



Walking the Way of the Cross with Paul

SESSION 1

The old is gone. The new is here!

Introduction

The apostle Paul has often been considered a controversial figure in early Christianity, especially in modern times. For some, he is the dynamic visionary who transformed Christianity from a Jewish sect into a universal religion; for others, he is the arrogant usurper who turned the simple spirituality of Jesus into a complex creedal religion. Some see him as a radical proponent of the idea that faith alone can act as the means of putting everyone, without distinction, on an equal footing with God; some, in stark contrast, see him as an irascible misogynist or an authoritarian despot determined to impose his will on all who wish to be saved.

Paul's own complex and sometimes contradictory writings are partly responsible for his mixed image. Yet at the heart of his difficult texts (and difficult life) was a simple but potent realization: God had sent Israel a crucified Messiah. This key recognition transformed Paul's entire understanding of God's ways and of the human response to them. It made the cross of Christ central to his unfolding of what it means to believe in God and of what it means to live a life conditioned by that belief. It placed self-sacrificing love at the foundation and the core of Paul's view of God, his own apostolic ministry, and Christian life overall.

Lent is, among other things, a journey on the way of the cross—a journey of learning how to appropriate Christ's teaching about "taking up the cross" (Mark 8:34–35) for ourselves. This six-session study will look at how one early Christian missionary, teacher, and theologian sought to do just that in his work and in his life. We will

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examine a number of passages in Paul's letters in order to reflect on the place of the cross in Christian lives today. We will consider Paul's statements about the cross and its implications not only in themselves but in relation to his practice—including areas where he seems to us to have had difficulty living up to his own ideals. The aim is to invite you into Lenten reflection and practice centered on the cross of Christ, guided by Paul's own incorporation of the cross into his spirituality. You will have an opportunity to reflect on your own practices of Christian spirituality and ethics in the light of the experience, teaching, and faith of the apostle Paul.

Some passages we will consider explicitly present Paul's cross-centered spirituality and its consequences for the lives of individuals and the church as a whole. Other passages will develop these consequences more

indirectly. In this first session, we'll look at the key theme of new creation and how it relates to the crucified Messiah. In the following sessions, we'll see how central the cross was to Paul's mission and message—how it conditioned his understanding of Jesus, how he saw the crucifixion of the Messiah as transformative for himself and all believers, and how he saw this transformation affect human relationships and behavior. As you prepare for each of these sessions, be sure to read the passages from Paul carefully and refer back to them as often as necessary.

New Creation

In Galatians 6:14–15, Paul speaks mysteriously of the world being crucified to him and he to the world. This happens, he says, by means of the cross of Christ. Paul seems to be saying that because of Jesus' crucifixion, he no longer relates to the world—the whole organized system of beings, natural and supernatural, plant and animal, and especially human beings—in the way that he once did. It is in some sense dead to him, even though he, along with everything and everyone else, goes on living.

We'll give more consideration to this puzzling declaration in session 4. For now we may note that here Paul rejects the claim that Gentile men who become Christians must be circumcised and that all Gentile converts must keep at least some parts of the Torah.¹ These requirements belong to that world to which believers are now dead. The distinction between circumcision and its absence now means nothing; all that counts is living in the "new creation."

Paul associates spiritual participation in the cross of Christ with dying out of the existing world and beginning life again in a new creation. The cross brings the believer not only to a kind of death but to a new life as well. This life is not only a matter of interior transformation and changed relationship with God but also a life visibly lived out in the material and social spheres. This visible transformation can be seen in the outlines of the new life that Paul presents as the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22–24, a crop that grows in those who have "crucified the flesh." This new life in the Spirit is lived within a framework of communal unity that transcends ethnic, social, and even gender divisions (Gal. 3:27–28, a baptismal formula). These are the ways of living that, for Paul, are implied in being "crucified to the world."

The new has come. What Paul means by "new creation" can be seen in more detail in 2 Corinthians 5:14–17. For all the complexity of this passage, Paul's fundamental realization is that out of sheer love, "one died for all." From this he concludes, first, that "all have died"—it is as if everyone has died in the death of the Messiah. Second, having thus "died," the people who do in fact go on living, do so not for themselves alone but for the one who died and was raised for them. The same kind of things Paul says about himself being "crucified to the world" in Galatians he now applies in 2 Corinthians to all human beings. They live—we live—but in a way that has been transformed because of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

In this transformed life it is no longer possible to know, regard, or understand anyone in the old manner—the manner of the world to which we, like Paul, have been crucified. Paul uses a number of terms to refer to that world. In 2 Corinthians 5:16 he uses the Greek word *sarx*, literally "flesh." Bible translations today, seeking to avoid misunderstanding, often translate *sarx* in terms of a "human" or "worldly" point of view. This is a good reminder that when Paul says "flesh," he is not just talking about the body. Consider the "works of the flesh" that are opposed to the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:16–24—not many of the actions listed in verses 19–21 are directly connected to the body. Rather, Paul uses "the flesh" as a metaphor for the self-centeredness and resistance to love for God and other people in which human beings and human societies are inclined to live. Therefore "flesh" and sin (not just particular sinful acts, but sin as a force in human life) are closely connected in Romans 7. In Romans 8 and Galatians 5, "flesh" is contrasted with the Spirit, so that the two ideas become two powers that bring about actions that are either opposed or conformed to the will of God.

According to 2 Corinthians 5:16, Paul had once evaluated even Christ in accordance with the worldview of "the flesh." By ordinary human standards, Jesus had failed. What could be a bigger failure than crucifixion for one who was supposed to be the Messiah, the liberator of God's people from such oppression? When Paul converted to the belief that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth actually was the Messiah, then everything went up for grabs. A whole new system of values and expectations, including expectations about God and God's purposes, came into play. The crucified Messiah could no longer

be understood according to the ordinary human value system that puts self-interest ahead of everything else. God's values, it now seems, are grounded in a love so unreserved that it is willing to put the good of others, even of enemies, ahead of one's own well-being, even one's own survival. Now nothing and no one can ever be looked at in the same way again.

The entire "fleshly," self-centered, and self-preserving way of life is gone; a new world has come into existence. It is not just that individuals are "born again." Many Bible translations still render 2 Corinthians 5:17 in terms of one person becoming a "new creature." But Paul has something much larger in view here: the transformation

of a new heaven and a new earth, inhabited by a human race renewed in the image of God.

When the first Christians proclaimed Jesus as Messiah (an eschatological title), they were continuing this vision but also transforming it. Their message implied that the reign of God had begun and that changed forms of human life were to be expected as a result. But if a crucified man was the Messiah, the triumphalism of eschatological hope was being turned upside-down. The Christian claims that the Messiah had come, and that resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit, and ethical renewal had happened fit in with traditional eschatological expectation. The initiation of all this by the crucifixion and resurrection of the

Messiah did not. Paul (and others) realized that belief in the crucified Messiah gave a different complexion to the entire eschatological vision. It was not just about victory and prosperity for the faithful but about suffering for the sake

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of the whole world, starting with Christian believers. The translations in the NRSV ("there is a new creation") and in *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) ("the new creation has come") capture this well. In the new creation, old social barriers are thrust aside (Gal. 3:27–28) and old patterns of living are abandoned in favor of the Spirit's impulses toward love (Gal. 5:16–24).

"The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17b, TNIV): this declaration goes to the heart of Paul's understanding of what Christianity is, of what Christian faith implies. It is new creation, the realization (at least in a preliminary form) of God's long-held desire for the world and especially its human inhabitants. This is one aspect of what theologians call "eschatology," teaching about the "end times" or the "last things." This terminology can be a bit misleading. In ancient Jewish thought, as adopted by the early Christians, this "eschatology" was not just about an end but about a new beginning. The expectation was that God would intervene in the world not only to save Israel from its enemies but to begin a new age of justice and righteousness, people living in accordance with God's desires. This is what Jesus meant by the "kingdom" or the "reign of God." The vision of the "end times" was not one of worldwide collapse and destruction, nor one of rapture to an eternity in the skies; rather, it was a vision

of others, giving up one's own interests to secure other people's good: it was about love.

The love of Christ urges us on . . . one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died so that those who live might live no longer for themselves. . . . We regard no one from a human point of view . . . in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:14–17)

The way of the cross, for Paul, is the way of new creation, a way of death that is a way of life, a way of life that is one of living and dying for others. Christ's love, grounded in God's love, is the root of it all; and the fruit is the believers' love for others.

The Mystery of God

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul is reminding the Corinthians about the nature of the gospel message he had preached to them. It was, he says, "the mystery of God." A "mystery" was something secret, oftentimes a Greek religious cult that involved special initiations into rituals and teachings that were not to be disclosed to outsiders. The Jewish sect that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls also spoke of the "mysteries of God" with reference to the secrets of destiny and the sect's own teachings.

In speaking of “mystery,” Paul emphasizes God’s hidden wisdom, something that is not open and obvious to ordinary human sight and insight, something initially known only to God. Now, however (and in stark contrast to the Greek and Essene mysteries), this mystery has been openly revealed by God’s own Spirit and is being further revealed by the gospel proclamation. What is this hidden wisdom of God, so inaccessible to ordinary human thinking? It is identical with the one thing that Paul says he kept in his awareness as he preached: “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). The possibility of a crucified Messiah was certainly something that had not crossed people’s minds before. The very fact that it goes against the grain of human thinking and expectation is what makes it clear that the crucified and risen Christ is a revelation of God’s mysterious wisdom.

Toward the end of 1 Corinthians 2, Paul speaks of “spiritual things” and “spiritual people.” “Spirituality” is a hot topic today, and this seems to be the first place in Christian literature where the word “spiritual” is used. But what does Paul mean? Most basically, by “spiritual” he means something that is associated with God’s Spirit. Hence “spiritual things” can be understood only by those who are “spiritual” (in the sense of being connected with the Spirit themselves), because these things are taught by the Spirit. To “have the mind of Christ” (2:16) is to have learned what the Holy Spirit teaches. And this brings us back around to the beginning of 1 Corinthians 2, for the mind of Christ is the mind of the crucified Christ. That is why “spiritual things” are not comprehensible to ordinary human wisdom, why they seem foolish to those who lack this Spirit, this Mind. (We will see more about the connection of wisdom and folly to the cross in the next session.) For Paul, “spirituality” is rooted in what the Holy Spirit teaches. The gifts of this Spirit are part of the eschatological activity unleashed by the sending of

God’s Messiah. Therefore what the Spirit teaches and brings about in the Christian community will always be in accord with the crucified Messiah. Paul’s spirituality is always a spirituality of the cross.

Conclusion

The crucifixion of the Messiah represents something new and radically different from standard social and cultural wisdom. It represents a whole new system of values and a whole new way of living. For Paul, Christianity is never “that old time-religion” or a timeless ethical or spiritual philosophy. It is new creation, brought into being by the unprecedented act of God in the crucified Messiah. With the coming of the Messiah, the end times have begun; but with the crucifixion of the Messiah, those end times and the new world that they usher in have taken an unexpected turn. The justice and righteousness that God has always desired from human beings comes into new focus through the lens of self-giving love, laying down one’s life for the sake of the one who laid down his life for us and for the sake of the human race that he loved so much. To walk the way of the cross is to live in this brand-new world.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. I use the Hebrew word “Torah” rather than “law” because the issue is not simply legalism or obedience to a set of rules. “Torah” means “teaching,” and the Torah is, so to speak, the owner’s manual for relationship with God under the covenant graciously given by God to the Jewish people. Torah defines what it means to live within that relationship. The applicability of this definition to non-Jews who converted to the new Jewish sect called “Christianity” was the issue that Paul was debating.