

Battle Scars

by Steve Zeisler

While watching the Olympics on television this past week it occurred to me that there are two ways whereby one could appreciate just what the Games are all about. The first is to get caught up in the statistics: the times, the records, the degrees of difficulty, the number of medals won by each country, and so on. For people who like statistics, the Olympic Games must be heaven on earth. The second way is to enter in to the lives of certain of the contestants, which is made possible by means of the ABC network's vignettes of some of the athletes--the 'Up close-- and-- personal,' as they call it, approach. It's hard not to feel touched when you see the tears of a winning athlete who had just earlier been presented to the viewing audience by means of this 'Up close' approach. It's hard not to feel touched when relay teams hug one another in joy because of their mutual accomplishment, or when a gold medal winner presents her medal to a crippled brother. For me, these personal touches make watching the Games so much more rewarding, much more so than scanning statistics and counting medals.

At the close of the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul presents himself in a similar fashion, in a 'close and personal,' way. In verse 11 of chapter 6 he writes, 'See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.' Here we see, written large, the heartbeat of the apostle. Paul intends that his example be instructive and challenging to us. And this book has been filled with challenge. Remarkable thoughts are penned throughout it. It is, as some have termed it, 'theology on fire.' Passion, challenge, correction-- even anger-- are some of the ingredients that make up this book. Galatians is not an account of the spiritual grey areas in life. The Bible does have passages that deal with the large areas of uncertainty in life, but this book is not one of them. This is a book of blacks and whites, a book about what is true and what is false. The book of Galatians is not concerned with negotiation and compromise. One of our elders has told me that he feels like he has been beaten up, that his blood has been let, as he has been contemplating the teaching of this book throughout this series. I have often felt the same way myself.

Having reached the end of his letter, let us see how Paul reveals his heart to us. He takes the pen from the hand of his secretary to whom he has been dictating the letter, and underlines, in a sense, everything he has been saying. It was the practice of the apostle and others of his day to dictate their communications to professional scribes, men who had beautiful and very precise handwriting. Paul's eyesight may very well have been poor, which could account for his words here, 'See with what large letters . . .' I feel, however, that what this signifies is his saying, 'See with what emphasis I am writing,' in the same way as we in our day underline important points we want to emphasize. Thus Paul now takes up the pen and personally attends to not just the thoughts he wishes to have written down as they formulate in his head, but even the mechanical process of writing those thoughts on the parchment before him. Galatians 6:12-18:

Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand- marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

In very striking fashion, Paul in these verses tells us something of his own life. He does so by opening up his heart and comparing it with the men whom he describes in verse 12 as 'those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh.' He very deliberately contrasts himself, and the type of Christianity that proceeds from

what he believes, with those who want to look good and with their phony Christianity. If you want to know the outcome of these two religious systems, look at the results, he is saying, look at the kind of people each produces. The central theme in this book is that false religion is the greatest enemy of true religion. It's worse than secularism, atheism -- even heathen antagonism. Galatians is a book about the difference between false and true religion; and Paul illustrates this concept by comparing himself and his ministry with 'those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh.'

The apostle draws the point finer still by saying that this issue turns on what each side believes about the cross of Christ. In verse 12 he charges those who want to make a good showing in the flesh with doing so because they are seeking to avoid the persecution that comes with the cross of Christ. Speaking of himself, on the other hand, Paul cries, 'May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Standing at the center of the apostle's identity is his willingness to glory in the cross, and his acceptance of whatever that brings. That's the great divide between Christianity and false religion: how do we regard the cross of Christ? Do we seek to avoid the persecution of the cross, or do we hold it, as Paul did, at the center of our experience? Has 'the world been crucified to us and we to the world'?

Persecution because of the cross of Christ is a difficult concept for modern-day American Christians to grasp. In all likelihood, none of us has ever been struck a blow because of his Christianity; nor have many of us been locked up in prison or denied economic opportunity because of our faith. Thus when we hear that false religion results in an avoidance of persecution we are often puzzled as to what exactly that means. It's interesting to note here, however, that Paul says that persecution comes about because of the Christian's alienation. He is not only speaking of acts of persecution, but where such acts originate. Persecution, he declares, originates from an alienation from the world, where there is separation from the quality of life that the world has. That's why verse 14 is so important: 'the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.' 'I am no longer a participant in that system; I no longer gain my identity from it,' is what he is saying. It is the alienation that has taken place between Christians and the world system that leads to persecution. But alienation comes first.

What Paul is suggesting is that false religion never alienates itself from the world. False religion, rather, seeks ways to promote worldliness, thus it doesn't need to tear persecution-- there's nothing to persecute as it has immersed itself in the world. If you consider the kind of persecution people commonly encounter- racial, religious, ethnic persecution, or whatever- you will agree that where division and alienation occurs, persecution follows. But 'those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh' have never differed from the world to begin with, therefore they don't need to fear persecution. That is the point the apostle is making.

False religion supports the very system that is antagonistic toward the things of Christ. Even despots use religion to further their aims. The Ayatollah Khomeini uses thousands upon thousands of his people as cannon fodder in a so-- called religious war. Thus religion is used as a tool to support a world system: nationalism. In this country, Democrats and Republicans vie with each other for votes, using religious catchcalls to support their philosophies. Intellectual humanists seek a religion which will support them as an elite group in universities and places of learning. Sales managers search for religious speakers who will promote enthusiasm among their salesmen and thereby increase sales. Coaches use religious speakers to extract better performances from the athletes they coach. Radical feminists want religious trappings for the course they have demanded for the world. Religious terms, ideas and language are attached to what the world is already involved in so that its pride, arrogance and power-seeking is legitimized. False religion, as a result, never has to fear persecution because it supports the very institutions that oppose real Christianity.

On the other hand, the apostle declares, 'The world has been crucified to me and I to the world. The cross stands at the center of my life, thus I am cut off from the world, and the logical result of that is that persecution will come.' Hebrews 11 speaks of another alien, Abraham:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow- heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb. 11 :8-10)

Abraham was a wanderer, a sojourner, who lived in a land he could not possess. That was a picture of what was happening in his heart: that he was a citizen of a city whose architect and builder was God. He did not belong to the earth; he never sank his roots into worldliness, but remained an alien throughout his life. Paul is saying that those who embrace the cross of Christ, and then live on that basis, find that the world is cut off from them and they from the world. And aliens may very well be persecuted. We must be willing to live in a different way than the world lives, and not try to immerse our religion in worldliness. Alienation is the precursor to persecution. If you want to avoid persecution, the surest way to succeed is not to be different than everybody else- to avoid being an alien, in other words.

Paul goes on to talk further of those who want to make a good showing in the flesh. He shows them up and scores them by saying that they themselves don't keep the law anyway. Verse 13: 'For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh.' They are essentially phony, like the Pharisees whom Jesus called 'whitewashed tombs'-- painted on the outside but filled with rotteness inside. All the enthusiasm for morality of those who have been circumcised has a dark side to it. They don't keep the law. They don't live as they should; they use all kinds of secret exits and double standards. They sound religious, but they are riddled with worldliness, and fail to keep the law they so religiously proclaim and force upon others. That's phony religion, Paul charges.

And secondly, it's selfish, he says. They want to 'boast in your flesh.' They are in it so they can use others as trophies, so they can use the young, the initiates, the uninformed, the starry-eyed to their own selfish advantage. That is exactly what Sun Myung Moon is doing with young people today. These legalists are phony, selfish people. So-called Christians throughout the ages have been attacked by the world in exactly these two areas -- phoniness and selfishness. The church has too often been phony and selfish; the church has too often wanted to make a good showing in the flesh. Those manifestations of so-called Christianity are hated by any discerning people.

Paul now goes on to contrast his own life and ministry with the phony, selfish legalists he has just described: 'But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (verse 14). Paul truly was an alien. His love for the Lord and his conviction of what Jesus had done for him had made him a changed man. 'For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God' (verses 15-16).

Verse 16 is primarily a contrast to the attitude of selfishness of the false religionists of verse 13. They sought to glory in the flesh of their adherents, and use it to their own ends, but by contrast Paul prays a prayer of blessing on 'those who will walk by this rule [may they receive] peace and mercy.' Paul sought to see people blessed, while the legalists sought to use people.

There is an interpretive and translation problem in verse 16. Is Paul here referring to two groups of people: 'those who will walk by this rule,' and, 'the Israel of God,' or are they one and the same group? Either interpretation is possible. He may mean to speak separately of Jews who are humble before God though they are not yet Christians, or he may mean to say that Christians 'who walk by this rule' are the true Israel of God. I tend to think that Paul is speaking of one group only, that he is here describing the church as the Israel of God. For our purposes this morning, however, the issue is to contrast the prayer of blessing in verse 16 with the selfishness of those of verse 13.

One of the things we are doing, as we said at the beginning, is looking at Paul close up. With that in mind, verse 17 is one of the most dramatic verses in this book: 'From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.' Circumcision was a ritual scarring of the body. It had become a badge of self -- importance, a religious way of promoting pride. But Paul shares that he underwent a different kind of scarring in the service of Christ: scars from the stones that had been thrown at him; scars from the manacles that had been placed on his hands; scars from the whippings and beatings he had received; calluses on his feet from the miles he had walked to preach Christ. 'Stigmata,' the term Paul uses, is a word that was used of the marking of slaves' bodies in the first century. Primitive tribes yet today scar their children's faces so they can be identified as belonging to a particular tribe. Paul uses this term to make the statement, 'I belong to Jesus. I got my scars legitimately, not because I wanted to impress anybody, not to promote my own

religious beauty, but because my commitment to the Lord I love cost me something. My scars are the evidence of my service in his cause.'

The issue Paul is raising here is a little like the practice in Old Testament times when the Jews were instructed to place memorial stones in certain locations so they would remember how the Lord had acted in their lives to deliver them from various dangers. After they had walked through the dry bed of the Jordan River they placed a pile of stones up so high that when the river returned to its normal flow the stones were still visible, and thereby their children could see physical evidence of their deliverance. Here the apostle points out that he has physical evidence of a life committed to the cross of Christ.

This verse challenges me to ask myself about the evidence of my Christianity. I have never suffered a beating in the cause of Christ; I don't have a physical mark on my body as a result of my commitment to him. What other kinds of physical evidence should I look for to indicate the reality of my faith? Some Christians I know have calluses on their hands because they have helped the needy. Some can point to the ashes of paraphernalia they have deliberately abandoned -- pornography, drugs, alcohol, etc.-- to follow Christ. Some have homes, cars and other things that have been damaged because they have been hospitable to strangers. A personal calendar might serve as a physical reminder. There are women in this church who spend their Saturdays standing outside an abortion clinic tenderly urging young women to not go ahead with having an abortion. Others in this church visit shut--ins and teach them the Bible. Others give their time in the service of Southeast Asian refugees. Some use their vacations as an opportunity to minister. Others have spent nights seeking their friends who have fallen into sin. A personal calendar recalling any of these choices might serve as evidence to testify to the life we have lived. Our bank accounts might show evidence of depletion for the sake of the gospel. James, the Lord's brother, was nicknamed 'camel-- knees,' because his knees were disfigured from the hours he had spent in prayer. Some show evidence of their faith in faces wrinkled due to their mourning over sin.

Paul says that his brand-marks were testimony to his alienation from this world. He had made the choice to be different from the course of this world. He served a different Master; his citizenship was in a different city; he was destined for a different eternal home. As a result he was persecuted. We too are called to be crucified to the world and the world to us. A new creation, standing for something entirely different, not circumcision or uncircumcision, is what matters.

The book of Galatians is a great document because of the clarity, the certainty, the challenge with which it speaks. The cross of Jesus is central. Are we, like Paul, crucified to the world and the world to us? Is there any evidence that we are different-- aliens whose citizenship is in God's city? May the closing prayer of Galatians speak for us as we answer these important questions,

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

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