

## Something to Brag About

### *Galatians 6: 14*

Welcome on this Independence Weekend, 2020. Yesterday we celebrated the birth of our democracy. A couple of years ago I had the privilege of meeting Lee Greenwood when he performed a concert at the Marriott Shoals. Every time I hear his song, "God Bless the USA" I get chills up my spine especially when he sings,

I'm proud to be an American  
Where at least I know I'm free,  
And, I won't forget the men who died  
Who gave that right to me.  
And I'll gladly stand up (!)  
Next to you  
And he defend her still today.  
Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land...  
God bless the USA.!

I believe it was comedian Johnny Carson who defined democracy like this: "Unlike communism, democracy does not mean having just one ineffective political party; it means having two ineffective political parties.

I thought you would like these insights that I discovered in my research this week:

***Only in America...***

***Can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance.***

***Do drugstores make the sick walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions, while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front.***

***Do people order double cheeseburgers, large fries and a DIET coke.***

***Do we leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put our junk in the garage. Hello.***

***Do we use answering machines to screen calls and have call-waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.***

***Do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.***

***People pay \$200,000 for a house and then leave it for two weeks every summer to sleep in a tent.***

We laugh to keep from crying, but we give God thanks for the many blessings we enjoy as citizens of this free land. Our topic today is "**Something to Brag About.**"

I want to begin our discussion today by telling you about something interesting that happened live on television in Great Britain sometime back. It involved a professional knife thrower. I say "professional knife thrower." That doesn't mean a perfect knife thrower.

It happened with more than a million British television viewers watching. Professional knife thrower Jayde Hanson missed his target and accidentally "nicked" his assistant. A spokeswoman for the show was rightfully disturbed. "You don't really expect that kind of thing from a world record-holder," she said.

To make matters worse, Hanson had recently bragged to a newspaper reporter that, in 11 years of performing, he had only hit his assistant on five occasions.

I'm not certain that, if you are a professional knife thrower, hitting your assistant with a knife on five occasions is something about which you ought to brag. It might make it a bit difficult in recruiting assistants in the future.

I suppose, though, that bragging or boasting is endemic to human nature. We boast about our children and our grandchildren. We boast about our work. We boast about our athletic accomplishments. We boast about the places we've been and the things we've done. On this Fourth of July Weekend, we boast about the land of our birth.

An American was staying in London. He was introduced to a man from Edinburgh, Scotland. The Scotchman asked him, "An' what country do you belong tae?" "The greatest country in the world!" replied the American. "Mon! So dae I," replied Scotsman, "but you donna speak like a Scotsman."

It's really quite human to brag about your school, about your team, about your family, your state and about your country. However, St. Paul said on one occasion that **there's only one thing worth really boasting about and that is the cross on which Jesus Christ died**. Paul writes, **"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."**

This is quite a remarkable statement for many reasons.

### **To Begin With, Paul Had Many Things About Which He Could Have Boasted.**

#### **He could have boasted about his Roman citizenship,**

for example. We think it's grand to be a citizen of this land, but imagine what it meant to be a citizen of Rome when Rome ruled most of the known world. Being a Roman citizen meant that you had special rights and privileges wherever you were in the Empire. Roman citizens could not be imprisoned without a trial nor could they be scourged or crucified. We are told that Simon Peter was crucified upside down. Paul, on the other hand, could not be crucified because he was a Roman citizen. He could have boasted about that.

Many of you boast about being a Texan and I take pride in being from Alabama but I am reminded of the bumper sticker I have seen many times, **"American by birth, a Christian by the grace of God"**.

#### **Or he could have boasted about his religious upbringing.**

Nobody had a richer background in the Jewish faith than Paul. In **Philippians 3**, he notes that he was **"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law blameless."** But then Paul adds in this same passage, **"Whichever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."(3-8).**

I was saved at five years of age, was the Alabama State Sword drill champion for two years, surrendered to preach at fifteen, pasturing at seventeen, received several awards from the SBC for being pastor of the fastest growing church in Alabama. What about you?

He could have boasted about his citizenship; he could have boasted about his religion.

**He could have boasted about his education.**

After all, Paul studied the law in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi Gamaliel (**Acts 22:3**). That's like going to Yale or Harvard for the serious student of the Jewish faith.

I treasure my seminary education at Southwestern. I set at the feet of H.C. Brown, Leon Marsh, Curtis Vaughn, Huber Drumwright, Roy Fish and Dr. Naylor. God blessed me with this experience. What about you?

Paul was a man of extraordinary credentials and extraordinary talent. He could have boasted about many things. But quite simply he writes, **"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ."** What a thoroughly remarkable statement. I agree with Paul, I have learned all of the education and experience in the world does not gain us eternal life, it is only the Cross!

**IT WAS REMARKABLE FOR ANOTHER REASON THE CROSS WAS AN INCREDIBLY OFFENSIVE SYMBOL.**

**The cross was an odd symbol for Christians to choose for the center of their altars.** A cross was a symbol of shame in those days. Criminals died on crosses not decent folk. Suppose, instead of a cross, we hoisted an electric chair and put it on our wall as a worship center? Or a gallows? Or an IV bag, in honor of lethal injection! Can you imagine an enormous replica of an IV bag from the hospital hanging where the cross is? No wonder Paul writes in **I Corinthians 1 that the cross is foolishness to both the Jews and the Greeks.**

**I said that Paul could not be crucified because he was a Roman citizen.**

The Romans considered death on a cross far too cruel for their own citizens. Indeed, sophisticated Romans considered crucifixion barbaric. It was the extreme form of punishment imposed by Roman law for the execution of slaves, criminals, and revolutionaries. That Jesus was crucified like a common criminal would not endear him to the proper people of the Roman world.

**As for Jews, the cross was an object of shame for two reasons.**

**First** of all, the very fact that the Romans used crucifixion to execute thousands of Jews during the conquest of their land meant **it was a symbol of revulsion**. It was a symbol of repression like the ovens of Auschwitz are today. There was good reason for the Jews to revile anything Roman, especially the symbol of the cross.

But there was a **second reason** it would be difficult for the Jews to accept the cross. **The Jews connected crucifixion to a passage in Deuteronomy** that reads like this: **"If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." (21:22-23)**

Did you get that? For the Jews, to hang on a tree did not mean you were the Savior of the world. Rather it meant that you were under a curse from God. It's utterly amazing that Christians would adopt the cross as the symbol of the faith.

There are not many people who revile the cross today, of course. Indeed, what concerns me is that not many people today take the cross that seriously. We see a cross hanging around people's necks, but how much power does it exercise in their lives? Do they understand that the cross signifies salvation from sin? Most people today don't even consider themselves to be sinners. Nowadays we make mistakes, not sins. Would somebody die on a cross to save us from mere mistakes? I don't think so. Maybe it would be good if the cross was reviled today. At least it would mean that it was taken seriously. It's remarkable that Paul would pray that he might boast about only one thing the cross of Jesus Christ.

## **IT IS A SIGN OF HOW SERIOUSLY PAUL TOOK THE CROSS.**

Maybe we are blasé about the meaning of the cross, but that cannot be said about Paul. He was passionate on this one subject more passionate, perhaps than anyone who has ever lived. What did the cross mean to Paul that made him so passionate about it?

### **First of all, it meant salvation.**

How much does God love us? Look at the cross and you will see. How desperate is our situation without Christ? Look at the cross and you will see. When Paul looked at the cross, he saw God's love poured out. He saw his sins forgiven. He saw that he had been set free from both sin and death.

A woman named Kim Drake wrote to *Reader's Digest* sometime back to say that her mom was getting swamped with calls from strangers. The reason? A medical billing service had launched an 800 number that was identical to hers.

When she called to complain, they told her to get a new number.

"I've had mine for twenty years," she pleaded. "Couldn't you change yours?" They refused, so Kim's mom told the billing service, "Fine. From now on I'm going to tell everyone who calls that their bill is paid in full."

The billing company got a new number the next day.

When St. Paul looked at the cross he saw his bill paid in full. He knew he could never satisfy the demands of the law. He was a sinner, just as you and I are sinners. But the cross had set him free. For Paul, the cross meant salvation.

### **The second thing the cross meant to Paul was a changed life.**

Notice his words: **"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."** When St. Paul looked at the cross, he did not see only Christ crucified, he also saw his old nature crucified. The man he had been legalistic, judgmental, even cruel.

In a sense Paul had been a first century terrorist. Remember, he was with the mob that stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death. He held Stephen's robe. How is that any different from modern day Islamists who cry out, "Death to the infidels"? Paul was willing to put people to death simply because they did not believe what he believed. Paul was surely horrified at what he had been. At the same time, however, he knew in his heart that that man no longer existed. In the theological language of some Christians, he had not only

been saved, but he had been sanctified. That is, his debt had not only been paid to God, but he had been transformed inwardly.

More than anything else in the world, St. Paul wanted to know God and be known by God. That's what salvation really is. Some people think of salvation as a ticket to heaven. Friends, heaven is just an added bonus. The important thing is to know God and to be known of God. In Paul's rich understanding of our faith, this was made possible only by the cross.

Bible teacher Beth Moore tells the story of a woman named Donna. Donna was a missionary to South America. Donna was not like most missionaries who were invariably polished, clean and very, very good and proper. Donna had had a rough life. She didn't feel very good about herself.

One day Donna watched weavers working to produce a beautiful new rug. The first thing the weavers did was to shear the sheep. Then, with a detergent they washed the fresh wool. Then the weavers sorted the wool into two piles. Over here was a small pile of perfect white wool. The weavers would take that perfect white wool and weave it just as it was.

But over in another area lay a pile of flawed, tarnished, stained wool. The weavers took the flawed wool and dyed it many colors. Then, with great skill, they began weaving the flawed wool. Weaving 60,000 knots every square meter they took that newly dyed wool and produced magnificent wool rugs.

"All of a sudden Donna scarred, stained, flawed, never living up to her own expectations said to herself, that's what God can do for me." She suddenly saw that God could take all her flaws, all her stains, all her impurities and make the dye that would turn her life into something beautiful. That transforming dye was the blood which Jesus Christ shed on the cross.

Paul looked at the cross and he saw Christ dying for the sins of the world, but he also saw there the man Paul had used to be crucified as well. He had become a new person in Christ Jesus. His flawed, scarred life had been transformed. We never want to forget that element in our faith, the element of a changed life.

In the United States, we have a nickname for tow trucks. We call them "wreckers." However, in England they're not called wreckers. In England tow trucks have one big name on the side of each truck "Recovery."

"Isn't that interesting?" "The same vehicle, the same function, but a totally different perspective. We say, 'There goes a wrecker.' They say, 'Here comes recovery.'"

**The cross is all about recovery.** Paul knew that, because he was one whose life had been recovered and radically changed.

**And so, there was only one thing about which Paul boasted though he could have boasted about many things. It was the cross upon which Christ died.** The cross was an offensive symbol to the world, but to Paul it was everything. He knew that without the cross he would have been lost.

What does the cross mean in your life? Does it mean salvation? Does it mean a changed life? Or is it merely a decoration, a trinket on a necklace? What is it about which you boast?

Be proud to be an American but boast about the Cross that provides salvation and a changed life.