

Oxford, GA. February 11, 2018

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The Power of the Cross

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 1. As you are turning there, let me tell you a story.

On June 14, 1940, after just 46 days of fighting, Paris fell into the hands of Nazi Germany. Three days later, France surrendered their arms to Hitler. Hitler's next target: Britain. On June 18, 1940, Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill spoke to the House of Commons to recall the events in France and prepared the British people for the reality that they would soon be standing alone in the sights of what seemed like an unstoppable German force. I want to read to you the last few lines of Churchill's speech:

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us.

Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'

History tells us that Churchill was right. The Battle of Britain was the largest air battle the world has ever seen. The Germans were expecting a quick victory like France but were met with heavy

resistance from Britain. For three months, the air raid sirens sounded as Britain held their own and dealt Hitler his first major defeat of the war. What seemed like the darkest day for Britain turned out to be their brightest hour.

There was another, more significant day in history that by all accounts and reasoning was the darkest day – Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, God incarnate, crucified on a hill outside of Jerusalem for six hours one Friday. But that dark day turned out to be the brightest event in the history of the world as death was crushed to death and the redemption of humanity was purchased through the precious blood of Jesus.

I want to talk with you today about the Power of the Cross, and to do so I want us to hear from God through His Word.

READ TEXT

We have just read one of the most pivotal passages that validates our hope in Jesus. We have just read of God's work to redeem his people through judging this age filled full of disharmony and unbelief that has held us captive. God demonstrated the wisest and greatest power the world had ever seen by the Cross. God has taken the sharp tip of death and through a cross and three nails beat death's spear into a plowshare as through the death of the Son we have our victory!

I want to give you 4 truths under two major headings from this passage as together we delight in the power of the Cross.

1. Only the Cross Has the Power to Save

There is no other event in the world that can come close to the Cross of Christ. When we say events, we may be prone to think about a list of the events that have changed the world. Events like WW2, the invention of the printing press, whoever decided to put jelly on a biscuit, but I want to challenge us to think broader. The Son of God slain on a Cross at the hands of sinners like you and me puts every other event in the history of the world in perspective. Even creation,

that incredible time where God spoke something out of nothing as light pierced the darkness, does not make sense outside the Cross of Christ. The Bible says that Christ is the lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). What that means is the Cross has always been the plan of God. When God decided to create the world, in the way that he created the world, he knew that if he created it this way it would mean that the Son would have to come and die a cruel death at the hands of sinful men. The most astonishing fact of reality is that of all the possible ways God could have chosen to create, he chose to create in the way that he did. Why? One word, one reason – Love! How, according to Scripture, did God demonstrate his love for us? Creation? Sure, but that doesn't grab our attention like the Cross. What does the Bible say? Romans 5:8, *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* We know love of God, are convinced of the love of God because of the Cross. We could read 1 John 4:10 here too. John says, *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

If there were a wiser or better way, a stronger and more powerful way, to demonstrate his love for us, God would have done it. But the fact is, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son* (John 3:16).

But, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians:

a) The Message of the Cross is Contrary to the World

Look back at verse 17. Paul is developing two contrasts between verse 17 and 18. Underscore *word* in each verse. *Words of eloquent wisdom* in verse 17 and *Word of the cross* in verse 18. Paul is writing his letter to a church that has problems because they have lost their focus. They are trying to see eternal things by looking through a keyhole. Paul wants to give them the right way to view things, and the right way is through the Cross.¹ The cross both changes and challenges the way that we see reality. I like what one commentator said. Paul is saying in effect, Who would have ever dreamed this plan up? “Only God is so wise to be so foolish. Furthermore,

¹ We could say *propter-crucis* – through the cross (or crucifixion). Excruciating (Latin) means “from the cross” - *ex* – out of; *crucis* – cross.

look at [the recipients of the gospel]. You! Who in the name of wisdom would have chosen you to be the new people of God? (1:26-31) Finally, remember my own preaching. Who in the name of wisdom would have come in such weakness? Yet look at its results” (2:1-5).²

Look at verse 18. Of all the classifications that we place upon ourselves, rich or poor, white or black, educated or uneducated, the Cross of Christ divides humanity into two categories: *Those who are perishing* and *Those who are being saved*. Look at the way those are written in our English. I’m reading the ESV and these translators have done a great job conveying the tense of the Greek. These are present active participles. The two types of people are those who are already perishing, and those who are already being saved. The perishing has already begun and will continue until something intervenes to stop the bleeding. Something has definitively happened to save humanity – the Cross of Christ.

The death and resurrection of the Son of God has brought about the dawning of a new age – a new age where the present age in all of its so-called wisdom is passing away and the new of God’s kingdom is breaking through. And, remember, the way that God has chosen to decisively defeat death is through the death of Jesus! Humanity could have never come up with this plan. History is filled with examples of humanities formation of saviors. Just consider in the Corinthians day the mighty Hercules or Zeus. The Cross stands audaciously opposite of these saviors in every way – intent, foundation, wisdom, and power.

Paul determines to hold the audacity of the cross before the Corinthians. We might think that Paul would choose as the foundation of his message the resurrection. The triumph of the empty tomb is what came before – Christ on a cross. The cross of Christ is exactly what Paul says is the display of the power and wisdom of God. Think about the Cross for just one moment. The reality of the cross is that Jesus was rejected by his own people, betrayed by one closest to him, deserted by the rest of his disciples, condemned to die as a common criminal. It was reported that he healed the lepers, caused the blind to see, raised the dead, and yet he was powerless to prevent

² Gordon Fee, *NICNT*, 67.

his own crucifixion. It is the crucified Christ that becomes the point of Paul's preaching. Preaching a crucified Christ doesn't minimize the resurrection, it amplifies it.

One theologian said it this way, "The cross was repugnant to ancient sensibilities and assailed the world's self-centeredness and self-destructive ways. It was not yet the old rugged cross sentimentalized in hymns, embalmed in stained-glass windows, perched on marble altars, or fashioned into golden charms."³

Paul preached Christ crucified because the only way to know Christ is through the cross. Christ said, *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) As Jesus would later say, *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* (John 12:32)

And he has drawn us to himself. Which is the reason:

b) The Message of the Cross is Consistent to the Believer

Contrary to the world, consistent to the believer. Remember, according to verse 18 there are two types of people – the ones who are perishing and the ones being saved. What is the difference between the two? The Cross of Christ. We are being saved because of God's call (verse 24) and our belief (verse 21). Left to ourselves we would have never believed in a crucified savior as the place to depend our eternity upon. We are prone to self-glorification and idolatry but the cross is the antidote to both of these tendencies.

By Christ's cross, God has taken an image of bondage and tyranny and turned it into the greatest symbol of freedom! God has taken an image that the world despises and made it into the only image capable of saving – God on a Cross dying for the sins of the ones he created. If you find this truth lovely, if this truth is like air to your lungs then understand that you didn't arrive here on your own. You didn't just come upon the Cross of Christ and say, "I think I will embrace that

³ David Garland, *BECNT*, 61.

view of things today.” If you believe you do so by the mighty work of the Spirit of God. Only those whom God begins a work are those who will ever find something so despised a thing of such astounding beauty.

The Cross is so incredible that once you see the love, wisdom, and power of God on display it can never be unseen. Better yet, once you see the Cross of Christ you, for the first time, begin to see reality as it truly is. You say, what do you mean if you see the Cross of Christ you see reality? God on a Cross confronts us with eternity, and once you brush up against eternity you then discover the reason for existence. No eternity, no reason for existence, but the message of Christianity – God crucified not just at the hands of sinful humanity but for the sake of humanity.

Do you see what God has done through the Cross? The message of the Cross is a message proclaimed that provides a point of focus for a world spinning out of control. The whole world is and spinning and moving, but getting nowhere fast. Scripture says the wisdom of this world is nothing more than chasing wind. God has shown us eternity through the Cross of Christ. How amazing! Even the phrase *Christ crucified* sounds like a contradiction in terms. *Messiah* has regal appeal. This is the King coming to be the King of Kings. *Crucified* means defeat, humiliation, weakness. This is madness in the world’s terms. But thankfully when we look to the Cross we aren’t dealing in the world’s terms, we are dealing with the wisdom and power of God.

God has left us with two options: Trust his wise foolishness and be saved, or trust our foolish wisdom and be lost for eternity.

Is there message wiser, more powerful than Christ crucified? No. So here is the challenge. Once we all agree that only the Cross has the power to save

2. Determine to Proclaim the Message of the Cross

There was an occasion behind Paul’s writing to the Corinthians. They were distracted. Look at verse 17. Their distraction wasn’t with something bad. They were having a religious

conversation. “I was baptized by Apollos.” It wasn’t as if baptism wasn’t important but baptism becomes insignificant without the Cross.

Oxford Baptist, don’t get distracted by good things when God has given you the best thing – Christ crucified. In the search for your next pastor, in the way ministries are managed, when strategies are formed, remember that only one message has the power to save. When you are going through your religious devotions, when you are praying, reading your Bible, ministering to others, coming to church, don’t substitute the message of the cross with your own foolish wisdom. Instead trust the wise foolishness of God – the power of the Cross.

Remember verse 22-24. Just as there are two kinds of people there are two kinds of idolatries in our fallen world: The longing for power and the quest for wisdom. Standing above all of these is Christ. When Oxford, and I am talking to the people who fill the pews this AM, makes her decisions in the upcoming days, weeks, and years, choose to live by this verse:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16-17)