

March 11, 2012  
Lent 3

*"The Power of the Cross"*

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## **1 CORINTHIANS 1:22-25**

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

Here is one of my favorite VBS projects. It has a piece of wood with a cross on it. On the piece of wood there are smooth stones surrounded with green moss. On the smooth stones the children have glued eyes that are looking up to the cross. The eyes almost seem to be drawn to the cross. What the Lord your God wants for you and for all people is to draw your attention to the cross and find your hope in what Jesus has done for you.

When the Apostle Paul went to the wealthy and worldly city of Corinth he fearlessly directed the eyes of people to the cross of Jesus. He writes in this letter: "I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

And what is Paul's plan for helping this congregation through some troubling times? His plan is to redirect the eyes of the people to the cross of Jesus to help them overcome their problems and troubles. They were having huge problems with personality conflicts, and speaking in tongues, and ignoring the Lord's Supper and even doubts about the bodily resurrection from the dead. Paul is convinced that the power of the cross that brought these people to faith will also have the power to get their lives back on track again.

I am so thankful for these words of Scripture before us this morning, because they direct my eyes and your eyes to the blessed cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is in the cross that we find forgiveness, hope, love and strength to live a whole new life that we can find in no other place.

### **The cross is foolishness to those who don't believe**

For those who are not believers the Christian message of the cross seems like foolishness and nonsense. "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles." Paul knew what it was like to be a Jew and live each day with the hope the Messiah would return and perform miracles similar to what had happened in the Old Testament.

The Jewish people had a rich history of signs and wonders. Every child grew up hearing the great account of leaving Egypt and passing through the waters of the Red Sea with walls of water on the right and on the left. When Jesus came performing miracles the people chased after him hoping to see more miracles. After he fed 5000 people with five barley loaves and two small fish it says that they wanted to make Jesus a king by force.

They wanted Jesus to use his signs and wonders to build a great kingdom here on this earth. They wanted nothing to do with a Savior who was promised in Isaiah 53 as they one who would be "wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities."

The cross of Jesus became a stumbling block for the Jews. That word for "stumbling block" refers to the trigger on a trap. The mouse eats the cheese or peanut butter on the trigger of the trap and the trap snaps shut and the mouse dies. How is the cross of Jesus like the trigger that brings the trap snapping down on them? Paul knew from first hand experience how much he hated the Christians and their beloved cross on which Jesus died. He felt threatened by the cross, because it took away from him any hope of saving himself. It has been said that if you want to make people mad tell them how their sin makes them unacceptable to God. If you really want to make them mad tell them how Jesus has done everything to save them by his death on the cross.

The largest Christian church in this country is located in Houston, Texas with over 40,000 people worshipping every Sunday. They claim to be a Christian church, but there is no cross in front of the church. Instead of pointing to Jesus, their web page has these words, "Finding the Champion in You." What if their pastor starting preaching Christ crucified as Paul once did? You can be sure their attendance will drop off dramatically.

The Jews were searching for signs. The Greeks were after wisdom. They considered the preaching of the cross to be foolishness and nonsense. Did you hear about the computer hacker who was arrested this past week for hacking into major corporations and even the federal government? He has an IQ of 168 but according to his own mother "he has no brains." He lacks the wisdom to make the right decisions in life. The Greeks were caught up with the pursuit of knowledge and the ability to wisely apply that knowledge. When Paul went to Athens he found the marketplace full of philosophers. Here is how Acts 17 describes the men of Athens: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived their spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." They did not just spend an hour in the morning sitting outside the donut shop and sharing great wisdom. They did this all day.

Paul said of these people that they were very religious. He was distressed at all the different idols and even an idol to an unknown God. It has been said that our current generation is made up of very spiritual and religious people who want God on their own terms. In his book, *Habits of the Human Heart*, Robert Bellah describes an interview with a woman named Sheila. She said, "I believe in God. I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It is 'Sheilism.' Just my own little voice." The cross of Jesus is foolishness to those who have their own little voice that has become their God.

Oh, how we long to see the cross more clearly for that is our assurance of how much our God loves and cares about us. Let's be honest with each other, if necessary, brutally honest. We have a problem with "I" disease that keeps us from seeing the cross as clearly as we want. I can look down a poor Sheila and her own little voice, or I can look down at the pastor who calls on his poor people to "Find the champion in you." What about my heart and my problem with "I" disease? I get wrapped up in myself. I play little games with my God where I try to hide sin instead of bringing it out and confessing it. I know it is not about me. I know it is all about Jesus and his cross. Yet, I slip into thinking way

to much about myself, and worrying about myself, and defending myself, and justifying myself. "I" "I" "I" "Me" "Me" "Me" "Be merciful to me O Lord, for I am faint; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" Take me to the cross. Take me to the power of the cross.

### **The cross brings hope for those who believe**

What hope and peace and joy and forgiveness the beloved cross brings to those who believe. "But for those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." God calls people. He calls them by the power of the cross and the power of his Word. People who reject Jesus are then drawn to trust in his cross for their forgiveness. So it was with the man who died next to Jesus. At first he joined the others in hurling insults at Jesus, but then he turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He saw in Jesus' and his death on the cross the only hope for forgiveness for the terrible life he had lived. Jesus turned and said to him, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

A non practicing Muslim man once told me that he could never believe in a religion that would have Jesus turning to a thief and giving him Paradise without demanding that he do something to earn forgiveness and earn Paradise. The cross of Jesus is foolishness to those who don't believe, but it is God's ultimate wisdom and power to those who do believe.

"The weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." Don't you just love these words: "The weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

It appears from all human accounts that a nice Jewish man, the carpenter's son, is being sadly crucified for the wrong reasons. Jesus appears so weak as he hangs on the cross. He hangs on the cross with the weight of his body pulling him down and making it hard to breathe. He hangs by the nails that have been pounded into his hands. He is so thirsty his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. He has to endure the shameful insults of the people who walk by and taunt. His hair still shows the gobs of spit people have spit on him. Yet the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

In the next chapter of 1 Corinthians it tells us that the natural man without the Spirit of God "does not accept the things that come from God for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them because they are spiritual discerned." Only with the eyes of faith do we see the power of the cross. Only with the eyes of faith do we see the miracle that took place when God laid on Jesus the iniquity of us. Yes, he became sin for us. When our God created the world, he brought all matter into existence in a moment of flash of time. An even more amazing display of power took place at the cross. By a miracle our God transferred everything I have done wrong and you have done wrong to Jesus. Just as this sponge soaks up water, Jesus took the sin of the world upon himself. And then he made payment for every sin. "The punishment for our peace was upon him." He did this for the whole world.

Oh treasure these words, these beautiful words, "Christ the power of God and the wisdom

of God." You have no power in you to remove even one single sin. Your human body is an amazing display of God's power. As you sit here today, your heart is pumping blood through 90,000 miles of blood vessels to feed the billions of cells in your body. Food is taken from your stomach and oxygen from your lungs. Even more amazing your God has connected you to the power of the cross, through the faith he has given you to believe. The full payment has been brought to you and is yours and you have peace with God. That is the power of the cross. I look at this VBS project. I see the eyes on these stones looking up to the cross. I look at these eyes and think, "That's me. That's the story of my life." That's the story of your life, eyes of faith directed by God's grace to the power of the cross. Amen.