

# **Power Through Weakness**

## **(1 Corinthians 1:18-25)**

Imagine the scene. A bus driver has a heart attack. The bus, out of control, ploughs into a crowded shopping mall. Bodies are scattered everywhere - the dead and the badly wounded. The crowd is completely stunned - in a state of shock. Just then, a smiling man comes up with a big bag under his arm. "Well, folks, isn't this a wonderful day? Makes me want to sing and dance! I just love this mall! I love all you folks who come here! Today, I said to my wife, 'I'm going down to Candies on the Mall. I'm going to buy a big bag of fudge and give one to everyone who happens to be in the mall just at that moment.' So glad you're here, folks! Love you! Have a fudge!"

The Church of today feels the strong pull of a desire for approval - "we want to make a positive impression" we want to be seen to be doing something." yet about us lie the dead and the dying. The jolly man with his bag of fudge is an insult to the victims and the onlookers alike. Yet there are those who as senior clerics are passing out the fudge. They say we must leave behind that old-fashioned stuff about sin and the cross and the blood of Christ and all that. Humanity has come of age. People will laugh at us if we talk that way. There is always the temptation to say that whatever the culture wants to hear is what we will preach. However we have been entrusted with the gospel, and we should not capitulate to the spirit of the age. Whoever marries the spirit of the age today is widowed tomorrow. When the church does this we end up passing out fudge when what is needed instead is the message of the Cross.

In the text under consideration this morning Paul makes it clear to us that the Gospel isn't credible from the point of view of most people. This is because at the centre of the Christian Message is the theme of power through weakness.

At no point does the Christian mind come into more violent collision with the secular mind than in its insistence on humility, with all the weakness it entails. The wisdom of the world values power not humility. Let me illustrate what I mean with the following scenario.

Picture a well-respected Canadian professional. They are well dressed and well groomed. They are being taken out the gate of the city to the garbage dump. They are stood in front of a post with a naked man hanging by the nails driven through his

wrists, covered with blood, gasping for his last breaths, and told, "This my Canadian friend is the one who is truly powerful. He is the one you are to worship. Not your house, your job, your money, your status. Will you kneel down here and cast yourself on him for mercy?"

How would such a person respond. What foolishness. "That! You want me to bow down before that! You think I need that! Don't you see how I am dressed! Have you seen the car I drive! Don't you know where I work! Don't you know how much money I make! And you think I need that heap of bloody flesh! What do you think I am a dog? A worm?"

Paul says "yes you do need that. For although you might be well dressed, well versed and living fine we are like the people at that mall. All that the world holds dear in its pursuit of status and importance is like a mist that will ultimately vanish and disappear. Paul uses the word "perishing" in verse 18. It is the Cross and the message it proclaims that will endure.

In this part of 1 Corinthians Paul will show us how the cross of Christ is the focus and foundation of our faith. There is something here that transcends everything. Paul presents this idea twice over in verses 18-25, in verses 18-21 and then in verses 22-25. In both paragraphs he begins with the Cross and in both he continues with different responses people make to the message of the Cross.

**Verses 18-21.** The message of the Cross receives diametrically opposed reactions. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." And Paul endorses this from Scripture. He quotes from Isaiah 29:14 to the effect that the Cross destroys and frustrates human wisdom and makes it foolish.

At verse 21 Paul gets to the heart of what he is saying in these first four verses "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe."

This verse rests on the fundamental fact that human beings cannot reach God by themselves. On the one hand, God is infinite, whereas we are finite. On the other hand, God is holy, whereas we are sinners. In consequence we are doubly cut off from God. So God has taken the initiative to do what we cannot do, namely to bridge the gulf between us.

In order to explain this, verse 21 contains three contrasts that emerge when we ask three questions.

**Question 1:** Who took the initiative to reach us? Answer: God did. For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not and could not know him, God was pleased to reveal himself to us through Jesus Christ.

**Question 2:** What was the result of God's initiative. Answer: Salvation. God was pleased to save those who believe.

**Question 3:** How was this initiative taken? Answer: Through the gospel.

Here then is the summary of verse 21. Wherever the world failed through its own wisdom to know God, God was pleased to save those who believe in the folly of the Gospel. That is, all human beings have to come to terms with the one hanging naked from the Cross.

**Verses 22-25.** In the next four verses Paul elaborates on this same theme. Wisdom through the folly of the Cross. And power through the weakness of the Cross. In order to develop this theme Paul divides the human race into three sections - Jews, Greeks and Christians - and pinpoints the essential differences between them.

First "Jews demand signs" They were expecting a political Messiah who would drive the Roman legion into the Mediterranean Sea and would reestablish the lost national sovereignty of Israel. So from every revolutionary pretender they demanded evidence (in the first century there were a lot of these pretenders). They especially demanded signs of power, to give plausibility to his messianic claims. That is why they kept asking Jesus, "What signs do you do that we may believe."

Second "Greeks desire wisdom". Greece had had a long tradition of brilliant philosophy. They listened eagerly to every new idea, every speculation, so long as it seemed to them reasonable.

Over against the "wonder seeking Jew" and "the wisdom seeking Greek" there is a third category, namely Christian believers. "But we proclaim Christ crucified" Notice the contrast implied in the three verbs used in defining these three groups of people. Jews make demands, Greeks desire (or seek) wisdom. What then is characteristic of

Christian preachers? It is neither "demanding" nor "searching" but "proclaiming" the gospel of Christ crucified.

As John Stott observes "But a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, a uniting of opposite. For Messiah means power, splendor, triumph; crucifixion mean weakness, humiliation and defeat. No wonder the message of "Christ crucified" provoked different reactions."<sup>1</sup>

First Christ crucified was a stumbling block to Jews. They were expecting a powerful military Messiah riding on a war-horse at the head of an army. What were they offered instead? A pathetic, crucified weakling. It was an insult to their national pride. How could God's Messiah end his life under the condemnation of his own people and even under the curse of God. It was impossible. The Cross was an absolute stumbling block to those who worshipped power.

Second, Christ crucified was foolishness to Gentiles. Crucifixion in the Roman world was not only a painful execution; it was also a public humiliation. It was reserved for the dregs of society, slaves and criminals. No freeman or citizen was ever crucified. It was inconceivable that God's son would therefore end his life on the cross.

Third, Christ crucified was to those whom God had called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God. In spite of what the Cross may seem to be, it was not weakness but God's power, not foolishness but God's wisdom. For as Paul says in verse 25 "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

By way of conclusion we want to take a minute to reflect on the contemporary application of what Paul writes here. To be sure, there are no first-century Jews or Greeks in the world, but there are modern equivalents.

First the Cross is still stumbling block to all who worship power and are confident in their own power to save themselves. Remember back to the Canadian professional we imagined a few minutes ago. They imagine they can accumulate merit and so put God in their debt. But the Cross tells us that this is impossible. Christ died to save us because we cannot save ourselves. Apart from Christ and the Cross, Paul says we are

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<sup>1</sup>John Stott: Basic Christian Leadership Page 41

perishing.

Second the Cross is still folly to the intellectually proud. To many it seems like an old idea and holds no interest. To others it makes no sense. The attitude of those who would oppose the Cross was summed up in an article A.J. Ayer wrote. He was an Oxford University philosopher. He was scathing in his denunciation of Christianity and was especially scornful of the Cross. Of all the historic religions he regarded Christianity the worst. Why? Because it rested on the allied doctrines of original sin and Jesus taking our place and dying for our sin. He said such teaching is intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the cross is still to God's people the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is the power of God because through it God saves those who cannot save themselves. It is the wisdom of God because through it God has solved not only our problem (sin and guilt) but his own. It is not wrong to speak of a divine problem or dilemma solved at the Cross. It arises from God's character of Holy love. How could he express his holiness in punishing evil without compromising his love? How could he express his love in forgiving sinners without compromising his justice? How could he be at one and the same time "a righteous God and a Saviour? His answer to these questions was and still is the Cross. For on the Cross he took our place, bore our sin, died our death and so paid our debt.

Thus on the cross God demonstrated both his justice and his love. And in this double demonstration the wisdom of God is displayed; his wisdom in the foolishness of the Cross, his power in weakness.

When people accept this message as necessary for their lives, than regardless of their status they will kneel down before the one who hangs from the Cross and say "Yes I now see and receive you as my Saviour. For the Cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God for all who believe. Today I believe"

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Stott: Page 43