

'faith' in Him and He demonstrated His love for the disciples in many different ways. John's Gospel in particular highlights both His love for the disciples and His command to them to 'love one another ... as I have loved you' (John 13:34).

The last part of the sentence is particularly concise and telling; '... and gave Himself for me.' This brief phrase captures all of the pathos of the story of the Cross as well as the sacrifices Jesus made for His disciples as their Lord and their servant, and as their friend and their Lord. Jesus offered Himself for the sins of the world even though He had no clear evidence that anyone would accept the sacrifice He made for them, at the moment of His death. This was the 'grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' which meant so much to Paul and which he speaks of in all of his letters.

Application

Yesterday I dealt with the matter of those who make religious legalism out of the Gospel and end up dividing God's people, because it is the most heinous of the consequences of religious legalism today. There is one other aspect of this passage which deserves our attention which is the 'grace' of God through Jesus Christ. The word 'grace' means 'favour', and indicates the great blessing God shows to us when we place our faith in His Son Jesus Christ, and trust Him for our salvation. Reading between the lines of our passage today, it does appear (particularly in the last verse) that Paul was deeply upset by those who felt that the 'grace of God' was some kind of general favour towards people who generally believed in God. No, said Paul; grace was not to be mistaken for being friendly with everyone. Grace was the blessing of God through Christ alone, and those who attempted to add to it misunderstood the saving work of God.

We must be careful in what we make of the 'grace of God', as well. I have heard people argue that the grace of God is surely large enough to embrace people who do not really understand His love, for various reasons, or that God's grace is large enough to embrace good people of other faiths. Oh dear, this sounds so reasonable, but I fear that these are yet more misunderstandings about the nature of salvation. The Bible teaches that there is no salvation except through Jesus, and through God's grace offered to all who will accept Him. As I understand it, the Bible says quite clearly that people who do not either know or understand this are not beyond His care or righteous judgement (see Romans 1:19, 2:1-11), because God cares for all His creation. However, the evidence is that sin always presents a barrier to human relationships with God. His grace through Jesus Christ is not the same as His general love for the whole of His creation; God's grace is given to us through Jesus, so that the barrier of sin might be removed and we might know His love and respond by faith. This is the only way by which our relationship with God is put 'right'. However kindly or wrathful God might be (and we do not know) towards people of other faiths or those who have not yet understood the Gospel, they are not 'saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.'

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you understand the paraphrase of this text found in the study. What does this tell you which you cannot find in the text?
2. What does it mean to you to say 'I have been crucified with Christ' (2:19)?
3. In what ways has Jesus Christ 'given Himself' (2:20) for you, the church, and the world?

Discipleship

Read through this passage and try to spot connections with other parts of Paul's letters (there are a few hints about this in the text of the study). Look up some other passages such as Romans 3:21-26 and compare what Paul says there about salvation and what he says here. Would you say that this passage contains sufficient information about the Gospel? How much more needs to be said? I ask you this because it is by exploring such things that we learn more about our faith.

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, deal kindly with us today, we pray. Open our hearts to people around us so that we become people of compassion, willing to hear and respond to those we meet with the same love with which You have paid attention to us and our needs. Make us more like You, we pray: AMEN.

Prayer

I thank You, Jesus, for the many different things I experience as I follow You. You have given me so many wonderful experiences, so much help and care along the way, so much protection from the evil one and so much strength to do things for You of which I could not have dreamt! I owe my life to You and I will continue to give it back to you. Thank You, Jesus: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Troubles

Pray today for any of these personal troubles which may afflict either you or someone you love, at this time. Ask for the Lord's help, His guidance and His peace:

- Serious chronic illness
- Bereavement
- Job loss or change of employment
- Personal dispute with a friend
- Loss of financial resources.

Meditation

Do I have a heart for the Gospel?

Am I prepared to take a stand for the eternal truths of salvation,
Or am I content to see the Christian heritage of the nations destroyed?

Am I willing to give my whole life to liberating people with the truth,
Or am I content to let truth become relative in our misinformed society?

Am I motivated to speak to other people about what I believe,
Or am I content to leave that to others, and let them dominate the world?

Am I intent upon making the ministry God has given me count,
Or am I content to spend my life working it out rather than doing it?

Am I ready, in body, mind, and spirit to bear suffering for the Lord,
Or am I content to moan about troubles and not have victory in Christ?

Jesus; make the Gospel real to others, through me.

Bible Study - Galatians 2:17-21

¹⁷ But if we are found to be sinners even while we seek to be justified in Christ, does this mean that Christ is a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I build up again what I once tore down, then I show myself to be a lawbreaker! ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And whilst I now live on earth, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if we could be put right with God through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Review

It is a glorious truth that when something really difficult happens to us we can, by God's help, turn what was difficult into something very positive. I say this because our passage today can only be understood if we remember that Paul wrote it as a report about a face to face row he had with Peter and the 'Judaizers' (people who insisted that people observed parts of the Jewish law once they became Christians); for a fuller description of what happened between Peter and Paul, please read yesterday's study. But this profoundly difficult experience led Paul to say some very important things about faith, even if he said them in the heat of the moment! Our passage today is Paul's report of the last part of what he said to Peter, and it contains some pearls of Christian theology which were born of that strife. Preachers throughout the ages have used them to explain

the change wrought in the life of the believer by the risen Christ; 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me ...' (2:20).

Why should Paul spend so long (2:11-21) telling the Galatian churches all about his argument with Peter, several years ago in Antioch? He did so because similar Judaisers were now at work within the Galatians churches Paul had founded, and this grieved Paul immensely. Quite clearly, the words which had been said when he confronted Peter were etched on his soul; they were words which had persuaded the most senior figure in the church to accept that salvation by God's grace through Christ was free of any requirement of the laws of Moses. They were good arguments and Paul wrote them to the Galatians as if to say, 'This persuaded Peter to ditch the Judaisers, now it should persuade you to do the same!'

You may understand everything I have said, and also value the wonderful parts of this passage which have meant so much to so many over the two millennia of the Christian church (e.g. verse 20, see above), but there are few people who read either the Greek of this passage or any version of the English who find it easy to explain in detail what Paul says within it and why! If you go back over the passage and read it again slowly, you may well find that you become confused! What does Paul mean by asking whether 'Christ is a servant of sin' (2:17 – sometimes translated 'Christ promotes sin')? Yes, we can easily see that Paul is horrified at the idea that anyone could think this, but what is he talking about, and why? It is very unclear. Again, why does Paul say in the last verse 'I do not set aside the grace of God ...' We may agree wholeheartedly, but what kind of argument is Paul making and why?

In the main part of the study I will attempt to answer these questions as fully as I can, and I have written an extended paraphrase of the whole section to assist our understanding of what is going on here. I nevertheless suggest that the passage should be thought of generally as Paul's attempt to argue with people who said that once a person became a Christian they needed to adhere to the laws of Judaism in order to be fully accepted before God. Paul was horrified by this because he could see that people were adding religious rules to the Gospel, and every sentence of this passage is an attack on such presumption from one angle or another. But in the process of attacking his opponents, the Spirit led Paul to speak about the Gospel with an appealing simplicity, and in a way which had not been done before, and has not been done since. Even though the whole passage is hard to understand, words like; 'I have died to the law so that I might live for God.' (2:19) have liberated thousands of people previously bound by religiosity. These are important scriptures.

Going Deeper

I have set my stall for what comes next. But it is also important to remember that although Paul was an unparalleled, church builder, evangelist and theologian, there are times when it is very difficult to understand what he has written. The church is not well served by those who take one sentence from Paul's writings here and another from there, and use them as pegs to hang their own thoughts upon. There is no substitute for spending time with these great texts in order to understand them and use them properly.

A paraphrase

The following paraphrase forms the basis of our discussion, and it is best read by imagining that Paul is talking directly to Peter. I have taken the core words of the text but expanded them by adding some of the background which I have already described, and also some imaginative license to help the flow of what is said. This now offers you my interpretation of this passage in a manner far more eloquent than four or five paragraphs of explanation!

¹⁷ Now if those who have found a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ discover some time later on that they are still sinners because there is some point of ritual law which has been omitted, then what you are saying is that following Jesus alone has in fact made them sinners! Now that is ridiculous! ¹⁸ You know well that the law only makes everyone a sinner in God's eyes. I got rid of the law to be free in Christ, so I am not going to start accepting bits of it again only to find that I am condemned all over again! ¹⁹ According to all the requirements of Jewish law, I am already a dead man, but because I accept this in Christ, I can now live for God! Don't you see, I have died with Christ on the Cross ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me! Don't misunderstand, I am not claiming that I am perfect, for while I am still alive on earth and subject to all its problems, I must live

by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. ²¹ Don't accuse me of ignoring the grace of God just because I will have nothing to do with people with these views. Frankly, if the laws of Moses have anything to do with how we are saved, then Christ died for nothing. That is how important this is!

An explanation

Before we look at the important theology of salvation which is found in this passage, there are one or two more things to be said about why I have paraphrased the text in this way. Firstly, the phrase 'Christ is a servant of sin' is rather strange and nothing quite like it is found elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul used it dramatically to tell Peter that by allowing himself to be seen accepting the scruples of Jewish 'Judaisers', he was allowing both Jesus and the Gospel to become subject to the law, and because the purpose of the law was to expose sin, any such compromise meant that Christ was reduced to serving the same ends. Even the thought of this was shocking to Paul. The men who came to Peter from James (2:12) represented nothing but the slavery of the law, and Paul could not accept that there was any compromise between the Gospel and the law because Christ should never be compromised.

Secondly, verse 18 reads rather strangely as soon as you try to explore what Paul meant. Paul was probably parodying the Judaisers who were attempting to build up within Christianity the same Pharisaic religious system which had by the middle of the first century AD virtually taken over Judaism to the exclusion of all other traditions (such as that of the Sadducees, for example). Paul told Peter straight that he was not going to become a hypocrite and take this on board, since he had dispensed with it as part of his very conversion to Christ. For him, any compromise was hypocrisy.

Thirdly, one can almost hear the criticisms which may have been levelled at Paul for confronting Peter so aggressively. Surely, some might say, the 'grace of God' was big enough to encompass people of different opinions, and Peter was doing nothing more than extending friendship to the guests from Jerusalem? It is most likely that verse 21 was written in response to this kind of criticism, and Paul would have none of it. General bonhomie and friendship to all should not be mistaken for the principles of the Gospel; as far as Paul was concerned, 'grace' was about the saving work of God through Jesus Christ, not appeasement with those who thought that people could only be saved through legalism, and not grace!

The Gospel

What can we learn about the Gospel from this passage which is new? The straight answer is nothing, but it is all a matter of how it is expressed. The confrontation with Peter had raised a heated debate, and the force of it had made Paul crystallise his own thinking about salvation. The result was that the Holy Spirit created within Paul's mind some of the words and phrases which he used and developed throughout his ministry to explain the Gospel. We are used to hearing phrases such as 'I have been crucified with Christ'; but remember that this phrase is not found in the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles. It is only found (or something like it) in Paul's letters and later New Testament writing, moreover, Galatians is one of the earliest of Paul's letters, so this incredible way of describing the reality of salvation probably originates here! This brief phrase builds on the idea that the Gospel is founded on Jesus' death 'for our sins', removing the barriers between us and God. It expresses the profound personal effect of Jesus' crucifixion, which liberates the soul from the power of sin; He won salvation for us, and we experience salvation in and through Him.

You could say that the next sentence is the result of the Gospel, rather than the Gospel itself, but I am not sure that Paul saw it that way; he said; 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' This is a miniature form of the theology which Paul expands and explains in other great works, notably the letter to the Romans. Paul elsewhere describes how the Gospel has the effect of a transfer of ownership in which we allow Jesus to 'take over the reigns' and become the director and controller of our life (see also Col 1:13, Romans 6:15-19, 8:9f.).

This is probably the most preached upon text in this whole passage, along with the sentence which comes next in verse 20; 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.' This, again, is very particular to the writing of Paul. Everything in this sentence is something which we can find within the Gospels, but it is crystallised here in a memorable and concise form which has been used in the church ever since. Jesus asked His disciples to have