

It is perfectly possible that as Paul closed, he expressed the pain of suffering the 'birth-pangs' of the early church (6:17). He had endured all manner of persecutions and personal hardship, including stoning, ridicule, beating and imprisonment (e.g. see 2 Cor. 6:4f.), and there is no doubt from the little we know about what happened to Paul that he must have been significantly scarred by his experiences (Acts 14:5f. etc.). All that Paul could mean by saying 'I bear in my body the marks of Jesus' could therefore be that Paul was conscious of the physical scars on his body of the persecutions and troubles he had endured for the Gospel. Jesus, after all, had prophesied that His servants would be persecuted, over and over again (Matt 5:11, 13:21, Mark 10:30; John 16:33 etc.).

Personally, I feel that this is a reasonable explanation of Paul's remarks about the scars (stigmata) on his body, here in Galatians; but the power of tradition on this matter is strong. It may be that we will not know the truth of this until we meet our Lord in glory!

Application

There is a price to be paid for the proclamation of the Gospel, and this passage from Galatians underlines the fact that Paul suffered in many ways because of his vigorous preaching of and defence of the Gospel. True, we do not know exactly whether Paul had to use someone to write his letters for him, and it is not certain what the 'stigmata' were, however, Paul was clearly a man who had suffered for the Gospel. Perhaps the Early Church was able to endure through decades and eventually centuries of persecution because its founding preachers were known to have suffered. They preached a crucified Christ, and their message became real because they preached with power from the midst of their own suffering.

Too many Christian churches, leaders, organisations and individuals have themselves organised for comfort today, and that is why people melt away from the church when trouble comes. If we were people who demonstrated triumph through suffering, then our testimony might inspire others to find strength in Jesus Christ instead of looking for churches that will answer all our personal problems. In the world of publishing, there is a phrase 'publish and be damned' which has undoubtedly contributed to the cavalier ethos of the press towards news and world affairs. I reckon the highest call of the Christian minister, priest, pastor, vicar or local preacher is this; 'preach and be persecuted'. As long as this just represents an attitude of heart and mind to accompany the presentation of God's truth through Jesus Christ by commitment, in passion, and by all means possible, then such preaching could bring renewal. The trouble with most congregations (and preachers) today, is that they know what they don't want; and they don't want trouble.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what the ending of the letter to the Galatians tells you about Paul and his state of mind.
2. How can we 'boast in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' today, and effectively proclaim the Gospel?
3. Which view of the 'stigmata' do you hold; the traditional view, or the more general view explained above. Discuss your reasons.

Discipleship

The ending of Galatians calls us back to consider the world in which we live, and in which we testify to the eternal saving love of God through Jesus Christ. It is astonishing that Paul, the Apostles, and the few people who made up the communities of the Early Church, eventually won through three centuries of persecution until Christianity was accepted within the 'known world' of the Roman Empire. By comparison, today we seem to show such little 'belief' in the faith we have been given. Try to make time to have a walk with a friend and discuss whether the many churches and Christians today make any difference to the world, and if so, what?

Final Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus, because Your grace has proved to be sufficient for all our spiritual needs. You have stayed with us on difficult paths, ministered to our broken hearts, received our worship when we have lifted You in praise, and guided us through troubled times. We depend on You, Lord Jesus, and we praise You: AMEN

Prayer

Glory be to You, Living Lord, for wherever we look, we see the evidence of the vitality of life; and the world You have created overflows with energy, vigour and vivacity. Forgive us for dwelling on the difficult and troubled things of life, and lead us to be inspired by the glorious wonder of Creation and the amazing potential of each and every day. May we always respond to what You have revealed within the created world, and trust You with all our hearts: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Christian Hope

Pray today for yourself. It is easy for hope to rise and fall within us with our moods and the various circumstances of our lives, but our hope needs to be fixed in Jesus Christ, our deliverer and redeemer. Ask the Lord to bless you with that quality of faith by which you will remain confident of the Lord's guidance and provision for your life, whatever happens. Pray for hope.

Meditation

The freshness of each magnificent day anticipates God's blessings
He gives His glorious, spiritual gifts to all who will receive Him:

The treasure of cherished moments taken to read the sacred Word;
The riches of quiet times of peace which revitalize the soul;
The opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;
The chance to be creative each day in discipleship and faith;
The challenge of sustaining work that it is important for us to do;
The excitement of always knowing that there is more to find in life;
The privilege of following Jesus our Lord, and seeking to serve the poor;
The freedom to share in prayer with others our troubles, hopes and joys;
The wonder of handing ourselves over to God for rest at the end of the day.

Is it possible for us to give adequate thanks to God for all He's done?
It is; and the more we do it each day the more we will know His peace.

Bible Study - Galatians 6:11-18

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you in my own hand! ¹² It is those who want to make a good worldly impression who are trying to force you to be circumcised, and only so that they may not face persecution for the Cross of Christ.

¹³ Not even those who are circumcised have themselves kept the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may take pride in your 'flesh'! ¹⁴ Far be it from me to boast in anything except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world! ¹⁵ Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; only a new creation. ¹⁶ As for all those who follow this rule; peace and mercy be on them, and on the Israel of God.

¹⁷ From now on, let no-one cause me any trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. ¹⁸ May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with Your spirit, dear friends. Amen.

Review

Paul's letter to the Galatians is remarkable. It was written because of the strife which had been created in the churches of Galatia because of the teaching of 'Judaisers' who wanted to draw the church back in the direction of Judaism by insisting that new (male) converts had to be circumcised. It was a torrid subject. However, the reason why this letter is in our Scriptures is because the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to respond to this problem by writing clearly and forthrightly about the meaning of salvation (see chapters 3 and 4). As he did so, Paul explained that the saving work of Jesus was unique, and that in order to be a disciple of His and a part of the Church of God the only thing required was faith. Nothing else either was required or should

be required. His argument was incredibly powerful, reasonable and spiritual, and as a consequence, the letter's words and phrases have become embedded in the language of our faith; for example, 'In Christ you are children of God through faith' (3:26), and 'Christ redeemed us ... so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (3:13,14)

The letter undoubtedly raised passions, as can be seen by the way Paul addressed the problem at the beginning of the letter (1:6f.), and in his later outburst; 'You foolish Galatians!' (3:1). Then, at the end of the letter, Paul hammered home his utter opposition to the Judaisers' teaching, and wrote in 'large letters' (6:11) as follows; 'It is those who want to make a good worldly impression who are trying to force you to be circumcised!' (6:12). In other words, their teaching had nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is some debate about what Paul meant by writing with 'large letters', and we will look at this later in the study, but there is no doubt that high emotions were aroused by the whole matter. The word 'excommunicate' had not yet been invented at the time Paul wrote, but there can be no doubt that Paul would have thrown his opponents out of the church. He would not have accepted that someone who thought it necessary to keep any part of the Jewish Law really knew the salvation of Christ.

Paul's own stance had been hammered home throughout the letter, point by point and in significantly and powerful ways, but he summarised it in these final paragraphs; 'Far be it from me to boast in anything except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (6:14). If you have read Galatians and have missed the fact that Paul argues for the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross as the necessary, unique and exclusive means of God's salvation, then you have missed the power of his arguments somewhere. Even the famous 'Fruit of the Spirit' is described by Paul as only possible for those who 'belong to Christ Jesus [and] have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.' (5:24). Christ meant everything to Paul, and as he said in this passage with considerable derogatory force, 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything.' (6:15). Paul regarded the Church as the new 'Israel of God', and having done his spiritually exhausting job of exposing false teaching, Paul signed off his letter, saying 'peace and mercy.' (6:16) to those left to carry the responsibilities of the true Churches of Galatia;

It will not have escaped your notice that Paul also said one more thing before the formal 'grace' (6:18) with which the letter concludes; 'Let no-one cause me any trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.' This is the famous reference to the 'stigmata', thought of since early times as the scars of the crucifixion, spiritually transferred to Paul as a mark of his favour in God's eyes. This is not exactly what is meant by the Greek of the letter here, but it is something we will have to look at carefully, as we go deeper.

Going Deeper

It hardly seems that we can go any deeper at this point in the letter to the Galatians! Nevertheless, there are some interesting parts to this reading which deserve a little more time, along with the issue of the 'stigmata'. The main point which we will consider is this; was obedience to the laws of Moses the only reason why the Judaisers suggested that Christians get circumcised? The matter is crucially important for the whole letter, but in this passage, there is the hint of a final twist to the subject!

Writing in a large hand

There are three places in the letters of Paul where a comment is made about the writing of the letters themselves. The first of these comes at the end of Romans, where in the midst of Paul's extended greetings to a large number of people, it says 'I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord' (Romans 16:22). The second is this passage here in Galatians in which verse 11 suggests that Paul took over from the writer of his letter to write boldly the sentence which comes next (see above, and possibly because of failing eyesight – see 4:13-15). The third is in 2 Thess 3:17 where Paul also appears to take over from another writer or copier to say, 'I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand ...'

All this has been taken to mean that Paul often did not write his own letters, but was depended upon an amanuensis (meaning someone who takes down what someone else says in dictation). However, there are reasonable explanations of why Paul said what he did in both Galatians and 2 Thessalonians which do not need us to assume he dictated the letters, so the only clear evidence for a dictated letter is that of Romans.

In the opening part of this study, I briefly hinted at what the explanation could be for Paul's comment about his writing in verse 11; and it was not the theory of an amanuensis but to do

with Paul's desire to stress what he was writing. The Greek language in Paul's day had no 'UPPER' and 'lower' case, so everything was written in capitals. This is easy to see by looking at any of the very early parchment fragments of various documents which survive from the first or second century AD. Therefore, the only way in which it was possible to emphasise something written (just we might write in capitals today as if to SHOUT in writing), was to write larger letters. Again, there is some evidence of this in ancient writing, but not to my knowledge, from the New Testament.

What Paul said in the next verse (6:12) was indeed emphatic, as I made clear in the introduction, so it is quite possible that verse 11 is simply Paul's way of making his point, rather than an indication that he took over from some other amanuensis. The whole issue of whether Paul used amanuenses is not resolved by this passage!

An ulterior motive for circumcision?

It is only natural that Paul should return to the subject of circumcision at the end of the letter. However, without going over the same issues about its significance to the law and to Judaism which we have already discussed, verse 12 gives us a clue about another factor which may have effected people's views about circumcision, and it was no small matter. The verse says, 'those who ... who are trying to force you to be circumcised ... only so that they may not face persecution for the Cross of Christ.' What was this about avoiding persecution for being a Christian, and what did this have to do with circumcision?

In the Roman Empire of the first century, the subservient people of the Empire were increasingly required to accept and practice the official 'cult' of the Emperor as a privilege of the Empire and in order to be protected by its armies. However, and as you can imagine, the Jews would not accept this, and as part of the negotiations under which Israel came under Roman rule, an exception was made for Jews throughout the Empire, which gave them an exemption from the cult of the Emperor. Therefore, in the second half of the first century when the Roman Emperor was regarded as a god, the Jews escaped any obligation to worship the Emperor, but everyone else had to.

At the time Paul wrote Galatians, in provincial cities such as Derbe in Galatia and Antioch in Pisidia and throughout the Empire outside of Jewish lands, Jews were able to worship God freely, but everyone else had to worship the Emperor whatever else they did by way of religion. Now, local Roman administrators were keen to make sure that citizens obeyed the cult of the Emperor, and the way that they knew who was Jewish and therefore exempt, was (rather crudely) by who was circumcised. You can now see that if a Jew became a Christian, a local Roman official would probably not be all that bothered about the distinction between Jew and Christian, and the person would remain exempt from the cult of the Emperor. However, if a Gentile became a Christian, they faced a problem. The message Paul preached and the salvation they received would have made it intolerable to worship the Emperor (as they had probably done before), but to refrain from so doing would lead them to facing persecution from the authorities, especially if they were not circumcised! However, if they accepted circumcision, as a means of identifying themselves with the God of Jesus' ancestors, then the problem would be solved. How easy it was for the Judaisers to argue their case, therefore, on good practical and apparently ethical grounds.

The result of all this was a serious matter. For by following Paul's teaching, the Early Church progressively cut itself off from Judaism, and without the so-called 'protection' of Judaism and its exemption from the cult of the Emperor, state persecution of Christians began in earnest towards the end of the first century, and these persecutions, particularly fierce in Rome, probably claimed the lives of both Peter and Paul. The price of glorying in the Cross of Christ (6:14,15) was the future persecution of the Church, which over its first three centuries, claimed thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of lives. But as Jesus had foretold, persecution could not be avoided if the call of the Gospel was followed in truth and purity; and as was said at the time, the church was built on the 'the blood of the martyrs'.

The stigmata

Tradition clearly holds that Paul, through mystical experiences (2 Cor 12:2f.) was the first recipient of the 'stigmata', generally defined today as the bodily marks of crucifixion, as born by Christ. However, without this tradition (which cannot easily be traced), the verse in our reading today, which is the only place where the Greek word 'stigmata' appears in the New Testament, need not mean what the tradition says at all.