

## Sermon

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# God's Glorious Grace

Ten weeks this summer in Galatians... and it has been good.

For a number of us, summer is over when school starts. At my house, summer is over tomorrow. The boys start back at high school early tomorrow morning, and for me classes for the fall semester at the University start tomorrow. While the astronomers tell us that summer ends on 9/22, and we know that we often have spectacular summer-like weather in September around here, we are wrapping up our summer this weekend.

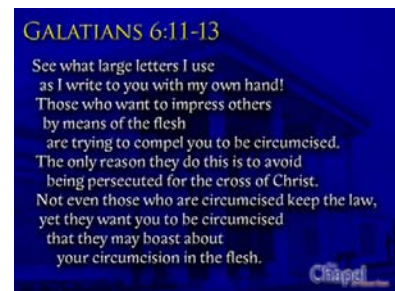


And we're wrapping up this series with the last eight verses of this book of Galatians.

I asked David to read the last 5 verses... allow me to pick up the entire passage assigned.

<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

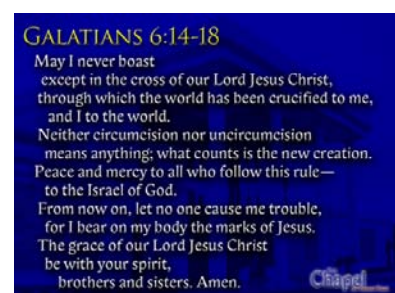
<sup>12</sup>Those who want to impress others by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. <sup>13</sup>Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>14</sup>May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. <sup>15</sup>Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. <sup>16</sup>Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.

<sup>17</sup>From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

<sup>18</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.<sup>2</sup>



I've been dreading working through this passage. Why might that be?

- End of a great series?
- Tagged on?
- Circumcision?

All of those might be good enough reasons to avoid preaching from this passage.

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ga 6:11-13.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ga 6:14-18.

Here's my reason: suffering.

This passage is full of suffering.

- Paul's suffering
- The Judaizer's suffering
- Christ's suffering
- Israel's suffering



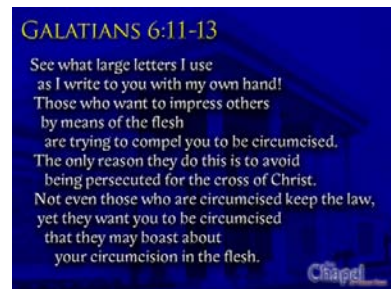
Suffering isn't good for you; suffering is suffering. From time to time you may have heard an argument that suffering is good for Christians. Take up your cross and suffer for Jesus. Doesn't suffering sound great? In fact, let's pass around a clip board right now so that people can sign up for some good ol' Christian suffering. Any takers?

I'm not crazy about ending our series on a note of suffering... but here it is, so I suppose we'd better see what we can learn.

First: Paul's suffering

<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!<sup>3</sup>

While there are a couple of reasonable explanations of why Paul might use "large letters," the common explanation is that Paul's letters were large because of his own disability. Specifically, it appears that Paul suffered from weak eyesight.



Here at the end of this letter, Paul reminds the readers that his message comes from weakness and suffering. Paul, the Great Apostle, God's man of faith and power, suffered with at least partial blindness.

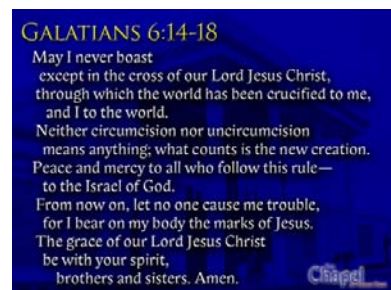
Whatever Grace is, it is apparently not healing; it is not perfection and health.

Paul also refers to his suffering in verse 17 –

<sup>17</sup>From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

There are at least a few kinds of suffering indicated in this short verse:

- Scars and bruises
- Persecution
- Heartache



<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ga 6:11.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ga 6:17.

Paul refers to “the marks of Jesus” he bears on his body. He uses the word *stigmata* when referring to these marks, most likely the scars he bore from persecution. He spoke of his suffering in 2 Corinthians

<sup>24</sup>Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup>Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup>I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. <sup>27</sup>I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. <sup>28</sup>Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. <sup>29</sup>Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

<sup>30</sup>If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.<sup>5</sup>

This word for “marks” (*stigmata*), indicates ownership in its ancient meaning... like a brand on livestock. When Paul says “marks of Jesus” he is not saying marks by Jesus, or even marks because of Jesus... he’s saying that these are marks that identify Paul as belonging to Jesus. Paul has been *stigmatized*, changed by his experience and bearing the marks for it.

It appears that Grace doesn’t mean the absence of physical pain and suffering.

But there is more than just physical pain and suffering in this verse. There’s the pain of persecution here too. The same spirit that fueled the beatings that caused Paul’s *stigmata* was driving the Judaizers that were “causing Paul trouble.”

Speaking as a pastor, I am confident that if Paul could choose between receiving another beating to his body over subjecting his friends in the church he founded to the attacks of those who would lead them from The Faith... Paul would choose the physical beating every time.

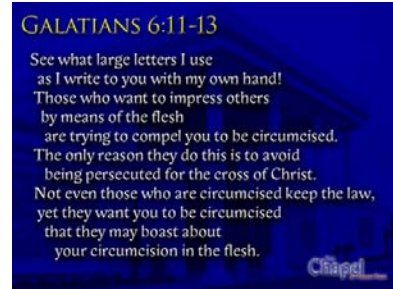
And it wasn’t just the attack from those outside of the Galatian church that caused him trouble; it was the lack of perseverance demonstrated by his dear friends in the Galatian church that most likely caused Paul the most pain.

Apparently Grace doesn’t necessarily mean that people will not hurt us... even those who are the closest to us.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 2 Co 11:24-30.

In juxtaposition to Paul's own suffering, the Apostle makes reference to the suffering of the Judaizers (the grace+ people who contended that the Gospel of Grace that Paul brought to the Galatians was not enough... that in addition to believing in Jesus, these new Christians needed to follow Jewish Law and customs).



<sup>12</sup>Those who want to impress others by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. *The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.* <sup>13</sup>Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh.<sup>6</sup>

Paul explains that the motivation for those who were insisting on a grace+ gospel was the avoidance of suffering. In so doing, Paul contends again that there is no room for compromise when it comes to the essentials of the Gospel of Grace. To many, it seemed to be a reasonable compromise to go along with those who demanded the Jewish rule keeping. It was a meeting-in-the-middle strategy that kept the peace and kept folk from persecution. But for Paul, the Gospel of Grace did not allow for this compromise.

Apparently Grace doesn't allow for this sort of compromise, even if it results in suffering.

There is no denying that the Gospel of Grace is founded on suffering.

<sup>14</sup>May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.<sup>7</sup>

There is no boasting, not in my religious practice or the religious practice I impose on others. There is no boasting, not in my suffering or in my delight. There is no boasting, except in the cross of Christ.

The cross:

- Instrument of brutal torture
- The most shameful punishment
- A horribly disgusting execution

But...

*I love that old cross where the dearest and best  
For a world of lost sinners was slain.*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ga 6:12-13.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ga 6:14.

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down;  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown.*

There is no way to separate the Gospel of Grace from the suffering of Christ.

Finally, there is the suffering of "the Israel of God."

It is good to study and meditate on God's word. As many times as I've read this passage, I never really thought about this phrase, in this context: the Israel of God.

I don't suppose it should have jumped out at me; this is an idea that is common in the Apostle's teaching. The Gospel of Grace opens wide the gates, inviting us all to be God's chosen people, Children of Abraham, grafted in to the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the twelve tribes.

But in this context of "suffering" it is meaningful that Paul reminds us Jesus followers that we are the Israel of God.

Reflect on the story, read earlier from the account in Genesis, of just how Jacob was given a new name by God: Israel.

<sup>22</sup>That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. <sup>24</sup>So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. <sup>26</sup>Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

<sup>27</sup>The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

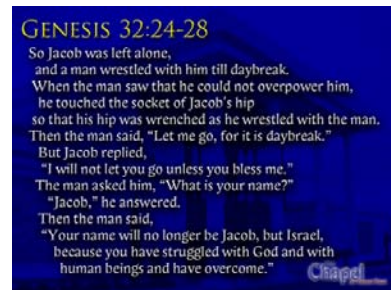
<sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome."

<sup>29</sup>Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

<sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."<sup>8</sup>

Jacob was renamed Israel out of a context of suffering. With his new name, he was marked (bruised and scared really) after "wrestling with God."



<sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ge 32:22-30.

I've never been a wrestler, at least not in any official athletic capacity. Most of my wrestling has been father-son wrestling, and I've been on both ends of that deal.

Sons can learn a lot from father-son wrestling:

- Sense of the father's strength
- Sense of the father's care

Fathers learn from the wrestling too:

- Fragility of the sons
- Trust of the sons

Jacob's wrestling, which resulted in his new name Israel, had to be a lot like this father-son wrestling. It left him with a reminder, a limp, that he would carry through his life... a mark of suffering that would persist through his ancestors.

The Gospel of Grace, it appears, may include some wrestling and struggle.

So what? Isn't it obvious?

What about *our* suffering?

Grace doesn't always appear to be happy, easy, or even healthy.

Is that good news or bad news?

If you are here looking for Grace, hoping that you might find some *magic* to ease your pain, to heal your disease, to fill your bank accounts... you might be disappointed.

But if you're here a bit bruised and battered, if you are here with pain and disappointment, if you're struggling or wrestling today... you can find encouragement today from the Gospel of Grace.

Grace may not give you the life you want or hope for;  
Grace **will** give you life.

It is wonderful to be happy and healthy. It is especially wonderful to be a happy healthy Christian. But what if you're not happy? What if you don't have a perfect life? If I were more spiritual, a better Christian, wouldn't I be happy?

I listen to a number of podcasts, especially while I'm driving (talk radio, sermons, a couple of NPR broadcasts). Yesterday morning I was listening to "Speaking of Faith." It was an hour with three guests talking about depression. I've had that episode



queued up in my iPhone for months. I didn't just delete it like I do many that don't interest me (I'll keep a discussion about Reinhold Niebuhr, but delete the one about meditating with yoga)... but I left it on the bottom of the pile. I like funny podcasts best; this one seemed like it might just be depressing.

Anyway... I listened and learned. The second guest, a Quaker who reflected on his own struggle with depression, helped me understand depression better when he said: "The opposite of depression isn't happiness; it is vitality." Depression is accompanied by sadness, but it is so much more... it is more like deadness... it is a constant struggle in just the simple things of life... it is exhausting. If depression was simply profound sadness, then happiness would be the opposite (even the antidote)... but that is too shallow of a view. The opposite of depression isn't happiness; it is vitality... just as the opposite of being dead is being alive.

I think that may be the best way of thinking of the product of Grace... not happiness, but vitality. Not necessarily the good life... but full life.

*I'm inright, outright, upright, downright happy all the time.*

*I'm inright, outright, upright, downright happy all the time.*

*Since Jesus Christ came in,*

*And cleansed my heart from sin.*

*I'm inright, outright, upright, downright happy all the time.*

I appreciate the intent of this little ditty for children... but I'm not happy all the time.

And neither was Paul... and neither was Jacob... and neither was Jesus.

I think we Christians from time to time make claims about the faith that are a great deal about happiness... that The Faith will fix things, clean you up, repair your marriage, make you nicer, etc.

But what if it doesn't all the time? What if you're not "happy all the time." Is that a failure of the Gospel of Grace? Did we not get it right? Or was it a sham all along?

Paul says no. There will be struggling and pain and suffering. The Gospel of Grace doesn't take suffering out of our lives, but it will bring us through. No promise of happiness all the time (in fact the opposite is true, the promise is more for persecution)... but a promise of vitality, of full life.



What marks do you bear today?

What pain might you be trying to avoid?

Will you, with courage, receive this Gospel of Grace and be the Israel of God, welcoming the struggle with both God and man, and overcome?