

Essays in Philippians- Enemies of the Cross

Phil. 3:18-19

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Paul was a case study in conversion. There was a time in his life when he was blinded by self-righteousness. As a result, he rejected that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. But, why? What was Paul's problem with Jesus being the Messiah? After all, wasn't Paul and the rest of Israel eagerly anticipating the Messiah?

There were many reasons why Paul and others like him rejected Jesus as the Messiah. From what we can read in the Gospels, the Jewish leadership viewed Jesus as a political threat. Jesus's popularity undermined the ruling class of Israel. However, Israel had a specific reason for their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah: the cross.

The cross of Jesus created a doctrinal dilemma for Israel. They could not reconcile their perception of the Messiah with crucifixion. For them, the cross was indisputable proof that Jesus was not the Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to have been a revolutionary figure. Jesus did not start a revolution. Jesus was killed.

The self-righteous, Judaizing teachers of Paul's day misunderstood the cross of Jesus. They had fundamentally misinterpreted the Scriptures which prophesied the purpose of the Messiah's death. This led them to militantly opposed Jesus and His followers. Notice Paul's characterization of this group: "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (Phil. 3:18-19).

What Happened at the Cross?

Like those of Paul's day, we may have misunderstandings about the cross. Why did Jesus die? Some may quickly respond, "Jesus died to save me." This is one reason why Jesus died; however, there was much more accomplished at the cross. Properly understanding the cross is crucial for the sake of our faith in God.

1. Evil was destroyed. After Jesus spoke of new life to Nicodemus, He described how evil would be destroyed by the cross. Jesus referenced the bronze serpent lifted on a pole by Moses in the wilderness. Jesus said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

Of course, the serpent is a not a symbol of the Messiah. The serpent is a symbol of evil. This historic event foreshadowed the cross of the Messiah. Evil would be raised up with Jesus on the Cross. Just like the snake-bitten Israelites had to look to the bronze serpent in faith to be healed, sinners must look to the cross of Jesus in faith to be forgiven.

2. Sin was destroyed. Paul discusses this frequently in the context of the Law of Moses. The law had several purposes. For example, in Romans chapters five and seven, we learn that the law defined, identified, and tabulated sin. Through the law, God permitted sin to abound, grow, and increase to its full strength. In other words, for generation after generation, the law made clear that sin brings death and the law could do nothing to stop it. Israel needed the cross of the Messiah.

Also, sin growing to its full strength indicates the power of sin. Over time, sin grew powerful enough to have the Messiah put to death. On the cross, God destroyed sin in the flesh of the Messiah. Paul states this in Romans chapter eight: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:1-4).

3. Death was defeated. Near the end of His life, Jesus gave a veiled reference to the consequence of His imminent death. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Paul would later use this analogy to explain the death-defeating consequences of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:36-38). New life is sown in corruption and raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power (1 Cor. 15:42-43).

In summary, the cross proved God's disgust for and power over evil, sin, and death. Additionally, the cross is a sign pointing to the future. God will hold those accountable who have colluded with the dark powers of evil, sin, and death. Therefore, we must look to the cross of the Messiah in faith that our sins might be forgiven in the hope of new life.

Conclusion

The Judaizing teachers of Paul's day refused to believe that the cross of Jesus accomplished God's purposes. Instead of trusting in the cross of Jesus, they trusted in themselves and the Law of Moses. They were focused on political objectives and self-promotion. They were effectively idolaters, serving the god of their ambition.

Sadly, their rejection of Jesus had a serious consequence. By upholding the law, they were upholding sin. They were enemies of the cross; thus, enemies of God. The cross shows what will happen to those who remain in a state of hostility towards God. Enemies of the cross shall not stand. Their end is destruction. God will be victorious.

Paul did not take pleasure in the future defeat of enemies of the cross. He wrote Philippians chapter three with tears streaming down his face (Phil. 3:18). He carried heavy sorrow in his heart for those among Israel who did not believe the Gospel (Rom. 10:1). He wanted

enemies of the cross to surrender. He wanted them to obey the Gospel and become part of God's family of faith. Perhaps one day they would, just like Paul had done.