

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul teaches that God proved his power on the cross, showing a contrast between the ‘foolishness’ of the cross and earthly wisdom. The message of the cross is the only way to spiritual and eternal life. Without the cross, the gospel of salvation is an empty hope. Without the cross of Christ, there is no Christianity and without a biblical understanding of the cross, there is no authentic Christianity. The cross of Christ is therefore central to faith for those who are saved. In our study today, we look at significance of the cross and its power at work in our lives today.

A. The Word of the Cross Separates the Lost and Saved – 1 Cor 1:18

The word of the cross is the preaching of the gospel (1 Cor 1:17). Human wisdom which exalts the cult of personality as we saw in 1 Cor 1:10-17, attempts to empty the cross of its power and is at odds with God’s plan of salvation. Looking at humanity through the lens of the cross, Paul highlights two categories: the perishing and the saved (1 Cor 1:18). For the perishing, the word of the cross is foolishness (1 Cor 1:18). The word of the cross is foolishness because the ancient world despised death by crucifixion. Based on human wisdom, it was ludicrous to think that this heinous act could bring humanity to God. It is therefore seen as foolishness (Greek *Moria*) by those who are spiritually lost and perishing.¹ However, without the cross, there is no gospel and there would be no gospel without the resurrection.

For those who are being saved, it is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18). The cross of Christ is the power of God that saves us in three tenses:

- it *delivered* us in the past from the penalty of sin (justification).
- it *delivers* us in the present from the power of sin (sanctification)
- it *will deliver* us in the future the presence of sin (glorification).

Paul refers to those who are ‘being saved’ – sanctification. Jesus provides an understanding of what salvation from a life of disobedience and sin looks like in Luke

¹ The Greek word ‘*moria*’ is related to ‘*moros*’, from which we get the English word ‘*moron*’. From the world’s perspective, only a moron would believe the message of the cross and live a life of self-service in light of the cross. However, for believers, who are taking up their crosses and following Jesus, the cross is the power of God.

9:22-24. It is a life of cross-bearing. We are called to take up our cross daily and follow him. It means every day we need to put to death our stubborn will and personal desires and accept the Father's will over our own.

B. The Wisdom of The Cross Highlights The Foolishness of Worldly Wisdom – 1 Cor 1:19-21

Paul contrasts the wisdom of the cross with worldly wisdom. James highlights the attributes of the wisdom from above and contrasts them with the attributes of worldly wisdom (James 3:14-17). We can be drawn to earthly wisdom and to boasting about ourselves, but Paul shows that it is foolish to trust in any other wisdom other than the wisdom of God revealed in Christ and his word. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:21b). The reference to Isaiah 29:14 provides an example to back up Paul's claim that the 'foolish' message of the cross was the wisdom of God. The context for Isaiah 29:14 can be found in 2 Kings 17 where Israel tried to rely on human wisdom in their attempt to defeat the Assyrian army rather than rely on the word of God. This resulted in disastrous consequences. Humans think that they can reason their way to God, but God has chosen that all who desire salvation must come to him through the cross. The wisdom of the cross therefore stands in sharp contrast to worldly wisdom.

C. The Witness of the Cross is a Hindrance to Some but the Power of God to Others – 1 Cor 1:22-25

Following on from the division of people into those who are perishing and those who are being saved, Paul further divides those who are perishing into two categories: Jews and Greeks (by extension, think Gentiles). Interestingly, Paul divides them based on their reasons for rejection of the message of the cross. For the Jews, they rejected the message because they were asking for signs – the miraculous (1 Cor 1:22). The death of their Messiah on a cross would have been repugnant to many Jews especially considering scriptures such as Deuteronomy 21:23 which teach that anyone hung under a tree is under God's curse.² The Jews sadly did not recognise and understand the words

² However, see Gal 3:10-14

of Jesus about who he was and the authority he carried (Matt 12:38-42; 16:1-4; John 2:18-22).

In contrast to the Jews, the Greeks look for wisdom but ended up at the same dead end. Knowledge was their pursuit, their idol. They held wisdom in high esteem following the footsteps of philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who came before them. For the Greeks, how could an ignorant Jew, crucified as a criminal, compare to their intellectual titans? The preaching of the cross was therefore foolishness to them. Whilst the spiritually lost stumble over the cross, seeing it as foolishness, to those who are called, both Jew and Greek, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24).

C. The Power of the Cross Rescues Man From the Effects of the Fall of Man

Every detail of the experience of Jesus in his sufferings on His way to the cross and on the cross is significant for us at every point of our need. We see this reflected as we examine the six woes of man that resulted from the fall of man in Genesis 3.

- Guilt and condemnation – Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Pt 2:24)
- Oppression of the devil – The cross brought an end to the unchallenged power of Satan (Col 2:13-15)
- Pain and suffering – By His wounds you have been healed (1 Pt 2:24)
- Anxiety and care – Jesus wore a crown of thorns. Sets us free to walk the way of the kingdom (Mathew 6:33-34)
- Death – Through the death of Jesus the judgment of death has been removed (Hebrews 2:14-15).
- Rejection and separation from God – Jesus took our sin into himself and bore the pain of being outside the Father’s presence (Psalm 22:1; Matt 27:46).

Jesus took all these elements into Himself on the cross and broke their power. For this work to be effective in us, we need to receive it into our own lives. As we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, we will enter the true victory of the cross.

CONCLUSION

The cross is at the core of our faith. Without the cross, there would be no gospel of salvation. Christ has completed the work on the cross and offers us complete redemption

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from the effects of the fall of man in Genesis 3. He calls us to take up our cross daily and follow him. The preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are lost but for those who are saved, it is the power of God.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the message of the cross and what was accomplished on the cross? What happens to the Bible without the cross?
2. The message of the cross was foolishness and offensive to the first century Jews and Greeks. In what ways is it foolish or offensive to those around us? In what ways may we be tempted to change the message of the gospel so that it does not appear foolish?
3. What is God saying to you today from the study today and what are you going to do about it?
4. Who can you tell what you have learned here over the next week?

Memory verse:

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV) – For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

References

- Akin D. L and Merritt J, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians* (B & H Publishing Group, Tennessee, 2023)
- Swindoll C. R, *Swindoll's Living Insights: New Testament Commentary 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois, 2017)
- Gordon B and Fardouly D, *The Foundations of Christian Living: A Practical Guide to Christian Growth* (Sovereign World, 1988)