

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

| | | | |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| Series: | Galatians | | Pastor/Teacher |
| Number: | 12 | | Gary L.W. Johnson |
| Text: | Galatians 2:20 | | |
| Date: | March 22, 2026 (a.m.) | | |

THE LIFE OF FAITH

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 37:36; 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 might 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 power argument for the total sufficiency and efficacy of the work of Christ."¹ It is important to note the first use of the word *crucified*. The death of Christ on the cross is at the heart of Paul's gospel. Martin Hengel correctly observed: "When Paul talks of the *folly* of the message of the crucified Jesus, he is therefore not speaking in riddles or using an abstract cipher. He is expressing the harsh experience of his missionary preaching and the offence that it caused, in particular the experience of his preaching among non-Jews, with whom his apostolate was particularly concerned. The reason why in his letters he talks about the cross above all in a polemical context is that he deliberately wants to provoke his opponents, who are attempting to water down the offence caused by the cross. Thus in a way the *word of the cross* is the spearhead of his message. And because Paul still understands the cross as the real, cruel instrument of execution, as the instrument of the bloody execution of Jesus, it is impossible to dissociate talk of the atoning death of Jesus or the blood of Jesus from this *word of the cross*. The spearhead cannot be broken off the spear. Rather, the complex of the death of Jesus is a single entity for the apostle, in which he never forgets the fact that Jesus did not die a gentle death like Socrates, with his cup of hemlock, much less passing on *old and full of years* like the patriarchs of the Old Testament. Rather, he died like a slave or a common criminal, in torment, on the tree of shame. Paul's Jesus did not die just any death; he was *given up for us all* on the cross, in a cruel and a contemptible way. The theological reasoning of our time shows very clearly that the particular form of the death of Jesus, the man and the messiah, represents a scandal which people would like to blunt, remove or domesticate in any way possible. We shall have to guarantee the truth of our theological thinking at this point. Reflection on the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often in present theology and preaching."²

- 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.³
 - 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.

NOTE: There are three law stages, as Lightfoot calls them,⁴ 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.⁵ 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 the law*; cf. 4:4) and his resurrection to new life."⁶ 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. 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).⁷ 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*."⁸

CONCLUSION: Philip Ryken, a classmate of mine at Westminster Theological seminary, writes: “This text reveals something very surprising about the cross. It shows that at least four things were nailed to the cross of Calvary. The most obvious, of course, was Jesus himself, through his hands and feet. As the records plainly show, he was put to death by being nailed to the cross. Also fastened to the cross with a hammer and a nail was the public announcement that read: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews* (John 19:19). The third thing that was nailed to the cross was the debt of our sin. Paul explained this to the Colossians: God forgave *all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross* (Col. 2:13-14). The record of debt was the law of God, which condemns us by listing all of our sins and which God canceled by nailing it to the cross. But here is the surprise: if you are a follower of Christ, then *you* were nailed to the cross too! The crucifixion is not just a fact about the life of Christ and a momentous event in human history, but is also part of every Christian’s personal life story. The Cambridge Puritan William Perkins (1558-1602) said, ‘We are in mind and meditation to consider Christ crucified: and first, we are to believe that he was crucified for us. This being done, we must go yet further, and as it were spread ourselves on the cross of Christ, believing and withal beholding ourselves crucified with him.’”⁹ Christ *gave* Himself! And He did so on the cross; not as an example that we should seek to imitate; not in order to move us to repentance per se (the moral influence theory of the atonement), but first and foremost He gave Himself as an atoning sacrifice to satisfy the justice of a Holy God – Lord help us to believe this! Listen carefully to the words of John Owen and put yourself in the situation he is describing. “. . . that I stood before the judgment-seat of God, charged with my original apostasy from him, and with all the sins of my life, multiplied above the hairs of my head, and being ready to perish, to have the sentence pronounced against me; then Christ came and stood in my place, putting the sinner aside, and undertaking to answer this matter: *Let the poor sinner stand aside a while. Come, enter into rest; abide here in the cleft of the rock; I will undertake thy cause, and plead it out at God’s judgment-seat.* In this undertaking God spared him not; as if God should say, *If you will stand in place of the sinner, and undertake his cause, then it must go with you as with him; I will not spare. Lo I come,* says Christ, notwithstanding this, *to do thy will, O God; -- Whatever thou dost require to make good this cause I have espoused, lo, I come to do it.* So Christ loved me, and gave himself for me. Everlasting rest and peace will dwell upon our souls, if the Lord will be pleased to help us to exercise faith on Christ’s love in this ordinance, wherein all these things are represented to us.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹A Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to The Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1956), p. 82.

²M. Hengel, *Crucifixion: In The Ancient World and The Folly of The Message of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 1977), p. 89.

³W. L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 32.

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

⁵In the Greek text, the word CHRIST stands at the beginning of Paul’s statement.

⁶F. F. Bruce, *Galatians: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 144. There is an ongoing and often very heated debate over the Pauline phrase *pistis Christou* (cf. Galatians 2:16, 20 and Romans 3:22, 26). Is it a subjective genitive: The faith of Christ, or is it an objective genitive: The faith in Christ? I strongly favor the objective genitive, cf. the extended analysis by Michael Horton, *New Studies in Dogmatics: Justification II* (Zondervan, 2018), pp. 416-446.

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

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

⁹P. G. Ryken, *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P&R, 2005), p. 73.

¹⁰*The Works of John Owen IX* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 602.