

Christ & Him Crucified:

(3) The Calling of the Cross

Introduction

The Text

1 Cor 1:17–2:2

¹⁷ (For) Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

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

¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,

²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,

²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

How Did We Get Into Him?

A. We closed last week by highlighting the preeminence of union with Christ that we see in 1:30:

³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

1. All the benefits of salvation, flow from the person of Christ to us by virtue of our being “in” Him. But now we need to press deeper into this and ask: How do we get into Him? How did I get saved?

a. Last week, I was only able to focus on half the story. I mentioned that God has to bring us to the end of ourselves before He can bring us into His Son. In other words, the new humanity begins where the old humanity ends. In His grace, He conquers our pride until, finally, we see our own wisdom and strength as foolishness and weakness, and the cross we once called foolishness and weakness we now see as the wisdom and power of God to save. Like Nebuchadnezzar, like the Prodigal Son, God breaks us down that we might be built up in Him.

B. We could illustrate last week’s message by an experience I had my first week here while my girls were still in Sacramento:

1. The power went out in my neighborhood. I never did find out why. I got home around 8 and couldn’t make any dinner so I did what any reasonable man would do: I went to In n Out. When I was riding my bike back, I pulled up to our street and noticed that the power was still out, no street lights, all was black. I was honestly a bit frustrated at this point, that is, until I noticed the stars. The sight was breathtaking! So much so that I went out into my backyard and just laid under their shine, listening to them preach: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psa 19:1a).

What’s the point? The man-made lights—all our self-focused, self-important energy—has to go out before we can see the incomparable glory of the lights of God. God turns our lights out so we can see Him.

a. This, in essence was last week’s message: become a fool in yourself so you can become wise in Christ. And it is true, but there is quite a bit of room here for misunderstanding. You could walk out of that sermon thinking, I just needed a little help. I can see just fine. When God causes some of my stuff to go wrong, I can see that He must be right. When he turns out my lights I can see His stars. But that’s not the fullness of the Biblical teaching. Humanity is not just distracted, in need of a little redirection. We are blind. God could turn off every light on every block in every city and we still would see none of Him. Darkness. That’s the human condition!

i. The sinful nature is suicidal. We would follow our own wisdom and power all the way to Hell. Consider Rom 1. “God gave them up” (v. 24), but do they see and return. No! So “God gave them up” (v. 26), but do they see and return? No! So “God gave them up” (v. 28), but do they see and return? No! The lower men get, ironically, tragically, the more arrogant they become.

Rom 1:21

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

- C. So, how do the lights come on? How did Nebuchadnezzar's reason return to him so that he no longer cursed but blessed the most high (Dan 4:34)? How did the prodigal son "[come] to himself" (Luk 15:17a), so that he turned from the pods of pigs and journeyed home to his father? How did the stars come out from behind the thick clouds of our spiritual consciousness, so that we saw in the cross of Christ, the wisdom and power of God?!

1 Cor 1:21–24

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,

²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1. There it is! The divine adversative: "but..." All humanity would be lost if left to themselves, but God calls some out. And, those whom He calls, see! The cross just light up for them like a sky full of stars!
 - a. And this calling establishes our union with Christ: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:9).
 - i. And this, in turn, makes sense of what we see in v. 30: "...because of him you are in Christ Jesus..." Christ is the source of salvation and all its benefits, and God is the source of our union with Christ.
- D. We are not merely distracted in need of a little redirection. We are not merely ignorant in need of a little instruction. We are not merely sick, in need of a little medicine. At the bottom, we are dead, in need of a resurrection!!!
1. Last week we focused on God's mercy in reducing us to a heap of stones covering bones (letting all our wisdom and power fail us).
 2. This is an important part of our being brought into Christ, but it is not the most fundamental or decisive part. This week we will focus on God's resurrection call to those bones (opening our eyes to His wisdom and power and uniting us to His Son)!
 - a. As we look now at The Calling of the Cross, we will attempt to (1) Understand God's Calling; (2) Illustrate God's Calling; and (3) Apply God's Calling.

(1) Understanding God's Calling

- A. The way I'm reading Paul here in v. 24, makes everything hinge upon this "calling" of God. Here is the difference between those in the First Adam, and those in the Second Adam;

between damnation and salvation, between death and life. This is no mere word study. Our eternal destinies hang on it. Our first order of business then is to try to understand what Paul means by it.

Divine Invitation?

A. Though I have opened with such conviction, I'm aware that some might still not be convinced that this calling is all that I am making it out to be. After all, isn't it more natural and intuitive to see this word as referencing a sort of Divine Invitation? When I call someone to do something, I am inviting them to respond to my will with their own will. I'm not compelling them, I'm calling them.

1. Now, to be sure, we do see this Greek word used in this way even in 1 Corinthians:

1 Cor 10:27

If one of the unbelievers invites [καλέω] you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you...

a. You call me to dinner, and, if I will, I will go.

B. Is this what Paul means by his use of the word called? Is it a mere invitation for us to come to Christ if we will? Or is it something more?

Divine Intervention!

A. Certainly this interpretation is more pleasing to our man-centered sensibilities, but to receive such an interpretation here in 1 Cor 1 is to devastate the whole point of Paul's argument! Let's trace his thought together:

1. Paul first shows the plan of God as He's constructing the way of salvation:

"...in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom..." (v. 21).

a. It was God's plan to save us in such a way that we could not give credit to ourselves! Who would see anything wise and powerful in a condemned criminal dying on a cross? No one! No one, that is, without God's intervention.

2. Paul then proves and personalizes his argument by having the Corinthians consider their own calling:

1 Cor 1:26–28

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,

- a. Notice how God's calling correlates with His choosing which correlates with His plan. He chose those who were foolish and weak and despised and nobodies, so that no one could point to themselves as the origin of their salvation. And this choosing, as an act of God's will, results in His calling of these people to Himself.
3. And all of this Paul marshals towards the goal of our salvation: namely that man's boasting would be both silenced (with reference to himself) and unleashed (with reference to God):

1 Cor 1:29-31

²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

- a. We have made note in the past weeks that it is man's stubborn impulse to self-save that is the essence of his problem. If this calling were a mere invitation, it would not sever this root of pride but nourish it. If man needs his own wisdom to choose Christ, then he can boast in himself. But if man is so foolish, so blind, so dead that he cannot choose Christ, then when God sovereignly calls Him into union with His Son, then only can we fulfill what has been written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" (v. 31)!
 - i. The doctrine of God's sovereign election and effectual calling is the final blow to the last twitchings of man's fallen nature.
4. Perhaps nothing more devastating could be said about humanity than that which Paul says later in 1 Cor 2:14:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

- a. Here we get to the deepest issue in plainest language. It is not a problem with Jew or Greek, merely, as an ethnicity or culture, but with man in general: his nature. Man's very nature is opposed to God!
 - i. The implications then are staggering! We must first have the Spirit of God before we can accept the things of God. We must first be given "the mind of Christ" (2:16) before we can receive the cross of Christ. In other words: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3).

- (1) And this may have behind it that text quoted by Peter at Pentecost:

Joel 2:32 [quoted in Acts 2:21]

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. [Peter stops here] For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

- (a) Our calling on Him as Lord is initiated by His calling of us!

- B. What we have, then, in Paul's discussion of God's calling in 1 Cor 1 is not mere Divine Invitation but Divine Intervention. Of course we could say it is both invitation and intervention. But the two hold together like this: as He invites us through the preaching of the gospel, He also intervenes, enabling us to see and respond.

1. This calling, then, is a lot less like the calling of the dinner invitation of 1 Cor 10, and much more like the calling of creation in Gen 1, where, as Paul puts it in Rom 4:17b, God "calls into existence the things that do not exist." Your conversion is a new creation.

2 Cor 4:6

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," [Gen 1:3] has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

- a. We were the formless and the void. We were the darkness over the face of the deep. We were the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37), dead in our transgressions and sins, languishing in the desert of our exile. But the Spirit of God came in mercy and hovered over us. And as the message of the cross was preached, the One who sits above the heavens called: "Lazarus [Nick...], come out" (Joh 11:43b). The Spirit and the word met with re-creative impact, and this heart of stone started to beat (Ezek 36:26), and these deaf ears heard the voice of the Son of God (Joh 5:25), and these blind eyes saw in His face (even as it was smacked bloody on the cross) the glory of God, and we were born again!

2 Cor 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

(2) Illustrating God's Calling

“Paul, called...”

- A. Consider Paul as an illustration of his own teaching at this point. After all it is his call that is mentioned before any other’s in this epistle:

1 Cor 1:1a

“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.”

1. It’s no wonder that he saw God’s call as divine intervention for he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Act 9:1), in furious pursuit of them on the road to Damascus, when Jesus threw Him to the ground and opened His eyes to the truth. His conversion was not “Come to Me, if you will” but “You will come to Me, for I will!”
2. It’s no wonder that Paul understood our being called by God into Christ along the lines of creation with its “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3). For on the day God called him, the sky, even the bright noonday sky, was filled with light of such intensity that the only proper response was to fall on his face.
 - a. And I think this next piece is astounding. Remembering the inversion of the world in Adam—the fall that was also the flip—it is interesting to compare Adam with Paul at this point. For as Adam and Eve’s eyes were “opened” (Gen 3:7) on the day they went blind to God, so Paul went blind on the day his eyes were first opened to God!

Acts 9:8

Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.

- i. This is where Jesus begins with him. Before he can see he must know he is blind. Before he could be lifted up he had to be knocked down. Before he could be wise he must learn that he is a fool.
 - b. And then, three days later, Ananias is sent by the Lord to pray for him, and we are told that “something like scales fell from his eyes” (Act 9:18)...and as he blinked the world back into focus, he found that everything had changed. The cross that was once a scandal to him, had become his only boast!

(3) Applying God’s Calling

“I Give Thanks to My God Always”

- A. This is our story. If there is faith in this heart, there was a Lazarus-Damascus moment in my life and your life.
1. This is the meaning of the word church, ekklesia in the Greek. It is a compound word bringing together the preposition ek (denoting separation; from, out of) with the verb kaleo (to call) = called out ones. The church is composed of those who

have been called out of this fallen world in Adam and called into the Messianic Son and the new world he has initiated. This is our story.

B. So what does this mean for us? How should God's sovereign calling of us affect the way we live our lives?

1. In a word: "I give thanks to my God always..."

1 Cor 1:4, 8-9

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...

⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

a. Gratitude accords with grace. God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. Our sin remained like a thick veil between us and the stars like scales over our eyes. But by His word and Spirit, these were removed and, as with Paul, all is different. Life isn't about me, it's about Him, it's about you, and it's all of gratitude. How could He have saved me?!

i. And this gratitude touches everything, from our trials to our triumphs, because "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). This is why Paul could call the saints to "[give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:20). Give thanks always, because all of life is grace for us.

ii. Have you come in weighed down with your sin, concerned that if you make one wrong move God is ready to drop you from the team? Have you come in afraid that the trials you are facing are evidence that God is no longer for you but against you? "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son" ...therefore, "give thanks to God always!" He has purposed in His grace to do good to you, and that is what He shall do!

