

NO BOASTING ABOUT ANYTHING, EXCEPT ABOUT THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Paul writes, “*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*” (Gl 6: 14). If he had not had this attitude, what might have been some of the things that he could have boasted about? Many people strive for, and obtain honours, riches and pleasure. Some people seek honour for themselves in the name of Jesus and for serving His church. In Philippians Paul suggests that he might have had confidence in physical connection with the people of God, as an Israelite, circumcised on the eighth day, belonging to the tribe of Benjamin, and a son of Hebrew parents. As far as God’s Law was concerned, he had been a zealous Pharisee. No one could deny that he was zealous for keeping God’s Law. In fact, that was what led him to persecute the church.

In Second Corinthians Paul said that he had more right to boast than the false apostles at Corinth, though he pointed out that he was foolish even to talk in that way. He had not shunned contempt, poverty, and sufferings for Christ’s sake. In Galatians he says that those who wanted to make a good showing in an outward way were insisting on circumcision, because they wanted to boast in what was physical, and keep themselves from being persecuted for the sake of the cross of Christ. Earlier he had made the telling comment that if he were still preaching that people had to be circumcised, the cross of Christ would be eliminated as a stumbling _.

In the Old Testament one of the basic ideas of a “stumbling-block” was a death trap. People thought of something like the stick to which bait was attached in a death trap. The Old Testament spoke about alliances with foreign nations as well as success and prosperity as such traps that could lead to ruin. Another idea in “stumbling block”, referred to what cruel people sometimes did for sport, like putting a block in front of a blind person, so that he would fall over it. In a spiritual sense, then, a “stumbling block” is what causes a person to become weaker in his faith, or lose it. In the New Testament both meanings of the word, literally, a “*scandal*”, have to be kept in mind.

Usually we think of Christ’s cross as the means of life and salvation for the world. However, it is a stumbling block. The point is that Christ’s crucifixion does not sit easily with people’s reason. If Paul were still preaching circumcision, the stumbling block of Christ’s cross would be idle, or inactive. Usually we speak of stumbling blocks as bad things, as things that would be best out of the way. There is something about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ that was offensive, particularly to Jews. It was that according to God’s Law, a person who hung on a cross was under God’s curse. If Jesus was under God’s curse, how could He be the Messiah, or the Son of God? In the epistle for today Paul makes it clear that to some, notably the Jews, Christ crucified is a stumbling block. To Greeks Christ crucified was foolishness, for different reasons. However, he adds, “*But to us, who believe, the power and wisdom of God*” The cross is not a stumbling block to believers.

When Jesus was still a baby, Simeon foretold to Mary, “Look, this Child is appointed for many in Israel 12 fall and to rise; and to be a Sign that is spoken against.” He would help some to rise, and He could cause some to fall. Several writers of the New Testament quoted Isaiah 8:13-15, which said that the Lord of hosts would be a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling to both of the houses of Israel. When Jesus referred the passage in Psalm 118 about the cornerstone to Himself, He said, “*Everyone who falls on that Stone will be dashed in pieces, and if that Stone falls on anyone, It will scatter him like dust.*” He Himself is an offence to unbelievers.

Paul does not want that stumbling block to exist, but he observes from his own experience that the stumbling block of the cross has not been removed. Because there are so many things, worldly honour, power, glory, and majesty, that stand as rivals to Christ’s cross, and because there are religious obstacles that coax people to look for glory, miraculous signs, meritorious deeds, and good behaviour, as rivals to Christ’s shameful, and painful cross, the offence of the cross does not cease. Those who want to be Christians must take up Christ’s cross. They, like their crucified Lord, know that they have been crucified to the world, and to their sinful natures. They suffer Christ’s disgrace, because of His disgraceful cross, through which they have been saved. People will still take offence at Jesus’ cross, and will still persecute those who have made it their own, and who preach it.

See how Christ’s cross turns everything that people esteem, honour, prestige, wealth, and power, and whatever else they regard as valuable on this earth, upside down. Jesus Christ had all that majesty, but for our sakes emptied Himself of the use of it. As a humble servant He became obedient even to death, the death of the cross. He has won the verdict of righteousness for sinners through His own patient obedience. Isaiah said, “*He was numbered with the transgressors.*” He became a criminal Himself by taking on Himself our crimes, and suffering mockery by men, and even rejection by God the Father in other than that transgressors might be

justified.

As a result, Christians are people who are prepared to accept for themselves the offence of Christ's cross. There was nothing glorious in it. Yet it was the way in which Jesus Christ has won glory for those who believe in Him. Because of what He has done, the Father has also highly glorified Him. Hence the preaching of the cross must always remain in the centre of our preaching and teaching. Once people make miraculous healings and the misuse of the charismatic gifts a means of their own glory and feeling of power, they insult God's gracious forgiveness through Christ's cross. Once these take over the centre, once people make a display of knowledge an excuse for people to show them deference, and once people use positions in the church as a means of power and control over others, Satan can, and will, use these as means of error, deception, and delusion. The same applies to all observance of the Law of God, which outwardly looks so pious, as a means of impressing others and making a good showing. All of these are opposed to the humble, shameful, painful, cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. God grant that we continue to boast in nothing but that.