

The Wisdom of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:20-31 (NIV)

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand 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 human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. ²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

When you look at the cross, what do you see? Do you see hope? Do you see “mission accomplished”? Do you see death? That’s what the people of Jesus’ day saw when they looked at a cross. This was the tool the Romans used to execute the worst of the worst criminals. It was specifically designed to give a prolonged and painful death instead of outright killing someone. It was meant to make the criminal suffer and to be displayed as a warning to all the other people to not to break the law like they did, less they suffer the same sentence.

That’s what the cross was originally designed to do. So, it seems a logical question to ask, “Why do Christian churches put crosses on their buildings, on their places of worship?” “Why do Christians wear crosses as jewelry, get them tattooed on their bodies?” It seems like a grotesque and morbid symbol, a depressing reminder of what people did to Jesus. If you’ve seen the movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” then you can vividly conjure the bloody pictures that went hand in hand with the cross, a depiction that makes you shudder.

With such a picture, why do we call this day, “**Good** Friday”? It’s the day Jesus died, an innocent and good man, a kind and compassionate man, a healer and a teacher. We believe that Jesus was more than just a man. We believe that he was at the same time true God, eternal God, no beginning and no end (He has always been God and will always be God), Almighty, all-knowing.

If that’s so, then why was he on a cross? If he is truly God, this almighty, powerful, can do anything spiritual entity, then why does he suffer and die? How come he couldn’t come up with a better solution to save the world than by dying? What kind of a power is dying? If it were me, I would just make all the sin go away. I would get rid of all the bad people. I would make this world perfect without subjecting myself to humiliating and excruciating death. The cross on Good Friday seems to be foolishness.

When you look at the cross, do you see foolishness? Do you see a God who is so weak, so unimaginative that he couldn’t come up with a better way, a pain-free way, of saving the world? He can make the blind see, the lame walk, the dead come back to life, but he can’t come up with another solution to the problem of evil in the world other than by dying? When you look at the cross, do you think that you could have done it better?

While we ponder and speculate of other ways God could have done this, God gives us and reinforces the message of the cross. “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (verses 22-23) The Jews let Jesus know that they had a better way to save the world; it was through signs, miracles. Do things that only God can do. Do something miraculous like come down from the cross. Prophecy who hit you. You raised others from the dead, but you can’t save yourself?! If you truly were God, you’d do the signs we demand. Since you don’t, we don’t believe you.

The Greeks, they loved wisdom. They wanted this whole cross thing to be a great big epiphany, an intellectual accomplishment. At the very least, the cross should make sense, but it didn’t for them. It didn’t make sense to them for someone to die in order to live, for someone to die in order to gain victory. It didn’t make sense for a supposedly all-powerful, eternal being to die in the same way a notorious criminal dies, as if he could be overcome by ordinary men. An all-powerful God should be able to make the world a better place by merely thinking about it. If he truly is God, this benevolent Creator, then he should fix all our problems instantly, with a blink of an eye. Aren’t we tempted to say the same, that if God was so loving and so powerful then he wouldn’t allow mass killings

by gun violence, he wouldn't allow children to die at the hands of evil people, he wouldn't allow for hurricanes to wipe out countries and ruin homes and lives. The idea scratches at our brain that the cross does not show a strong or wise God, but a foolish God.

And yet we still have this massive cross at the front of our church. We preach Christ crucified. It's repulsive. It's dark and gloomy. It's depressing. It makes me sad. It does make you sad, doesn't it? Because we hate seeing people suffer. We hate it even more when innocent people wrongly and unjustly suffer. It hurts us when an innocent person suffers for something I did.

The cross preaches that message to us. Jesus went to the cross because he saw you and me. He knew the lies that you would tell. He knew the times when you would lash out at others in fits of anger, saying words intended to deeply wound, maybe even physically hurting someone. He knew how we would hate. He knew that we would lack love and patience. He knew that we would be selfish, putting ourselves above those around us, only begrudgingly helping others at times. He knew every impure thought you and I would have, how our minds would fantasize over what we can't have. He knew that our devotion to him would never be enough, that we can't even get through the Lord's Prayer without our minds wondering and thinking of other things. We are not good enough for God, and we can't make ourselves good enough for him in spite of all our great thinking and our best efforts. We deserve to be cast from God's presence, sentenced to eternity to an outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, an everlasting pain beyond what we have ever experienced, complete alienation from God.

So, Jesus took the task on himself as the only one who could die an innocent death without a single wrongdoing committed throughout his entire life. He is the only one who could have done this because he is God, God from all eternity. On the cross, he shed his blood for us, exchanging his life for ours, taking on the punishment we deserved for every lie we've told, every word that we have said that wounded another, every time we did not give our all for God, every loveless act we took. On the cross, God's justice which demanded perfect payment for all the ways that we wronged him was now satisfied since God himself bled and died for our sins. Jesus paid an eternal life sentence to cover what we owed God by means of the cross.

Because Jesus allowed himself to hang on the cross and die on it, God turns to us and says, "You are forgiven." Your wrongs, your sins, your imperfections, your boasting, your arrogance, your short-comings have all been put on my Son – every angry and hateful word, every impure thought, every distracted devotion, every selfish action. He paid for all of these things. The sentence is satisfied. Nothing more is required. You are now holy and righteous in my sight because the blood of my Son, his life given for yours on the cross, has bought you from eternal death, saved you from being cast away from God into outer darkness. This is the message of the cross. Is that foolishness or is that love that we can't even conceive in our minds? Is this weakness or is it greater mercy than we have ever known or could ever produce?

God went to the cross to do what we could not, a foolishness that none of us would have ever chosen. This is his wisdom. This is the message of the cross. It's a message not based on IQ level. It's not based on what we think is best. It's not based on social status or money. It's not based on strength or effort. The message of the cross is only based on what God has done for us. It's based on who God is, not on what we are. This means that it doesn't matter if we are weak or strong, if we are wise or foolish, if we are despised or prestigious, if we are influential or a nobody. The cross does not discriminate nor does it limit. It doesn't withhold Jesus' payment for anyone's sins, but the cross stands as a proud testimony that your sins and my sins are paid by God in full. Here he poured out his wrath. Here he satisfied his justice. The cross means that you and I are totally and completely forgiven of all our sins for our whole entire lives and that God has gifted to us Jesus' holiness and righteousness. The cross is God's wisdom of exchanging Jesus' life for ours so that none of us would be lost, but all of us would be reconciled, have peace, with God.

What do you see now when you look at the cross? See a death, yes, but see a death that gave you life – eternal life with God. See a death that wiped out your entire life of sins from beginning to end. See a death that has made you perfect before God now and forever. The world may call the cross foolish, but God did not use the cross so that only the worldly wise would know him. He used the cross so that all glory would go to him for saving people in a way that no human would have thought of. The cross is now a symbol of life for all who believe. There on the cross Christ saved me and you. There Christ changed me as he paid for my sins with his body and blood and gave me his righteousness, his holiness. The cross changes everything. The cross means total and complete and final forgiveness for all. Amen.