

March 19, 2006
Lent 3

"Drawn to the Cross by God's Grace"

1 CORINTHIANS 1:22-25

*J*ews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

A girl went into a jewelry store to buy a cross that she could wear around her neck. She looked around at different crosses under a display case. A clerk came and took out a case of crosses so she could see them more closely. One by one she looked at the gold and silver cross, some of them studded with diamonds. Finally stumbling for the right words she asked, "Do you have a cross with the little man hanging on it?" She wanted a cross but she did realize who Jesus was or what he had done for her on that cross.

Before we become too judgmental of that girl, let's remember that at one time we were no different. Before the Holy Spirit changed your heart and mine we had a natural revulsion and disdain for the cross of Jesus and what it stands for. I am holding in my hand two magnets. When I put them together they repel each other rather forcefully. If I turn one of the magnets they suddenly attract each other. It was the Holy Spirit and God's grace and mercy that flipped us or turned us around from people despising the cross to people who love and cherish it as the source of salvation.

Historically the cross was a hideous instrument of torture and execution. Even the evil and sadistic emperor Nero said there was no form of torture and execution so painful as crucifixion. We see the cross in a different light. We see it as a place of great love, a place where God's Son was punished in our place for our sin so we could go free and have the blessings of eternal life. That is what the Christian faith is all about. Today I want to speak to you this subject, **"Drawn to the Cross by God's Grace."**

Drawn to the power of the cross

We are drawn to the cross of Jesus because of the power that we see on the cross. It is a power to wash away sin and remove punishment. Paul says that Jewish people did not see this power because they were caught up looking for power and miracles in other places. "Jews demand a sign and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Jesus Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." Paul knew what it was like to be caught up with a false hope that God would someday perform mighty miracles to rescue his people and restore their land. They wanted Jesus to show them more signs and miracles to prove he was the Messiah, even though he healed many people, opened the eyes of the blind and raised people from the dead.

God's Old Testament people had a rich history involving a God who stepped into the lives of his people with signs and wonders. When the Lord wanted to convince Moses that he

had the power to stand up to Pharaoh, he gave him the power to perform miracles. He took a stick such as this, threw it to the ground and it became a snake. Generations of God's people told and retold the details of these mighty miracles. Children stood in awe of a God who could divide the waters of the Red Sea and let his people walk across on dry land. They never grew weary of telling the story of Passover. They thrilled to the miracles about manna falling from heaven, water coming from the rocks, the walls of Jericho tumbling down, and David the shepherd boy picking up smooth stones and firing one of the stones with such power that a great giant of a warrior was knocked to the ground. They lived with the hope that God would someday provide more miracles to rescue them from their enemies and rebuild the pride and glory of the nation of Israel. They still end the Passover Meal today with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem." They did not want the kind of power that Jesus showed on the cross. That was like a trap or stumbling block to them.

What kind of Messiah do people want today? One of the most popular churches in the country in Houston, Texas ministers to thousands each Sunday and millions by way of television. One of their doctrinal statements says, "WE BELIEVE...Jesus died on the cross and shed His blood for our sins. We believe that salvation is found by placing our faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross. We believe Jesus rose from the dead and is coming again." That is a good statement of faith. Yet, there is a serious disconnect between these doctrinal statements that focus on Christ and the mission statement for the church that reads: "Discovering the Champion in You." Here is a partial list of the most popular sermons: "Be the Individual God Made You" and "Feeling Good about Who You Are" and "Improve Your Self Image with Words." The emphasis seems to be on looking into yourself and improving yourself rather than being drawn to the cross for the forgiveness of sin. That's what people want and that's what brings in the crowds.

So much of my life and yours depends on having power. We need to eat food to supply our bodies with power or energy to walk and think and work. We need fuel to run our cars and we groan when the price of fuel starts approaching \$3.00. We depend on electricity to light our homes, run our computers and do our work. Even our cat, on a cold morning, seeks out the rays of the sun to warm his black fur, a ball of gas 93 million miles from the earth. I also want power inside of myself to be a better person, because the better I am to people the happier I will be and the greater joy I will bring into their lives and this world will be a better place to live.

When it comes to making myself acceptable to the God who made me, my own power, or the power of the sun, or the power of water, or the power of money, or the power of chemicals or even a nuclear bomb is useless. Sin has made such a deep ugly mark in your life and mine that all the power in the world, including the best things I do in my life, cannot remove one single spot or stain. Listen to what the prophet Isaiah says of all people, "So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows." Further on the prophet says, "He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own right hand worked salvation for him." Then it says, "The Redeemer will come to Zion." That is the ultimate power, the power of God that came to us and removed the shame and guilt and punishment of our sin. The Apostle Paul said of this power early in this chapter. "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." In the next chapter he writes, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with the demonstration of the

Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom but on the God's power."

Dear Christian, think of the power that you have come to put your hope in for your salvation. You have been drawn to the cross, by the power of the Holy Spirit. You are drawn to a man hanging on the cross, with his body nailed to that cross, covered with blood, groaning with pain. You believe that man born from the Jewish people, a carpenter's son from Nazareth is Lord and God from all eternity. Somehow by a miracle of God's grace you believe that on the body of this Son of God the sin of the world was placed and paid for completed. "By his wounds we are healed." The power of that blood is so great it cleanses us from all sin and it even gives strength to live a new life that says I want to get rid of sin not give into it. With Paul we confess our faith in the power of the cross: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live I live to the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Praise God that you have been drawn to that power of the cross. Praise God you are drawn to the wisdom of the cross.

Drawn to the wisdom of the cross

The Apostle Paul tells us that the Greeks of his day were always looking for wisdom. The cross of Christ and its salvation seemed like such foolishness and nonsense to them. "Greeks look after wisdom." Christ crucified is "foolishness to the Gentiles." He says that the "foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom and the weakness of God stronger than man's strength." In order to illustrate the difference between power and wisdom I have brought along this axe that we use for chopping wood. On some of our camping trips I can remember watching the kids trying to chop through a piece of wood unsuccessfully because they lacked power and the wisdom. A very strong man could easily lose a wood chopping contest with a much weaker person if he does not know how to properly sharpen the axe and chop at the right angle to make the wood chips fly.

I am born thinking I can use my power to chop away the problem of sin in my life, get rid of it and prepare myself for God and eternal life. The problem I have is that I do not have the right wisdom or knowledge about what sin is and how it can be removed forever. The Greeks looked to their philosophers to provide a road map that led you to look into yourself, open up your mind and open yourself to a power source within you. The Greek philosophers were also connected to the Gnostics. The Gnostics said you could develop a higher knowledge of yourself and even rise above your ordinary human body to get connected to God who was the energy source of the universe. Just as my cat with his little brain has figured out how to find a place where the sun will warm his fur, so the philosophers said they have the help you need to get better connected to energy forces in the universe that will improve your life on this earth and give you a better chance in the life that is come.

The problem with human wisdom and worldviews is they constantly change. Did you know people once believed the world was flat? Prior to Columbus the people in Spain had a coin with this inscription on it, "Nihil ultra" (Nothing beyond). They sincerely believed that if you went too far west with a sailing vessel you would fall off the end of the earth. After Columbus discovered the new world a new coin was minted that said, "Omnia ultra" (Everything beyond). This new source of knowledge changed the whole worldview.

This morning you are sitting here with a world view that depends on the wisdom God has given you about life. You know the answer to the three most important questions of life: Where did I come from? Where am I going when I die? Why am I here? God has opened your heart to believe and accept what he has revealed to you in his Word. He has drawn you to a cross and told you that his wisdom used this instrument of torture to punish his Son in your place. And we are not ashamed to sing:

What wondrous love is this,

O my soul! O my soul, O my soul!

What wondrous love is this

That caused the Lord of bliss

To bear the dreadful curse

for my soul, for my soul,

To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.