

Did Jesus Die For Nothing?

by Steve Zeisler

We have been looking at the dramatic confrontation between the apostles Peter and Paul, described in chapter 2 of the book of Galatians. Beginning with verse 11, the concern that was raised by Paul was that 'koinonia,' oneness in Christ, would be destroyed, and Gentiles separated from Jews.

The first verse in this segment, verse 11 of chapter 2, reads, 'But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.' And the last note sounded in this argument is perhaps not what we would expect. It begins at verse 20 of chapter 2:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.

That is one of the greatest verses in Scripture, one all of us ought to know by heart. But in this context it is an unexpected verse. When we realize that this argument began with Paul's condemnation of Peter's willingness to cause a rift in the early church in Antioch, we could not be faulted for thinking that Paul would probably offer insights on how Christians could learn to get along with each other. Perhaps he would bring in experts from outside to help them solve their problems, or have seminars on how to get along with Christians of different cultural backgrounds, etc.

But that is not what Paul does. He begins his analysis of the problem in Antioch, but he quickly moves into a description of the greatness of Christ. That ought to be very helpful for us in our concern about our oneness in Christ. The foundation for our 'koinonia' is not knowing how to communicate and share our concern for one another, rather the power undergirding our oneness in Christ is the very greatness of our Lord himself--who he is to each of us as individuals. Thus Paul's argument proceeds from a description of a problem between believers to one of the greatness of the cross of Christ and our identity with Jesus in his death and resurrection.

There is another important point to notice in Paul's argument, and that is his use of pronouns. In verse 14 he says to Peter, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" There he is speaking to Peter in the second person: 'You, Peter, are a hypocrite.' But very shortly thereafter Paul changes the pronoun to 'we', thereby including himself in the argument. Eventually, at the end of the dispute, we find Paul saying, 'I have been crucified with Christ.' The apostle has interjected himself. The debate has grown most intense in its description of who Jesus is, and it has grown more personal for the apostle as he tries to articulate his concerns. Thus we see that his speech changes from the second person to first person singular.

The reasoning behind Paul's confrontation of Peter in verse 14, and his description of Peter as a hypocrite, is not very difficult to understand. The point he is making by so doing is simple, yet profound. He is saying to Peter, in effect, 'You were raised as a Jew. You had all of the advantages of Judaism: the culture, the outward appearance, the Scriptures, etc. But you discovered that your freedom in Christ was greater than those things, so you learned to live freely as a Gentile. How is it possible, then, that you would do an about turn and require Gentiles to restrict themselves in an area where you are now free? It's hypocritical to expect others to live in a way you are unwilling to live yourself. You have learned to like bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches for lunch, and now you want to forbid that to the Gentiles who have eaten them all their lives!' Nobody likes hypocrisy. You don't have to be a Christian to hate it. Everybody--Christian and atheist alike--hates phoniness (at least when it is apparent in others). Thus we see the reason behind Paul's withering statement: 'You, Peter, are a hypocrite to make such demands of Gentile Christians.'

In this political year we are daily presented with the hypocrisy of political endorsements. Political leaders

stumble over themselves to announce their endorsement of Candidate X, even though in their hearts they regard the man as a fool; off--the-record they despise him. But by their endorsing him they are attempting to create naive enthusiasm for him among voters. They want to live with the freedom of truth and reality, they want to have opinions that are based on facts, but they try to manipulate the electorate and treat them as children. This kind of hypocrisy does a disservice to the American political system.

So Paul exposes Peter's actions for what they really are. Then his analysis begins to intensify. Based on what happened at Antioch, Paul now includes himself. Verses 15-16:

We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be Justified by faith In Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.

Again, the point is simple. Paul is saying if being a good, highly successful, orthodox Jew was not sufficient to accomplish what was required in human hearts, then we ought to realize that our need for a Savior should keep us from demanding those things of others. And here the apostle includes himself: 'The fact that I was a very good Jew did not make me right with God. Why should I, then, advocate the lifestyle of a Jew to other people? Peter, we both placed our faith in Christ because we needed a Savior, because our attributes as Jews were not going to help make us righteous; how then can we dare recommend to Gentiles what was inadequate to save us?'

At this point in the letter Paul interjects for the first time a very important word, the word 'justified.' Like many other words commonly used by Christians, that word has a problem about it in that we rarely use it in common, everyday speech. But it is used so frequently in Scripture that we need to have a biblical understanding of it. The simplest definition I have ever read of the word 'justification' is the definition by John Stott: 'Justification is the opposite of condemnation.' Have you ever felt condemned, disapproved of, cut--off, sentenced? Imagine all the emotional trauma that accompanies being condemned. Now try to imagine the opposite and you will know what it means to be justified: a deep sense of approval, of acceptance; barriers have been broken down; chasms have been crossed; oneness has replaced antagonism. That is what 'justification' means. Paul is saying, 'We were not right before God; there was always something wrong. Our hearts continued to condemn us even when we were on our very best behavior as Jews.'

In Acts there is recorded the statement Jesus made to 'auf at his conversion: 'All your life you have kicked against the cattle prods.' (Acts 26:14) 'You knew you were wrong. However hard you worked, however willing you were to condemn other people, it never made your own heart right. It continued to announce to you that there was something wrong with you and that your guilt remained.' Paul is saying that even as Jews that was their experience: a cattle prod continually stabbing at their hearts. They needed a Savior, someone who would make them right with God again, someone who would bridge the chasm, who would bring intimacy, approval and freedom where formerly there had been distance, darkness and guilt. As Jews they needed a Savior, Jesus our Lord. Three times Christ is mentioned in verse 16. He is the only One who can make men and women right with God.

We live in a frightened and frustrated world. I spoke recently with a couple from Northern Ireland and we touched briefly in our conversation on the terrible history of conflict in that tiny country. There anger, fear and loathing separate Catholics and Protestants, people who share a common language, who have lived side by side for hundreds of years. The problem seems beyond solution. The same feelings of mistrust and fear exist between Jews and Arabs, between the Soviet Union and the United States. Words are not believed, bad motives are assumed on every hand.

We need a justifier, someone who will remove the antagonism. If only someone could bring Jews and Arabs together to care for each other and make peace between them, then the working out of the political solutions would happen overnight. If only the great super-powers of our day could somehow stop mistrusting each other, could feel confidence in one another and goodwill toward one another, nuclear disarmament could begin. The problems are not that hard to solve; the chasm that exists between the two nations is the problem. A justifier is needed.

But Paul declares that the rift that existed between God and man was greater than anything we can even conceive of in this world. Somebody had to come and bridge the gap and allow us genuine, honest, wholehearted freedom before God and peace with God so that the building of our could begin to take place, based on approval and intimacy. Paul says, 'We Jews thought we had everything necessary to salvation, but we too needed a Savior. We should certainly do nothing to forbid a Savior to those who do not even have the advantages of Judaism. And by no means should we impose on them a system that we found wanting in our own experience.'

Paul counts himself in this argument because he probably is remembering his own experience. He is not merely espousing theology or philosophical commitment. He remembered the pain of his own being cut off from God. He knew what it was like to long for approval from God and not have it, to wish he were different but to find himself lacking in the ability to change. Just like every one of us, he knew the chapters of wickedness in his own life, the memories of evil that had been kept secret from everybody else. He knew that the more he saw of the holiness of God the more inadequate he himself was. Remembering these things he counts himself a participant in this argument. He too needed a Savior, and Jesus Christ offered him what his heart was crying out for. Thus for Paul this was not merely a good notion; it was a life and death issue.

The precise reasoning of verses 17-18 is difficult to be sure of (interpreters vary in their opinions), but the main thrust being made is clear.

But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! [God forbid!] For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

Paul is saying if we are going to talk seriously about Christian reality and not just the external appearance of things, we are going to have a deeper and deeper sense of how terrible is our human condition. So long as our religious experience consists of how we look, how we cut our hair, where we go to meetings, phrases we use at the appropriate times, even proper giving of money, then our problems are relatively easy to solve. But, in fact, there is a core of rebellion about us, the depths of which we cannot plumb. There is something deeply wrong with us. When we come to Christ, seeking to have the real problem solved, we are going to have to face how awful the disease actually is.

That can be rather unpleasant. Real Christianity not only applies a better and truer solution, it also analyzes the problem as being much more serious than it formerly appeared. That is the argument that Paul is raising in this section: 'Seeking to be justified in Christ we find out how terrible our condition is. Does that mean, then, that Jesus is a minister of sin?' he asks, 'because if we had never heard of Jesus we would still be sailing along, under the impression that the problem was relatively minor. Now that we have encountered him we realize how deep is the darkness in which we live.'

You can see how fallacious that argument is. It is important also to notice how emotionally wrenching this argument is to Paul. 'God forbid, may it never be,' he cries. 'What a terrible thing to say. It is not just a bad idea, it hurts me,' he is saying, in effect. But it is also a stupid thing to say; the argument itself is fallacious. If you have undiagnosed cancer and everybody keeps telling you how good you look, then a doctor finally tells you that you are riddled with cancer and indeed very sick, is the doctor at fault? Is he the servant of cancer merely because he pointed out to you how bad the disease is? Of course not! All he has done is tell the truth and helped you realize what was going to become evident anyway. All he has done is serve you, in fact, by making apparent what your problem was.

Sometimes in counseling a man will say to me, 'My marriage is falling apart. Can you call up my wife and help her?' As we talk, however, the conversation gets around to my having to ask the man, 'Sir, do you see what you yourself are like? Can you see what your problems are?' Can you even begin to glimpse the way you impact people?' Increasingly the conversation will center around the individual sitting in front of me. Occasionally a mother will share with me in counseling, 'My teenagers are terribly disobedient. Can the church change them?' Again, the longer the conversation goes on, the more apparent becomes the disease of the person who thinks another needs help. Is the pastor, then, the minister of sin? Is he the one who causes these

problems, or is he in some way beginning the process of help?

That is the argument here. Paul says that it is both abhorrent to imagine and stupid to say that Jesus is the minister of sin merely because he makes us see the depth of what is wrong with us.

In verse 181 believe Paul is hearkening back to Peter's experience in Antioch which began this argument. He says, in effect, 'Peter, you once tore down the edifice of Jewish culture in your life. You once were willing to recognize that it did not do you any good, that your life lived as a thorough--going Jew was not accomplishing anything. You were even willing to live like a Gentile Can't you see that if I seek to rebuild what was once destroyed, "I would prove myself to be the transgressor"? In fact, in both cases I would prove myself to be the transgressor. The first time, when the edifice was torn down, it was because I recognized that it did not do me any good, that I retained my disease, and the structure I was counting on to deliver me was inadequate, so I found myself condemned. But if I rebuild this outward religion and hand it to somebody else, then I am a hypocrite and once again have proved myself a transgressor. In either case--finding that my sin is too great for external religion or hypocritically advocating for others what I know to be useless--I find myself judged and condemned.'

That is the point of verses 17 and 18. Paul is realistically recognizing that real Christianity is going to make us face things about ourselves that judge us, embarrass us and frighten us. There are things going on inside us that condemn us, and we find ourselves marched off to die. The law of God, the truth of God, condemns us.

So we come to verse 19 where Paul says,

Through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.

Our seeking to be justified in Christ makes us aware of the condemnation we properly deserved. 'I was marched off to die,' Paul says, 'but the most amazing thing happened: instead of being crucified alone I was crucified with Christ. I found Someone who would embrace me in that moment. He took on the death I deserved. When I was at my lowest point, just when I was ready to agree with my executioner that I deserved the death sentence, Christ joined me in death.'

As they try to elaborate on Paul's words in verse 20, almost every commentator I've read does so with some note of hesitancy. It is as if they are declaring, 'I know there is more here than I can say.' That is certainly the way I feel. There is more said in this verse than I will ever be able to understand, let alone describe. One thing is clear, however, and that is that Paul intimates that the most remarkable thing is not that he was crucified, but he was crucified with Christ. The remarkable thing is not that he would die, but that he would have life afterwards, that Jesus would be willing to live in him.

The key that helps me open up this verse is not so much the opening words but the statement at the end, "The life which I now live...! live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." The thing that so overwhelmed Paul was the love of Jesus Christ for him. Our Lord gave himself up, delivered himself up, and he did it freely; no one took his life from him. 'He gave himself for me.' Paul is saying, 'For once in my life I found someone who cared enough for me to know me for who I am and to do something about it. The disease and self-condemnation that I have felt all my life has been taken away because of what Christ has done for me. The law never loved me; Judaism never loved me; the church never loved me; but Jesus loved me.' That is why Paul is so deeply concerned that any action taken by Peter would not demean his Lord, would not in any way sully the name and reputation of Jesus Christ.

Paul will fight to the end for the reputation of his Lord because Jesus loved him, because he gave him what he could not otherwise have: he gave him life when he was dying. Again let me say that this is not just a theoretical, theological notion for Paul; this is not just the creed. The Lord Jesus found Paul when he was in desperate straits, took his death upon himself and gave him life. Paul is insisting, 'I will not have what this

One did for me evacuated of its content. He loved me and he gave himself for me.'

There is a poignant moment in the book of Ruth where Ruth and Boaz were falling in love with each other. They decided to get married, but realized there were obstacles in the way. Boaz thanked Ruth, a beautiful, attractive young woman, because she cared about him even though he was an older man. Boaz, perhaps, was a widower who had no children. He had probably given up the notion that anyone would love him for himself, and he took a moment to thank Ruth because she loved him (Ruth 3:10-11). Everybody in this room who has, contrary to expectations, had the experience of being known, sought after, cared for and approved by someone can almost hear the tenderness in Boaz' voice as he thanks Ruth.

Or take the prodigal son as our example. He rejected and disgraced his own father, lived a life of debauchery, and ended up degraded in his own eyes as well as everybody else's. On his return home to plead for a job, he is met with open arms by his father who has spent the intervening years scanning the horizon, waiting for the day of his return. How the son must have sensed his father's love! He knew he did not deserve it, he well knew his own shameful reputation, yet he was honored and loved by his forgiving father.

It is precisely those same feelings that the apostle Paul sensed in his relationship with Christ. Somebody cared for him when he was needy, hurting and desperate, and this Someone made possible for him what he longed for all his life: a restored relationship with God; he was at last 'justified in God's sight. The thought that anyone would dare sully the name and the work of the Justifier saddened and distressed him so much that he hastened to the defense of his Savior.

'Christ loves me. I live by means of him. I was condemned to execution, but instead of dying alone I died in his arms only to be given life. I won't let anybody ruin this for others. It means too much,' declares the apostle.

That is why verse 21 completes the argument: 'I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died for nothing.' Paul is saying, 'If there is any other way whereby men and women can be justified before God, then Jesus was a fool to die. He is to be laughed at and pitied rather than worshipped. This cannot be.' Thus we can see why Paul challenged Peter, 'Don't deprive others of this salvation. Don't give them a short-term substitute. Even if you know in your heart that you don't really mean what you're saying, don't do it. Don't take the cross of Christ from people. Don't scorn his death.'

I'm sure that Peter eventually thanked Paul for his challenge. It is on that basis that healing comes to a church. If there are rifts, divisions, problems and antagonisms among Christians, the best way to solve them is not to have seminars on rifts, divisions, problems and antagonisms among Christians. The best way to solve them is to talk about Jesus Christ and who he is to us. It is on that basis that oneness, 'koinonia', in reality, is brought about. That is what exploded out of the heart of this apostle as he recalled the events in Antioch.

There is a blank page in your bulletin for sermon notes. Let me suggest that you write in that space, 'Jesus loves me, this I know. for the Bible tells me so.' That is the main point of this message. Put that piece of paper where you will be able to see it all the rest of this week. As you contemplate that truth, ask the Lord for the passion the apostle had to live by means of Jesus' life and to faithfully offer it to others.

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Steve Zeisler
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