

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	77		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 2:20-21		
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### A GLORIOUS TRUTH

When a person dies, we know that the bond uniting that person to us and to life in this world has been severed. Every human death is a definitive break, a break that cannot be mended (cf. Psalms 38:36; 103:15, 16). The cross of Christ was such a break. In one sense we can say that the Lord Jesus died, physically speaking, like any other person. He had a real human body that experienced physical pain just like we do. But that is where the similarities end. The death of Christ is unlike any other. Galatians 2:20 is one of the key texts in the Bible that serves to explain the nature of Christ's death. Unfortunately, this text is often used by preachers as an exhortation to personal sanctification. We are told that in a very *mystical* sense, we must experience crucifixion to self in order to discover the pathway to spiritual victory. However valid that thought may be, it is not, I repeat, it is not the point that Paul is laboring to make. If we pay close attention to the context we will see that this passage is, in the words of Alan Cole, "a powerful argument for the total sufficiency and efficacy of the work of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

- I. **TEXT AND ITS CONTEXT.** We have to, in the words of Walter L. Liefeld, pay close attention to the "*connective tissue*" between the text and its context.<sup>2</sup>
  - A. **Paul's Thought Pattern.** The significant ideas in this chapter are centered on the doctrine of *justification*. Note that seven times in vv. 15-21 Paul insists that nobody can be justified by the law.
  - B. **Paul's Verbal Pattern.** Note the frequent use of the word *law* and significant words like *live* and *die*.
  - C. **Paul's Structural Pattern.** What is the direction of Paul's thought in this passage? The verses in this chapter do not stand in isolation to each other (like sections in the Proverbs), but are inter-related, so that 2:20 *must* be interpreted in the light of what Paul is saying about justification and the role of the law.
- II. **THE TRIUMPH OF THE LIFE OF FAITH.** Paul's language may strike us as paradoxical since he speaks of *life* coming through *death*.
  - A. **Paul's Death to the Law.** There are two important pitfalls to be avoided in interpreting this: (1) *The law* is **not** to be restricted here to only one aspect of the law (the ceremonial). Paul is arguing against *any* form of human merit. (2) If the first error puts too little meaning on the words "I died to the law," the second error to avoid is the one that reads into these words too much meaning, e.g., *antinomianism* which advocates the view that the law is completely done away with and serves no purpose in the life of the Christian. Paul specifically rejects any such notion (Galatians 5:13-21). Paul's death to the law means that he ceases to have a living relationship to the law. It has no further claim or control over him as a means to life. Elsewhere Paul declares that the law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). But the law cannot give a man what it demands of him. All it can do is to demand, forbid, judge, and condemn. It cannot give life, it cannot save, it can only *slay* the sinner. Richard Gamble writes: "Paul portrayed how justification worked in

the believer's life and experience. Paul described this life as his no longer living, but Christ (Gal. 2:20-21). The reference was existential. This was not a biological reference, relative to the heart beating, but referred to his life's goal. Paul's life now springs from Christ, not from his natural self: he was living in actual communion with Christ. This living and dying was done in two ways. First, Christ governed and directed Paul by his Spirit, and second, Christ made him a partaker of his righteousness. Paul's profound statement about his life did not mean that Paul himself was sinless. Paul did not deny that the law was a norm of life. Nor did he propose a paradox, that someone can still live on the earth in his body and yet "not be his own." Earthly life, for Paul, was a life "by faith" (Gal. 2:20), not of the senses. There are other passages with similar teaching. Paul elaborated the nature of this new life being united to Christ as it related to the law a few chapters later. At Galatians 4:5, Paul offered a slightly different nuance to his instruction on justification. Instead of the ransom freeing the Christian from the curse of the law, it liberates him from the obligation to fulfill the law in its ceremonial aspect. Perhaps Paul's notion for the Galatians was more like the situation when a minor child comes of age and receives the full inheritance established for him by the family. The issue is freedom from the law. Christ's active and passive obedience, relative to the law, has set the believer free."<sup>3</sup>

**NOTE:** There are three law stages, as Lightfoot calls them,<sup>4</sup> which are observable in the Bible: (1) Prior to the law – people are sinful but are ignorant of sin; (2) under the law – people are sinful and are now made conscious of sin by the law; (3) free from the law – as a means of justification before God by faith in Christ.

- B. ***Crucified with Christ.*** It is important to note that this does **not** refer in an ethical sense to a *subjective* experience in Christian consciousness, but to the believer's *objective* position in Christ.<sup>5</sup> Note the flow of Paul's thought up to this point. The law condemns sin and prescribes death as its penalty – that is its function. How can a sinner possibly be justified? The *only* way is by fulfilling the law's requirement and dying the death it demands. Paul could not do this – but Christ has borne the penalty of broken law; specifically, Paul is saying, Christ has borne the penalty of Paul's law-breaking. "Those who place their faith in Christ are united with him by that faith – united so closely that his experience now becomes theirs: they share his death to the old order (*under law*; cf. 4:4) and his resurrection to new life."<sup>6</sup> Paul uses the perfect tense of his having died with Christ, which suggests that in Paul's thinking this was a specific completed event, but one which has an enduring effect on his life.
- C. ***Life with Christ.*** The cross has changed everything. Paul has changed. He has died to the law and with Christ in order that he might live for God. Note the individuality of Paul's language. Christ's atoning love is highlighted by the Apostle as it relates specifically to him. Christ loved *him* and gave (*paradontos*, cf. with 1:4) himself for Paul. J. R. W. Stott has pointed out how this is a conscious echo of Isaiah 53:12, which says that Christ poured out (in the LXX this is *paredothē*) his life unto death.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Paul declares that God "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up (*paradōken*) for us all" (Romans 8:32; cf. 4:25). I like the way Lloyd-Jones has put this: "[Christ] did not wait until Paul was converted before he loved him. He loved him as he was, a blasphemer and persecutor and injurious. He loved him even when Saul of Tarsus was there blaspheming his holy name, ridiculing his claim that he was the Son of God, and the Lord of Glory, ridiculing this idea that he is here to teach us and to die for us and to save us, pouring his blasphemous scorn upon him. While Paul was doing that, he was dying for Paul. And he was doing the same for you and for me. You who have reviled him and blasphemed him and hated him and regarded all this preaching of the cross as an offence, he did it for *you*."<sup>8</sup>

**SUMMARY:** “It is noteworthy exegetically,” declares David Shaw, “that many of Paul’s greatest appreciations of divine love come precisely in contexts of propitiation and forgiveness (Gal. 2:20; 1 Tim. 1:15; cf. Rom. 5:6-8). Put simply, a diminished view of God’s wrath diminishes his love in equal measure, and to anticipate my later argument, it also cuts the nerve to ethics, for it is those who have been forgiven much who love much (a point to which we shall return). There is also a final, apologetic point to make here, since there are serious questions of theodicy involved in presenting a God of pure benevolence in a world so filled with malevolence and injustice. The promise of perfect retribution for wrongdoing, though humbling, is also deeply hopeful.”<sup>9</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Horton has recently observed: “In the Reformers’ writings, the marital union of the believer to Christ is not merely a piece of devotional piety but attains a systematic role in delineating the blessings of salvation. The realism of this union, including the grace at work within believers, refutes any charge of nominalism. In his 1535 *Commentary on Galatians*, Luther wrote, ‘Christ and I must be joined together so that He lives in me and I in Him – and what a wonderful way of speaking this is. For because He lives in me, whatever there is in me of grace, righteousness, life, peace, salvation, is all His but in such a way that it is mine through this inseparable union and conjunction which I have with Him through faith. Through this faith Christ and I are made one body, as it were, and spirit. Now because Christ lives in me there must be present with Him grace, righteousness, life, and salvation, whereas the Law, sin, and death are absent; in fact, the Law is crucified and devoured and destroyed along with sin, death, and the devil. Thus Paul tries to draw us wholly away from ourselves and transplant us into Christ by faith in Him, so that in the matter of justification we think of nothing else but grace and separate this from the Law and works which must have no place in this matter.’ This, Luther says, is what is meant by the *blessed exchange*. His description is vivid: ‘With gratitude and a sure confidence, therefore, let us accept this doctrine, so sweet and filled with comfort, which teaches that Christ became a curse for us, that is, a sinner worthy of the wrath of God; that He clothed Himself in our person, laid our sins upon His own shoulders, and said, *I have committed the sins that all men have committed*. Therefore He truly became accursed according to the Law, not for Himself, but as Paul says, for us. For unless He had taken upon Himself my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world, the Law would have had no right over Him, since it condemns only sinners and holds only them under a curse. Therefore He could neither have become a curse nor have died, since the cause of the curse and of death is sin, of which He was innocent. But because He took upon Himself our sins, not by compulsion but of His own free will, it was right for Him to bear the punishment and wrath of God – not for His own Person, which was righteous and invincible and therefore could not become guilty, but for our person. By this fortunate exchange (*feliciter commutans*) with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. . . . We must look at this image and take hold of it with a firm faith. . . . Therefore we are justified by faith alone, because faith alone grasps the victory of Christ.’”<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1956), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> W. L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> R. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: The Full Revelation of God* (P&R, 2018), p. 636.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Macmillan & Co., 1869), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> In the Greek text, the word *Christ* stands at the beginning of Paul’s statement.

<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Galatians: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross* (Crossway, 1986), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> D. Shaw in *The Doctrine On Which The Church Stands or Falls*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Crossway, 2019), p. 338.

<sup>10</sup> M. Horton, *New Studies In Dogmatics: Justification I* (Zondervan, 2018), p. 203.