

The Testing Of Our Faith!

Galatians 6:17 [NIV] “... I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.”

The Greek word translated “marks” is “stigma” a tattoo – distinguishing mark that shows ownership of an animal or slave.

Paul was applying this mark [stigma] to the wounds and scars that came from persecution.

2 Corinthians 11:23-25 [NIV] “Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,”

Paul accepted that he was a slave owned by Jesus Christ.

The same Greek word is synonymous with the word “skandalōn” meaning “offence”.

[We get the English word “scandal” from this Greek word].

1 Corinthians 1:23 [NIV] “but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block [Greek “skandalōn”] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,”

What we believe and preach is offensive to many people.

Galatians 5:11 [NIV] “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been abolished.”

To many the cross of Jesus was and is offensive. Related to the painful death of the worst of criminals, in the days when Christ was on earth. Today, because of the hypocritical history of those who called themselves Christians, it is an offence to those who follow Islam and other related religions.

By nature we all try to avoid a stigma or what will cause offence.

We naturally like to please people to be well thought of, so we avoid any kind of stigma that causes offence in others.

Acts 5:41 [NIV] “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”

Peter and John did **not** try to avoid the stigma of the cross, but counted it a blessing to be persecuted for preaching Christ and Him crucified.

Saving faith or achieving faith is always linked with the stigma of the cross.

Hebrews 11:6 [NIV] “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

It was the faith of all mentioned in this “faith chapter” that brought on their persecution. Their faith was a stigma, an offence, to others without that faith in God.

Believing and achieving faith will always bring on us the persecution from others.

Why is the study important?

- 1 As we have already seen in other studies on various aspects of faith, we must be prepared to move out of our “*comfort zone*”.
- 2 Achieving faith brings with it the risk of being misunderstood because of our diligence and total surrender of our own will to that of God’s Will.
- 3 If we desire the special anointing of the Holy Spirit we have to accept the stigma that comes with it, and the accompanying persecution. The greater the anointing the greater the stigma and the suffering.
- 4 Those in the history of Christianity who bore the stigma are also those who were honoured by God.
- 5 The One who bore the greatest stigma was Jesus Christ, but He was the One who had the greatest achieving faith in His physical life with us on earth.

We can be persecuted by a needless stigma

Acts 7:23-29 [NIV] *“When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being ill-treated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defence and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realise that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’ ‘But the man who was ill-treating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.”*

Moses tried to endear himself to his people before God had prepared him for the task of saving God’s people from slavery. This action brought on a stigma because of their misunderstanding of his motives.

John 16:8-9 [NIV] *“When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me;”*

Before the Holy Spirit prepares the minds of people our attempts to bring them to repentance will be a stigma and bring persecution on us.

Romans 8:14 [NIV] *“because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”*

We have to follow the lead of Holy Spirit **not** try to dictate what path His is to take, the Holy Spirit is Sovereign.

1 Peter 4:15 [NIV] *“If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.”*

Note the word “*meddler*”.

1 Peter 1:13-14 [NIV] *“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.”*

Our task is to be fully prepared by the Holy Spirit until the time we are ready for the Holy Spirit to use us.

1 Peter 3:15 [NIV] *“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,”*

First be prepared then be ready and that includes the bearing of the stigma, the mark showing we are a bond slave of Jesus Christ.

Are we prepared to give a true testimony and willing to accept the stigma?

For God to use us through a greater anointing of the Holy Spirit we must be prepared, through studying and accepting God’s Word, and be willing to suffer the trial that bearing the stigma [mark] of a bond slave of Christ will bring.

Disillusionment can be a stigma for us

1 Samuel 1:10-11 [NIV] *“In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow, saying, “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.”*

Samuel’s early life was dictated by the vow made by his mother Hannah to God if He healed her barrenness.

Samuel grew up in awe of Eli, the priest of Israel, but Eli was not the best of examples tolerating his sons’ wickedness.

1 Samuel 3:1-9 [NIV] *“The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he ran to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ So he went and lay down. Again the LORD called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ ‘My son,’ Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ Then Eli realised that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.”*

God chose to bypass the normal channels of divine communication and spoke directly to Samuel.

Samuel had to learn that *“the best of men are at best men”*.

Disillusionment over the imperfections of a leader can cause some to go astray. But not Samuel, for he learned to look beyond the physical human being to the God who had placed them in the position of leadership.

The stigma of standing alone and learning to not take rejection personally

1 Samuel 8:7 [NIV] *“And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”*

Israel demanded to be like other nations around them and have a king.

Samuel from bitter experience knew the problems this would bring.

But Samuel showed graciousness and worked hard to find them the best man possible to be their king.

This graciousness was the key to Samuel’s anointing by God.

1 Samuel 3:19 [NIV] *“The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.”*

As a result of the gracious attitude God powerfully used Samuel in his day and on through history, as an example for us also.

The stigma of breaking with the movement God was in yesterday but not today

1 Samuel 16:1 [NIV] *“The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”*

Saul was Samuel’s personal discovery but after Saul had disobeyed God, Samuel had to follow God not Saul.

Such a move is not an easy thing to do.

We become attached to people, places and things.

But if what God was in yesterday does not move forward following the lead of the Holy Spirit we must make a choice.

To stay with the old or move on with the Holy Spirit, moving out of our “*comfort zone*” and accept the stigma such a move brings from those we worshipped with before.

“It is the task of every generation to discover in which direction the Sovereign Redeemer is moving, through the work and lead of the Holy Spirit, then move in that direction.”

[Quotation: Jonathan Edwards]

The stigma of moving out of our comfort zone

1 Samuel 16:2 [NIV] *“But Samuel said, “How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me.” The LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’”*

This was a very awkward and dangerous situation, anointing one man to be king, when there was still another king on the throne.

1 Samuel 16:11-13 [NIV] *“So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?” “There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered, “but he is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.” So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; he is the one.” So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.”*

Samuel was not able to please Jesse or his seven older sons when God made him anoint David. David was the person whom we all would have said was the least likely candidate for the job of king.

The stigma of being tomorrow’s anointed man or woman

David was misunderstood by his family.

David’s own father did not include David in the “line-up” for anointing by God until God’s representative insisted his inclusion.

1 Samuel 17:28 [NIV] *“When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle.”*

David’s brothers thought David was conceited and out of place.

David was underestimated by the establishment.

1 Samuel 17:33 [NIV] *“Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth.”*

King Saul initially rejected David’s offer to fight Goliath.

1 Samuel 17:38-40 [NIV] *“Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armour on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. “I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.”*

Then the king tried to make David do the job in the established method instead of the way God had trained David to win battles for Him.

Charles Spurgeon was rejected by Regent’s Park College.

G. Campbell Morgan was rejected by the Methodist Church.

Sometimes leaders cannot recognise the anointing of the Holy Spirit or the gifting of the Holy Spirit in tomorrow’s man or woman.

The stigma of being hated by the establishment

1 Samuel 18:6-8 [NIV] *“When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. “They have credited*

David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?”

Killing Goliath was the best and worst thing that David could have accomplished.

David became an instant hero of the people but a threat to the establishment.

1 Samuel 18:12 [NIV] *“Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with David but had left Saul.”*

Saul’s personal hatred of David overtook his concern for the real enemy, the Philistines.

A church can be so concerned with the maintaining of the establishment that it becomes distracted from its real job of overcoming evil with good.

Romans 12:21 [NIV] *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

As this chapter tells us, we do this by total surrender to God and personal expression of God’s Love in us in our day-to-day living.

Revelation 12:10-11 [NIV] *“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”*

The tools we are to use to accomplish God’s Work:

- a) The blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ
- b) Our own living sacrifice as a testimony for good

The stigma of having to wait on God for the time when He will use us

1 Samuel 16:13 [NIV] *“So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.”*

David was given an anointing but no crown of rulership.

The anointing was a secret known only by a few people.

The anointing was an inward anointing of preparation with no “platform” on which it could be seen by all the nation.

David after the anointing had to wait for 20 years of trial and preparation before God used him.

The stigma of standing alone

1 Kings 17:16-18 [NIV] *“For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to*

Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

We can be misunderstood by the very people we have been a blessing to.

Elijah overcame by his “*stand alone*” the challenge of the prophets of Baal, but then had to flee for his life.

God was his only help and comfort.

Daniel 3:14-18 [NIV] *“and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

These three brave men stood alone against the establishment to the point of certain death before the god they believed and trusted intervened.

Their stigma was refusing to worship anything other than the true God.

The stigma of an unpopular message

Matthew 3:1-2 [NIV] *“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*

The call to a radical change in our lifestyle. This was really departing from our “*comfort zone*”.

Matthew 3:5-6 [NIV] *“People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.”*

Only the ordinary people responded, most had little of this world’s goods to lose, and a vision of a new society had great appeal to them.

Matthew 3:7-8 [NIV] *“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”*

This was a message that the establishment did not like at all. They looked on it as an attack on their position of authority.

Matthew 5:17-20 [NIV] *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Jesus’ interpretation of the law pleased nobody.

Jesus' message was unpopular with:-

- a) Those who wish the law was abolished
- b) The Sadducees who made a living by the law
- c) The Pharisees who held only the outward letter of the law
- d) Jesus required personal righteousness that was beyond the keeping of the letter of the law

Matthew 5:21-22 [NIV] *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”*

Hate became murder.

Matthew 5:27-28 [NIV] *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

Lust became adultery.

All the above are messages that are very hard for our natural human nature to accept.

The stigma of righteousness by faith alone and salvation available to all people

Acts 22:21-22 [NIV] *“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!”*

To Jews the sharing with their religion and God with Gentiles was a stigma.

Acts 2:23 [NIV] *“This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”*

That their Messiah should be murdered like the lowest of criminals was to Jews a stigma.

Romans 4:9-12 [NIV] *“Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”*

To the Jews, for a person to be saved without first becoming a Jew was a stigma to Jews who considered they alone were God’s people.

Many modern religions insist that we can have no hope of salvation without first joining their group and abiding by their rules.

The stigma of accepting Christ's death and His righteousness as a substitute to our own works of righteousness

Isaiah 53:1-3 [NIV] *“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”*

The rejection of Jesus was prophesised 600 years before He came to earth.

Isaiah 53:4-6 [NIV] *“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

Only faith in this prophesised death of the Messiah will free us from the death penalty the breaking of God's Law has earned us.

Such faith in Jesus Christ is a stigma to us all in two major ways.

- 1) We totally lose control of our destiny. All our hopes rely on what was done by another, Jesus our Saviour.
- 2) We are humbled by this total dependency. Our ego is shattered for all time. Our human nature rebels against both of these facts.

1 Corinthians 2:2 [NIV] *“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”*

Paul understood this but had to **resolve** to accept this truth and nothing else.

Are we willing to bear the stigma of Jesus Christ, the sign to all who come to know us that we are bond slaves of our Saviour, the soon-coming King of kings and Lord of lords?

Bare this mark with pride.