

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Introduction

I want you to imagine for a moment that you had a particular wound on your leg that was not healing. All the various drugs and topical ointments you've tried proved useless. Seeing you at your wits end, your doctor tells you there is one more option, that has been used at various points in history, and has recently been proven to be very effective for your condition.

“There's just one thing you need to know says the doctor... This medical treatment involves the use of maggots to consume the dead tissue and help clean your wound.”

Would you go for this off-putting salvation? Or would you keep battling away in the hope of another option? Could you get past the yuk-factor?

Maggot therapy, which was used to heal and even save life in the American civil war and WW1 has apparently made a bit of a comeback in the world of medicine. But as one article on this topic commented, the big barrier advocates of this treatment face is simply: “The emotional gravity of pure human revulsion.”

The saving remedy is there – it's just that it carries with it such a huge yuk-factor in the eyes of many.

In our passage tonight, we read of a much greater salvation that likewise carries with it a huge yuk-factor in the eyes of many. Or to use Paul's words, a huge “foolishness” factor. Paul speak of the message at the heart of the Christian faith – the message of Christ crucified – The Son of God, rejected, shamed and killed on a cross in order to bring forgiveness of sins

through faith in his name. In the ancient world, as in most times of history, talk of the cross was viewed by many as illogical, barbaric, and unbecoming for one you would worship as God.

So, you can imagine how this outside perception would have put pressure on some in the Corinthian church to change their tune a little. Why focus so much on a message that appals so many when you could focus on other things that appeal. Things of wisdom and knowledge, and other Greek virtues that can perhaps work well with Christianity.

And we can think this too right. Why focus on the message of the cross and talk of people's need for forgiveness when that message might offend or confound people. Why not place our focus on other things that we uphold as Christians but that appeals more strongly to the world around us... Things like social justice, or running youth programs.

In response to this way of think Paul says, "don't hold back from the word of the cross" – Leave what is central to our faith, central. It might be called foolish by many, it might carry the yuk-factor, but it also carries the power of God to save – so you keep believing it and you keep proclaiming it as the truth which is central to your lives.

Now the way I've broken this text up is to look first at Paul's main argument that this so-called "foolish" message of the cross is actually God's power to save. Then I want to look at the two pieces of evidence he gives to convince us of the power of this message:

(1) The weak people saved.

(2) The weak preacher used.

1. The power of God to save.

First, this “foolish” message of the cross is God’s power to save. It’s through the message of the cross that people are saved from God’s judgment on sin and brought into a saving knowledge of the true God.

Look at verse 18:

18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.

Ever since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have had to grapple with this awkward tension. On the one hand we rejoice over the saving truth that God has forgiven our sins our heart rebellion against Him by the means of His Messiah’s death on a cross on our behalf. On the other hand, we feel the judgment or ridicule of others who see the very same message as foolishness.

“You follow a humiliated and crucified saviour? You’ve got to be kidding!?”

There is an ancient piece of graffiti from the 2nd or 3rd century that provides a window into how the earliest Christians were viewed by their neighbours.

[Show pic]

The ancient Greek words when translated read: “Alexander worships his god.”

Can you imagine being this ancient Christian, Alexander. There you are just walking back from the local market and you see that etched into the wall for all to see. The whole neighbourhood is getting told you're worship of a crucified saviour is as foolish as worshipping a crucified donkey.

Maybe you can imagine that kind of mockery because *you've* felt it from your own neighbours, work colleagues or family.

Or maybe you've felt it from influential public figures who are prepared to tell us what they really think when it comes to the message of the cross we hold so dear. In his book *The God Delusion*, the famous evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins says this about the message of the cross:

"I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sadomasochistic and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad, but for its ubiquitous familiarity which has dulled our objectivity.

The prevailing wisdom of many of the elites in many cultures throughout many periods of history has been that the message of the cross is foolishness. You'd have to be barking mad to believe it.

But notice that God doesn't play by the rules of the world's prevailing wisdom. In fact, it's like he takes all the proud assumptions that lead people to dismiss the cross and turns them on their head. Look at what God says in verse 19:

¹⁹ *For it is written,*

***I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent.^[a]***

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the teacher of the law?^[b] Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish?

Now, these verses (which includes a quote from Is.29) are not saying that God is against wisdom or logic or science. In fact, Paul often *appeals* to logic in many of his theological arguments. And God has an entire genre in the bible referred to as the “wisdom literature” where he highlights the blessings of wisdom.

The wisdom that God is turning on its head here applies to the subject *of* God. It's the wrong assumptions humanity makes of Him when it comes to knowing Him and being accepted by him.

We are used to simply going along with what the experts tell us in life. And much of the time that is helpful. But notice when it comes to God, the world's so called “experts” on religion and philosophy are the very ones who get it wrong.

The message of the cross turns the wisdom of the “wise,” the teacher of the law, the debater of this age on its head. People aren't coming to a saving knowledge of God through their so-called wisdom – but through the “foolish” message of the cross. Verse 21:

²¹ For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is preached. ²² For the

Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

Why was the message of the cross just so difficult to accept for both the Jewish and Gentile people of Paul's day?

Well, in terms of the Jews, they were simply appalled by the idea that their promised Messiah would be crucified by their Roman oppressors. In their minds the Messiah was supposed to be doing the crushing not being crushed. And so the Jews would look for signs indicating the arrival of God's *political* saviour. So, although Jesus did many signs, they had no eyes to see them because he simply wasn't the Messiah they wanted... They wanted salvation from Rome, not from sin. Thus, a crucified Messiah was simply unthinkable.

In terms of the gentiles, they couldn't cope with the cross because of how pathetic it all looked. The Greco-Roman world valued traits such as wisdom, power, style – things that made you look impressive to others. Things that win respect. They wanted to follow in the footsteps of the great Greek thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. The idea of following in the footsteps on a crucified saviour (particularly in comparison with these men) would have been crazy.

It's hard for us to contemplate just how much horror and shame this ancient form of execution conjured up in the minds of many ancient people, because we've become somewhat used to the idea of the cross,. It was such a shameful form of death that it was forbidden as a form of capital punishment among Roman citizens. It was so distasteful that Cisero speaks of crucifixion as something that should:

“be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears.”

The cross was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles.

It's an awkward and at times uncomfortable reality that some of the people we do life with will view our commitment to Jesus as foolishness. I remember feeling this when I told the eye doctor's I worked for that I would be leaving to do a traineeship at my church and teach people about Jesus. I remember one doctor looked totally shocked and clearly thought it was a waste of time. I remember another doctor, the most senior and respected one, when he heard about it, went and bought me a copy of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations. If philosophy and theology is what you're interested in, here is real wisdom.” I left work that day very aware that most of these doctors, who I really liked, looked at me as a naïve 23 year old who had bought into foolishness.

What do you do in a moment like that? Well, Paul says you remember the great power and wisdom of the “foolishness” you believe.

Look at verse 24

²⁴ Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, ²⁵ because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The Cross is the wisdom and power of God.

It's the wisdom of God because it's the fullest revelation of God. The cross speaks of God's remarkable love for sinners, that He would send His own son for them. The cross speaks of their seriousness of our sin [deserving of death] and God's commitment bring justice through the death of Jesus. The cross speaks of God's great sovereignty, as we see Him using the most vial act in history (the murder of Jesus) as part of his glorious plan to save us. If you want to truly know God as the infinitely loving, just and sovereign God – don't go looking for it in Marcus Aurelius' words, or in any other philosopher – go and find it in the message of the Cross. That's where you will find the wisdom of God Himself, in the fullest way.

And the cross is also the power of God, because it is effective to save sinners.

To say: "Jesus died for me" is actually to say, Jesus, The *Christ* died for me. Paul says we preach "*Christ* crucified". It's wasn't just some holy man who was hung on that cross as a sacrifice for us... It was and the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Only He was the perfect, sinless, God-man who had the power and authority to take upon Himself and atone for all the sins of those who believe. B.B. Warfield sums it up like this:

"A Christless cross no refuge for me; A Crossless Christ my Savior may not be; / But, O Christ crucified! I rest in thee!"

We rest in the message of *Christ* crucified because, because it is the only thing that removes the penalty of our sin. We aren't made right with God by our achievements, law-keeping, intellect, or success... It's only by the death of the God's Son, Jesus Christ, who dies in our place, for our sin, that we have life.

These verses show us the foolishness of the world's "wisdom," and the wisdom of God's "foolishness."

Application.

Now, maybe we don't completely ignore the message of the cross. But maybe we do find other messages to focus our attention on – message that align more easily with the wisdom and priorities of the world. Messages that more easily appeal rather than appal. What might that look like?

- *Maybe it's a Christianity that focuses primarily on social issues (without grounding in the gospel).*
- *Maybe it's a Christianity that focuses on self-improvement and morals. 10 steps to a more enriched life.*
- *Maybe it's a Christianity that focuses on social reformation and the return to conservative principles.*
- *Maybe it's a Christianity that focuses on the demonstration of spiritual gifts.*

These aren't bad things. Many of them are good. But they are not the message that beats the heart of Christianity. That belongs to the cross. Jesus crucified for us. That's where we need to keep our focus.

A faith which rests short of the Cross—is a faith which will land you short of Heaven!

[Spurgeon].

So, Paul has just made the point that the message of Christ Crucified, though foolish in the eyes of many, is in fact God's power to save.

Paul now brings two pieces of evidence to prove to the Corinthians just how powerful the message of the cross truly is. He shows them (1) the weak people God saves and (2) the weak preacher God uses.

First Proof: The Weak People God saves. (vv.26-31)

So, the first piece of evidence that displays the power of the cross is the weak people it has clearly saved. Their frailty, their low status, their average lives, showed that their salvation had nothing to do with them, and everything to do with God and his powerful message of the cross.

There is an expression that is sometimes wrongly believed to come from the bible: “God helps those who help themselves.” It’s the idea that God favours/rewards/helps the capable, productive and successful. The flip side, of course says the opposite – God doesn’t help those who can’t help themselves. He ignores the weak, the foolish, the unimpressive.

But you see, who are the winners in this world-view about God? Who gets to boast? It’s not God is it? He’s just dealing out the rewards/help to those who are doing the hard work – it’s the successful people – they get to boast in their own achievements.

But notice how the congregation in Corinth turns that world view on its head. It’s not the impressive and successful who had found God’s help and salvation it’s the unimpressive, those who have nothing really to offer God. Look at verse 26:

26 Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective,^[d] not many powerful, not many of noble birth. 27 Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

I was given a book as a kid which was all about famous sports people who were also Christian. It contained their sporting achievements and their testimonies about how they came to Christ. It was encouraging, but in many ways it was also a little reflective of our desire to make Christianity more appealing through the people who have succeeded. “Look, at this guy! He’s a huge footy star *and* he takes Jesus seriously...”

But it’s interesting that God doesn’t point to the successful Christians and say be like them...

He points to the average joes and says, “look at what I’ve done in them.”

It isn’t the nobles of this world who receive God’s salvation in large numbers, it’s the nobodies. The people the wise of the world write off as fools.”

But notice how the “foolish” people of God match with the “foolish” message of the cross.

Both God’s message and God’s people are turning the wisdom of the world on its head.

It’s not a message of power, might and style that saves, but a message of humble, shameful service that does.

It’s not a people of power, might and style who are called by God, but those who are weak, insignificant, and despised.

God does this, says Paul to show where the power really rests. Not in people and their power, but in God and the message of His crucified King. Look at verse 28:

²⁸ God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, ²⁹ so that no one^[e] may boast in his presence.

You see, when we all stand before God on the great day of judgment – no one is going to be able to say before God: “God, of course you should accept me, you should let me in to heaven! I’ve been a good person. I’ve worked hard. I’ve achieved great things.”

No, on that last day, God will look past those who have been trusting in themselves or their own achievements and point to the 6-year-old believer, the intellectually disabled believer, the barely-making-ends-meet believer, the believer with a messy history, the average joe believer... And declare *them* to be the ones He accepts and welcomes in on the basis of the cross, not their credentials.

The brilliant, the famous, the strong, who might be tempted to read out their resume of achievements to God - they will stand humbled in the face of these unimpressive people who, by God’s grace, simply cling to the achievement of God on their behalf by means of His crucified saviour.

*³⁰ It is from him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption—³¹ in order that, as it is written: **Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.***

We run a Christianity explored course through our church. One of the things I will often do in this course is direct people to check out the CE website which has a whole host of helpful material. There is a link on the website that takes people to a page titled “real-life” stories. And here you can read all about how regular, unimpressive and broken and sinful people (like the Corinthians) were drawn by the power of God to believe in the message of the cross.

One lady, Deb, speaks of being a former heroin addict, who one day found a Gideon bible in a drawer while looking for a lighter. She speaks of reading it while high and then feeling the weight of her sin, the fear of God, and sudden need to go to a church for more answers. The service she went to just happened to be a Good Friday service that [thankfully] was all focused on the cross. And even before the preacher even got up, the Bible reading alone hit the target of her heart. She writes:

they started reading from the gospel of Matthew about Jesus’ crucifixion. And I just sobbed, because what I heard was that he had died on the cross for me. That all the things I had done and the punishment that was coming my way, he had taken on the cross. And when he cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” I realised that it was for me that he was forsaken. He had taken my forsakenness.

And I just sobbed. I just burst into tears. He’d done that for me so that I could be not forsaken—and I just knew that I was God’s daughter.

I was sobbing, absolutely sobbing. I don’t know what people thought, but I didn’t really care,

because I walked out there knowing that God is my Father and life has just changed from that moment on.

Outwardly, Deb's life would have looked pretty messy and unimpressive. By her own admission she had done things she knew were wrong in God's eyes. But, God in His great power saved her. God led her to that bible, God brought a conviction of sin in her heart, God led her to church, God had his message of the cross from Matthew's gospel saved her. It was all of God.

And it always is.

And like Deb, people who hear and believe in the crucified and risen saviour are changed from that moment on. Paul says as they find Christ they also find:

- Righteousness – Their sin given to Jesus, His perfect and righteous life credited to them.
- Sanctification – Made Holy in God's eyes – set apart to be his special possession – “God's daughter.”
- Redemption – They have new life in Jesus having been freed from slavery to sin and death.

Maybe you're here tonight and you're not a Christian. Maybe like Deb, you feel like your life is a mess and you have nothing really to offer God. The good news is that God doesn't need anything from you. You simply need to trust in his “foolish message” of the cross – and you will find life.

But maybe you here tonight and you do have some credentials to your name. Maybe you do feel like you have a few achievements under your belt. Let me encourage you to humble yourself before God, and cling to the achievement of Jesus at the cross. It is still possible for successful and powerful people to come find salvation in the cross.

The Countess of Huntingdon was a wealthy, and powerful English woman in the 18th century. She was also a wonderfully committed Christian. She reflects on Paul's words here and speaks about God's grace to her despite her wealth and power. Speaking of verse 26, She writes:

Blessed be God, it does not say "any mighty," "any noble"; it says "*many* mighty," "*many* noble."

I owe my salvation to the letter "m."

While many nobodies find a place in God's kingdom, He does still leave the door open to the noble who is willing to trust in the cross, rather than credentials.

Second Proof: The Weak Preacher God Uses (2:1-5).

The second piece of evidence that Paul uses to demonstrate God's power to save through the message of the cross, is his own weakness. It was the message, not the man, which had powerfully saved them.

Look at what Paul says in chapter 2, verse 1ff:

2 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery^[g] of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. ² I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.

Now, this kind of shocks us. The great apostle Paul, possibly the greatest missionary every to have lived, tells us how much he was freaking out when he came to Corinth. And we know he really was scared. In fact the book of Acts tells us Jesus actually came to him in a night vision while in Corinth and say to him

⁹ “Don’t be afraid, but keep on speaking and don’t be silent (Acts 18:9).

Paul says he was scared not self-confident as he preached to the Corinthians. He didn’t have all the perfect illustrations. He didn’t have awesome little one-liners. But in his fear and weakness, he simply “decided to know nothing except for Jesus Christ and him Crucified.” Now that doesn’t mean he didn’t know or mention other related things... It just means Paul made the main thing the main thing – that “foolish” message of the cross. He didn’t dress it up or attempt to make it more palatable for His audience... He simply preached it in all his weakness.

And what was the result? Well, you see it stated clearly in Acts 18:8 which says:

Many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized.

How is it that Paul was able to somehow break all the rules of public speaking? How was he able to win people over without the slick presentation, without the confident tone, without the

persuasive arguments, without the emotionally moving examples, testimonies and illustrations? Because, it wasn't the man winning people over, but the message... The simple truth that says Jesus the Christ was crucified on your account, to grant you forgiveness and life through faith in His name. It was the power of God's Spirit as God's message was delivered. Look at the final verses:

⁴ My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom^[h] but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power.

App

Most Christians are not gifted speakers and are terrified about sharing their faith. Most of us know that we often stumble over our words and may even look visibly nervous when trying to explain things. And because we know that, we assume our efforts would be fruitless. We assume evangelism is probably not our gift and leave it to someone else more capable, more gifted, more articulate. We say, "come along to church, and hear this guy explain things." Or, "listen to the way this youTube preacher frames it all."

Paul words remind us of God's power to use weak people like us in the proclamation of Christ crucified. So long as you know that message – that's enough. God will work through it. It actually gives you confidence at the office tomorrow, or in your uni circles when people ask you what you did on the weekend. Instead of passing over the fact you went to church, you can say, in all your weakness, that you did go to church and you heard about how Jesus died for your sin and rose again in order to give you life. Salvation could come through a simple, stumbly conversation about that, all because God is powerful, not you.

Conclusion.

The cross has been a symbol of Christianity since the early church. It remains a symbol today. We see it on churches, hanging around necks and tattooed on arms. John Stott (Christian writer) comments on this symbol of the cross:

The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol, and that Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of the ridicule, to discard it in favour of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself. It was out of loyalty to him that his followers clung so doggedly to this sign.

Why does Jesus want us to keep the cross of Christ central? We've heard the answer tonight... It is this "foolish" message, that God demonstrates his power to save. It's the cross that saves weak people like us. It's the cross that bears fruit despite the weak preacher. Praise God for Christ crucified.