

Boasting in the Cross

Galatians 6:14

Good Friday 2018

IT should strike us that Paul *boast[ed]...in the cross*. The Old Testament doesn't speak about criminals being executed this way as they were executed by stoning, but we do read in Deuteronomy 21 that dead bodies of criminals were hung on trees as warnings of what it looked like to be accursed by God. These bodies had to be taken down and buried before sunset so that the land would not be defiled (vv. 22–23). The New Testament alludes to this when it speaks of Jesus dying on a “tree” (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; 1 Peter 2:24). One way Romans crucified was by using a single upright post called a *crux simplex* that looked like a tree: “Christ became a curse for us, as it is written,” Deuteronomy 21 (Gal. 3:10). As we sang:

Extended on a cursed tree,
Besmeared with dust, and sweat, and blood,
See there, the King of Glory see!
Sinks and expires the Son of God.¹

Yet Paul *boast[ed]...in the cross*.

Although not invented by them, the Romans popularized crucifixion as a means of executing slaves, people in conquered provinces, and criminals, but rarely of citizens. This is why tradition says Peter—a non-citizen—was crucified albeit upside down, while Paul—a citizen—was beheaded. Besides

the single upright post the Romans used three other designs: two posts that looked like a capital T (*crux commissa*), two posts in the shape of an X (*crux decussata*), and two posts like a lower case t (*crux immissa*). This last is most likely what our Lord died upon as the Gospels say above him was a sign (Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19–22).² According to Roman law, Jesus would have been scourged with a *flagellum*, a whip of leather cords sometimes with rocks, metal, or glass on the ends. He would have then been forced to carry the cross beam called the *patibulum* to the place of crucifixion. He would have been stripped naked, laid on the ground, with his arms or hands tied or nailed to the cross-beam, lifted up and secured to the post. There would've been a small piece of wood (*sedile*) where he would've sat sideways to lean his bottom on to support his weight. His legs would have been bent at the knees with his ankles under his buttocks. His feet would have been tied or nailed to the post. Crucifixion was considered worse than decapitation (*decollatio*), being killed by wild animals (*damnatio ad bestias*), or being burnt alive (*crematio*).³ The Greek orator Demosthenes said it brought “a terrible calamity upon a...man.”⁴ So heinous was crucifixion that Cicero argued Roman citizens should never even have to hear the word “cross:

...the very word “cross” should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them,

but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.⁵

Yet Paul *boast[ed]...in the cross*.

But Paul's boast was not in these historical or physical details but the theological purpose of the cross. That brings us to the conclusion of his letter to the Galatian churches. Those affecting and infecting the churches called "the Judaizers" **want to make a good showing in the flesh** (v. 12). Their concern was getting Gentiles circumcised to show how many they got to join their clique. They were the equivalent of today's, "How many people go to your church? Oh, well my church has..." The Judaizers used pressure tactics: **who would force you to be circumcised** (v. 12). Earlier Paul used a similar phrase when he asked Peter, "how can you *force* the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (2:14) What was their motivation? **Only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ** (v. 12). There was pressure on Jewish Christians to make Gentile Christians more like them to make them like less like followers of Jesus and more like followers of Moses.⁶ Ironically **even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law**; why not? Because their motivation is not love, which fulfills the law; instead their motivation was selfish: **they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh** (v. 13). This was a good work they could parade before men. In Romans 2 he

berated those “who boast in the law” (v. 23). In Philippians 3 he warned of “those who mutilate the flesh” and “thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh” (vv. 2, 4). But as he said in Romans 3:27, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of world? No, but by the law of faith.” What was Paul’s boast? **But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me**—including its value system of what is boast-worthy—**and I to the world**—because it disregards me (v. 14). Two ancient preachers expressed this phrase that **the world has been crucified to me and I to the world** so beautifully. John Chrysostom said, “They are dead to me, and I to them, neither can they captivate and overcome me, for they are dead once for all, nor can I desire them, for I too am dead to them.” Ambrosiaster said, “Whoever puts all his hope in Christ will glory in his cross. The world is crucified to him because he is sure that the love of the cross of Christ is life, and the love of the world seems like death.”⁷

Notice the contrast he makes between those who boast in their accomplishments and himself: **But far be it from me**. This is the language he uses elsewhere in answer to his question, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1–2) Absolutely not! He concludes:

for neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (v. 15).

Tonight we boast in this cross of our Lord, singing in self-effacing
humility:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.⁸

I, I alone, have done the deed!
'Tis I Thy sacred flesh have torn;
My sins have caused Thee, Lord, to bleed,
Pointed the nail, and fixed the thorn.⁹

Tonight we boast in this cross of our Lord, singing in wonder of the love
that sent his for us:

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;
The slave hath sin-ned, and the Son hath suffered.
For our atonement, while we nothing heeded,
God intercedeth.

For me, kind Jesus, was thine incarnation,
Thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation;
Thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion,
For my salvation.¹⁰

The burden, for me to sustain
Too great, on Thee, my Lord, was laid;
To heal me, Thou hast borne my pain;
To bless me, Thou a curse wast made.

In the devouring lion's teeth,
Torn, and forsook of all, I lay;

Thou sprang'st into the jaws of death,
From death to save the helpless prey.¹¹

Tonight we boast in this cross of our Lord, praying that our “merciful God” would make its love known in all the world “upon all Jews, Muslims, unbelievers, and false teachers.” That he would “take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of your Word.” That he would “bring them home...to [his] flock, that they may be saved among the remnant of the true Israelites, and be made one fold under one shepherd.”¹²

With Paul we **boast...in the cross**. “And what is the boast of the Cross?”

Chrysostom asked?

That Christ for my sake took on Him the form of a slave, and bore His sufferings for me the slave, the enemy...yea He so loved me as to give Himself up to a curse for me. What can be comparable to this! If servants who only receive praise from their masters...are elated thereby, how must we not boast when the Master who is very God is not ashamed of the Cross which was endured for us. Let us then not be ashamed of His unspeakable tenderness; He was not ashamed of being crucified for your sake, and will you be ashamed to confess His infinite solicitude?

Endnotes

¹ From the hymn, “Extended on a Cursed Tree.”

² J.B. Torrance, “Cross, Crucifixion,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, N. Hillyer, D. Guthrie, A.R. Millard, D.J. Wiseman (Second edition, 1982; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, reprinted 1996), 253–254.

³ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 33.

⁴ “Against Meidias” 105 in *Demosthenes: Against Meidias, Androtion, Aristocrates, Timocrates, Aristogeiton*, trans. J.H. Vince, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 75.

⁵ “In Defense of Rabirius” 5.16 in *The Speeches of Cicero*, trans. H.G. Hodge (London: Heinemann, 1927), 467.

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (1982; repr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 269.

⁷ *Commentaries on Galatians–Philemon*, trans. and ed. Gerald L. Bray, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 33.

⁸ From the hymn, “Ah, Holy Jesus.”

⁹ From the hymn, “Extended on a Cursed Tree.”

¹⁰ From the hymn, “Ah, Holy Jesus.”

¹¹ From the hymn, “Extended on a Cursed Tree.”

¹² From the Book of Common Prayer.