyalty to Christ than any words.

The word “mark” comes from the Greek word *stigmata*. Paul may have meant the branding of slaves with the special mark of their master. The mark showed to whom the slave belonged. Or, Paul may have been thinking about people who branded themselves to show their loyalty to a god. But without a doubt, the wording the “marks that show I belong to Jesus” points to the fact that Paul means “the scars left upon his body from suffering. . . . Paul’s attackers want non-Jewish believers to be circumcised as a sign they are loyal to Jewish law. But Paul has marks that show whose loyal slave he is. And for Paul, there is no other loyalty than to Christ. Paul received scars from his enemies for serving Jesus, his Master. These scars speak more powerfully of his loyalty to Christ than any words.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, page 989.

What “marks” of the body or spirit have you received because of your faith in Jesus? Or, to ask the question another way, What has your faith cost you?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “The Cross of Calvary will finally win the war against every earthly and devilish power. The cross is the great center of our faith. On it, Christ gave up His life for humans. He made this sacrifice in order to bring us back to the way we first were created to be. Christ offered Himself on the cross to give us humans (1) the power to change who we are and (2) victory over sin.

“We must take hold of the strength of Christ. Then we will overcome the enemy. And God will give us in the heavenly courts a place above angels who have never sinned.

“Christ announces, ‘I am going to be lifted up from the earth. When I am, I will bring all people to myself’ [John 12:32, NIV]. Christ on the cross was the way through which mercy and truth met. The cross is God’s chosen method for saving the world.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 6, page 1113.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What important meaning do you find in the fact that Paul begins and ends his letter with a mention of God’s mercy and forgiveness, or grace?
- ② In Galatians 6:14, Paul says, “Through that cross the ways of the world have been crucified [put to death] as far as I am concerned” (NIV). What relationship should Christians have with the world today? How should Christians think and feel about problems that deal with the environment, race, abortion, and so on? Abortion is a medical procedure used to end a pregnancy and cause the death of the unborn child.
- ③ How does a person know if he or she has experienced the “new creation” (Galatians 6:15, NIV) that Paul writes about?
- ④ Put into words Paul’s views on these topics: the law, works of the law, justification by faith, the old and new agreements, the work of Christ, the meaning of the Christian life, and sanctification. Sanctification is the process of becoming as Jesus is with the help of the Holy Spirit.

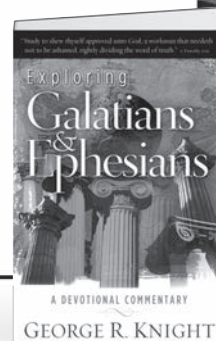
SUMMARY: True religion is not only what we do. It centers on the heart surrendered to God. The heart must be surrendered to God. Then a person’s life will show more and more who Christ is.



The Cross of Christ is the great center of our faith.

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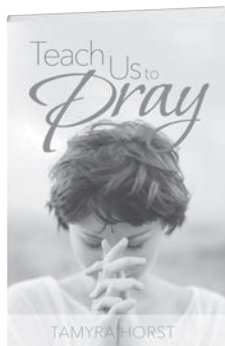
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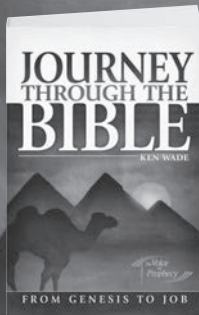
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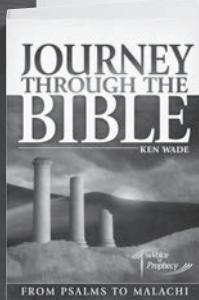
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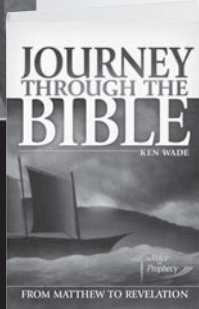
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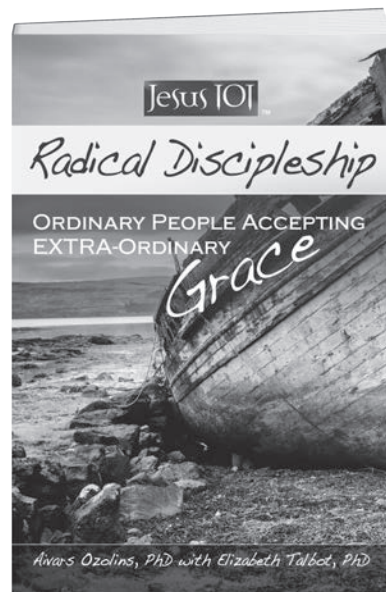
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