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SUMMARY

The meaning of Jesus' death on a cross is lost on many today—even in the church. Although bold cinematic depictions of its utter cruelty may shock some into a deeper grasp of its horror, the “word of the cross” is much more than a testimony of great suffering and the death of an innocent man. Jesus' death on the cross is about the Creator of heaven and earth who made human beings in God's own image making possible our “righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (1 Cor 1:30) Still, Jesus' death—like all death—is hard to face. Indeed, there is a natural aversion to dwelling upon Jesus' crucifixion. We want to look away, and many ignore it altogether or choose instead to focus on other aspects of Jesus' life or their own. But Paul insists that faithfulness depends upon keeping the cross of Christ in sight.

In this Session, we will see how Paul builds on his opening call for unity and continues to expose the foolishness of arrogance in the community of faith (1:18-4:21). He shows that the gospel centers on what God has done for us all through the cross of Christ and that it has power to save individuals and communities. Paul makes the case that Christianity is not a philosophy or mystery religion promoting wisdom and success. Rather, the church of Jesus Christ is a living sign of God's redeeming presence and power at work in the world (1:18-2:5). Moreover, true wisdom and strength are not human accomplishments at all—they are gifts of God administered through the Spirit by faith for faith (2:6-16). For Paul, the crucified Christ is the crux of life .

Basic Bible References

Isaiah 29:13-14

1 Corinthians 1:18-2: 16

Supplementary Bible References

Psalms 33

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Word List

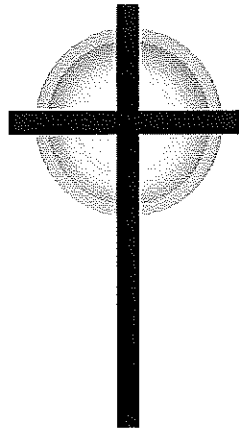
Kerygma

Moria

Skandalon

Sanctified

Wisdom (sophia)



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WHAT WISDOM IS THE CROSS!

Wisdom, Foolishness, and the Crucified Christ

Read **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**. We live in a world that places great value on appearances and power, which means the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified will always be problematic. No matter how it might be construed by artists or seen in one's own mind, any authentic image of Jesus dying on a cross cannot look good and will always cry of powerlessness. It is an utterly gruesome and degrading form of execution. Indeed, the great Roman statesman Cicero called it the "cruellest, most hideous of punishments," and the Hellenized Jewish historian Josephus called it the "most wretched of deaths." The Roman government, in fact, spared its own citizens from crucifixion's unspeakable horrors and shameful humiliation except for the crimes of treason and desertion. The Romans used it often, however, in warfare, against rebellious inhabitants of the empire, and to control its massive slave population. By Jesus' day, crucifixion was commonly called the "slave's punishment."

No wonder the gospel met such resistance. What kind of god would endure the shame and powerlessness of the cross? Where is there any wisdom in Jesus' crucifixion? How can divine power be found in human weakness? From the world's perspective, the "message about the cross" is utter nonsense. Paul describes this view with the Greek word *moria*, which is often translated as "foolishness" or "folly" but from which English derives the words "moron" and "moronic." Evidently, since Paul is addressing fellow Christians here, there are some in the church who share this worldly view and have distanced themselves from the Crucified Christ, wanting to keep Jesus' terrifying, bloody self-sacrifice on the cross far behind them. Paul insists, however, that faithfulness depends on keeping the "word of the cross" at the forefront of one's life and in sight at all times.

Paul grounds his position in the Scriptures where the prophet Isaiah utters God's own judgment upon humankind's trust in human wisdom and cleverness. This is precisely the situation in Corinth. Wisdom in the Greco-Roman context refers both to the display of superior knowledge and the capacity to express it eloquently, abilities that were highly prized in the ancient world even as they are today, and many Corinthian Christians are apparently measuring faithfulness—theirs and others—by such standards. Over against such “wisdom,” Paul utters the words of Isaiah to remind the faithful that appearances do not always reflect the truth. Indeed, the lines preceding this prophetic conclusion read: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, and while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so . . . the wisdom of their wise shall perish . . .” Read **Isaiah 29:13-14**.

Paul asserts on prophetic grounds that humans cannot save themselves through trusting in human knowledge and eloquence. Indeed, anyone who idolizes human wisdom is already being destroyed.¹⁵ As Paul sees it, the Corinthian Christians' elevation of speech and knowledge—their adulation of their age's intellects, writers, and orators—is presently being judged by God, because the factions in their community show that their hearts are far from God. They are more interested in prestige and power than humility and service. But the cross exposes every proud status-seeking heart for what it is, and through the lens of the cross Paul is able to see the truth of their widespread self-importance that lies behind the disunity it has spawned.

God has revealed another kind of wisdom through the cross of Jesus, one that overturns the wisdom of the world. God is not to be found through exercises of cognitive gymnastics or the accumulation of knowledge. Rather, God's wisdom comes through God's self-revelation upon a cross in an utterly humiliating and powerless death. Yet Jews are seeking signs of God's power through a prophet like Moses, or a king like David, which is understandable given centuries of domination by foreign powers. And Greeks are seeking knowledge, understanding, and powerful speech through disciplined learning. God's Messiah, then, should exhibit either powerful signs of God's favor and worldly dominion for the Jews or be the epitome of a wise and eloquent sage for the Gentiles. Thus the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified is “a stumbling block (*skandalon*) to Jews and foolishness (*morion*) to Gentiles” (v. 23). It is foolishness to Gentiles because they believe no self-respecting, powerful god would tolerate such humiliation and powerlessness. It is a scandal to Jews because the Law declares that God's curse is upon anyone who hangs from a tree—is crucified (Deut 21:22-23). The

crucifixion of the Messiah Jesus, though, overturns both common sense and the Jewish Law that has become in part “a commandment of men” (Isa 29:13), because God raised Jesus from the dead.

Curiously, Paul does not move to the resurrection of Jesus at this point but stays focused resolutely upon Jesus’ crucifixion. He will get to the risen Christ, to be sure, but it appears that Jesus’ death on the cross was an obstacle—perhaps even an embarrassment—to the Corinthian Christians in a way that Jesus’ resurrection was not. Paul therefore asserts the saving power of God at work through the cross and stresses the paradoxical nature of God’s saving grace through Jesus’ death. The cross overturns all human values. Human assessments of power, status, wisdom, authority, and security are all overthrown by the Messiah’s death. Yet from Jesus’ death arises a new order of living in relationships with God and neighbor, even creation itself.

Paul reminds them of the radical equality and unity they enjoyed when they first embraced the good news of the gospel, how the word of the Crucified Christ exposes and conquers sin’s divisive power. “Not many of you were wise by human standards,” Paul writes, “not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” The gospel cut across the social barriers of Corinth and humbled them all, so that no one could boast of their own wisdom, power, or status. Humility through trust in Jesus Christ formed the common ground of their saving faith and their new kind of community. Moreover, the Crucified Jesus Christ continues to be the source of every believer’s life, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. For this reason, believers may boast only in the Lord, which is to say that humility is essential to authentic Christian living.

The message (*kerygma*) of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” is crucial to the gospel, and it can only be ignored at grave peril to the believer and the community of faith. Thus Paul’s preaching centered on Jesus Christ’s shocking death on a cross and how it breaks sin’s dominating power of perversion over us.¹⁶ For Paul, the gospel is foremost “reality speech,” not flamboyant sophism. As such, it confronts and exposes human sinfulness, but it also declares centrally God’s saving act in Jesus’ death. Human words and knowledge cannot improve upon the gospel;¹⁷ neither can ostentatious packaging. Faithful preaching is not a show, and neither is it an act of self-flattery or self-promotion, acknowledged or not. Rather, a “testimony to Christ” is a matter of getting out of the gospel’s way so that the power of

¹⁶ See Gal 3:1

¹⁷ Cor 2:1; also Gal 1:6-9

God may flow freely to all who would hear. In faithful preaching, God's saving act in Jesus is central and listeners encounter through the Spirit the love and grace of God. Here lies the power of God and the wisdom of God, the Good News who is Jesus Christ crucified for us.¹⁸

Wisdom's True Revealer

Read **1 Corinthians 2:6-16**. Like a seasoned sailor in rough seas, Paul now shifts his tack in the headwinds of the Corinthians' pride. He pivots about and appeals to their esteem of wisdom, soon to expose further the ridiculousness of their position. Using language that likely belonged to many of them, words like "wisdom" (*sophia*) and "mature" (*teleioi*), Paul addresses from a different angle anyone who is worshiping wisdom and elevating outward signs of spirituality over inner ones, persons who are presuming themselves superior in matters of faith and practice, deeming others inferior. He approaches their egos with an offer of secret, hidden wisdom, which is precisely what they want, but the wisdom he offers is more of the wisdom of the cross and how true wisdom comes.

First, Paul says that the wisdom of the cross is not of human origin. He says it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age. Paul here is drawing a sharp line between our present age and the age of the Lord that is coming. He is saying that the wisdom of the cross is not considered wise in this old age; it is wise, however, in the new age of God. The wisdom of this old age will be brought to nothing and is doomed to perish, but the wisdom of the new age of the Lord is eternal.

Secondly, Paul says that God's purpose from the foundation of creation is that the word of the cross would be "for our glory." This "mystery" is as old as creation itself. Going back to Genesis, we see that God's intention from the beginning is for human beings to reflect God's glory in the world, meaning our glory is not really ours but God's. Instead, people throughout the history of this passing age have rejected God and sought their own glory. This, after all, is why Jesus was crucified. Proud people do not willingly forfeit power, position, and materialistic lifestyles. Proud people do not willingly listen to people beneath them. Proud people live by the world's standard glory in their talents and achievements; they work to increase their prestige and power. But according to Paul, this is not the way true glorification comes, at least not the kind that lasts into the age to come. The glory that is true and lasting comes from the Crucified Lord of Glory.

At this point, Paul brings the topic of love into view. Clearly, if we would understand God's word of the cross, then love is going to play a big part. In fact, apart from love, it is impossible to understand the word of the cross. As Paul sees it, we do not relate to God primarily through knowledge, we relate to God through love, which is the way that God has chosen to relate primarily to us and to the whole world. It is impossible to understand the word of the cross apart from love, just as it is impossible to understand the wisdom of God apart from the revealing and guiding Spirit of God. The wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ crucified is confirmed through the Spirit of God who reveals to us the fact that the word of the cross is the truth about God, even as it is the truth about us. Apart from revelatory insight from the Spirit, the news that Jesus Christ is crucified is but foolishness and folly.

As Paul sees it, like knows like. In the same way that an individual's thoughts and actions are known most completely only by that individual's spirit, the thoughts of God and the ways of God are known most fully by God's Spirit. In verse 13, Paul summarizes all of this by saying that whatever we know in truth about God comes only from God. This means that it does not come through the lofty, eloquent words of polished preachers. It does not come through any particular denomination or party. It does not come through proud Christians masquerading as humble servants. It does not come through books, multimedia presentations, radio programs, or crusades. It comes only from God, who can and does work through all of these things, but only God is the source of knowledge about God. The truth about God and power from God come only through God's Spirit.

The "deep things" of which Paul speaks is that the truth about God comes only through a revelation from God. This means, among other things, that apart from God's spirit, there is no faith. Apart from God's Spirit, we can know neither our own spiritual gifts nor the gifts of others. Relishing in its own wisdom and power, however, the human mind rejects the gospel and the guidance of the Spirit, and so the truth of the gospel sounds like foolishness. The word of the cross that God saves and redeems everything entrusted to his care sounds like rubbish and is not trusted. So if the gospel is comprehensible only because of God's active work in the ears and heart of a listener, there can be no room for any personal boasting. Faith itself is a gift from God, which means everything else that stems from faith—such as the recognition and appropriate use of one's gifts—has its origin in God.

The word of the cross is a word from God. It is a word of love from God that declares the world-altering truth that the blood that God shed on the cross through his Son Jesus

was shed for us so that we would not be doomed in our sins. Incomprehensibly, God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God took upon himself the punishment for our sin: every evil word we have spoken, every wicked deed we have done, every time we have dishonored God, mistreated a neighbor, and been poor stewards of creation.¹⁹ God lovingly takes upon himself every single sin committed in the world. What an unimaginable act of kindness—for us and all creation. God saw the horribleness of our situation, the separation and alienation that sin creates between us and God as well as between us and our neighbors and creation itself, and God did something about it. God acted on our behalf, renouncing every privilege he was due and claiming nothing for himself.²⁰ He went to the cross and he died upon it, and in his death broke sin's tyrannical rule over us. He took the just penalty for our sin upon himself and made it possible for us to be free of its death grip upon our lives and relationships. He chose to die for us rather than live without us and so gave us back to life. Who can understand the depth of such love?

This is the mind of Christ—the word of the cross. This is why Christians can live lives free from sin and guilt. This is why we can be unafraid of the future and fully attentive to the present. This is why we have a new day—today and every day. Because of Jesus' death on the cross, believers can rise when they stumble and start again, persevere when others quit, bless when others curse, and help when others harm. The word of the cross—the truth of God's love—is sown in the heart of every believer and grows by the blessing of God's Spirit.

In the same way that the cross reveals God, then, the cross also helps believers to see themselves, others, and the world as they truly are—in need of God's wisdom, God's righteousness, God's redeeming grace and saving love. As Paul sees it, God's rescuing hand is offered to the world in the outstretched arms of Jesus upon the cross and it is grasped only through humble trust by the Spirit of God at work within us. What wisdom is the cross!

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:18
2. Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:21-25
3. Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:30
4. Memorize 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

Research

1. Study crucifixion in the ancient world. One of the most comprehensive and accessible books on the subject is *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, by Martin Hengel (Augsburg Fortress, 1977). Among the most notable artistic presentations of the crucifixion is Matthias Grünewald's center panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. What do we know about crucifixion and how has Jesus' crucifixion been depicted?
2. Look up the words "righteousness," "sanctification," and "redemption" in a Bible dictionary. What do the words mean and how are they related?
3. With the help of theological dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other sources, dig further into Gnosticism. What appeal might Gnostics have found in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16? How did Gnostics appeal to Paul's writings? Where do you see evidence of Gnostic thought today?

Reflection

1. How do people today view Jesus' death on the cross? To what extent is the "word of the cross" still perceived as a "stumbling block" or "foolishness"?
2. What value is given to wisdom today? What constitutes "wisdom" for the world and for Christians?
3. To what extent do contemporary Christians accept Paul's assertion that faith is a gift? How might acceptance of Paul's view impact how one lives the Christian life?
4. How may you know whether or not you have the "mind of Christ"? In what tangible ways might having the mind of Christ impact one's life?