

Christ & Him Crucified

(1) The Centrality 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.

A Tale of Two Cities

- A. Allow me to map the beginnings of my story here at Mercy Hill onto the beginnings of Paul’s story in Corinth. Interestingly, the ancient city of Corinth is strikingly similar to this modern city of San Jose and the greater bay area that we find ourselves living in today.

1. Prosperous—Corinth was a city of great wealth. If you were to find it on a map you would see that it is located strategically between North-South and East-West trade routes. It was a port city with lots of connections, lots of trade and commerce.
 - a. San Jose, likewise, is one of the wealthiest cities in America. I almost feel like I'm sinning just paying rent here, the prices are so obscene. There's a lot of wealth and prosperity here.
 2. Promising—Corinth was a city of promise. You have the intelligentsia, the men of status, and you have those that want to climb the social ladder, and there was an abundance of opportunities to do so—attracting the entrepreneurs, the opportunists.
 - a. Talking with Steve Marsh over lunch a few weeks ago, I found out San Jose used to be just orchards, nothing particularly special about it. But now, because of the overwhelming success of a few startups it's become one of the intellectual capitals of the world, with people flooding in now in hopes of getting a little bit of this success for themselves.
 3. Pluralistic—Because it was a city of wealth and promise, Corinth was also a pluralistic city with people coming in from all over the Roman empire. There was the cosmopolitan comingling of social classes, languages, philosophies, and religious devotions.
 - a. It was our first night in San Jose and we were trying to find a restaurant. So we got on yelp and it was amazing to see—Vietnamese, Korean, Hawaiian, Japanese, Italian, Thai, and then, of course, In n Out. What a pluralistic city!
 4. Promiscuous—Corinth was a promiscuous city. Historians speak of temple prostitutes and homosexual exploitation. We get a taste of their lasciviousness when we read in [1 Cor 11](#) that even members of the church were getting drunk at the Lord's table!
 - a. San Jose, it was just disclosed by the Barna group is (along with San Francisco and Oakland) the most "unchurched" & "dechurched" city in America. Beyond this, the evangelical churches that have had success in the bay area are giving way one by one to secular pressures over issues of ethic.
 5. Populous—Corinth was the biggest city that Paul had faced to date, with nearly a quarter of a million people crammed into its borders.
 - a. There's now over a million people in San Jose. When I was first driving through, I was thinking: does this urban sprawl ever end? It does...at my house :) God's provided for us a beautiful home at the base of the foothills. I love it! Come on over and let's go for a hike sometime :) But there's a lot of people here.
- B. With such metropolitan majesty before him, and with memory of the beatings and persecutions in places just behind him (Philippi and Thessalonica), it is no wonder that Paul says to the Corinthians in [2:3](#): "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling..."
1. Now, I haven't been beaten for the gospel, but I still feel something like fear and trembling when I stand before this city. Who am I?! I'm not the intellectually elite. I'm not an entrepreneur. I'm not wealthy. I'm not cultured. I don't know about computers, engineering, business, politics, and whatever else. I've graduated from

seminary, but do you think that really prepared me for this? “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor 2:16b). Not me. What am I gonna do?!

- a. I’m going to take my cues from Paul. How did Paul attempt to reach Corinth, in spite of his fear and trembling? What would be his philosophy of ministry? What would he say? What would he do? The same thing he did in every city he ever entered: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). The Christian ministry, no matter how frightening, is not about pandering to the culture to gain their approval, it’s about preaching the cross, even if we are crucified for it! We have one message, one hope, one boast...and one alone!
 - i. And so, following the Apostle Paul, I wanted to begin here with you as well. By God’s grace, I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Christ and Him Crucified

- A. You can call what we will be doing for the next month a mini-series, if you like. The overarching title would be Christ and Him Crucified, coming from 1 Cor 2:2. But we will come at this from 4 particular angles all drawing from 1 Corinthians as its source: (1) The Centrality of the Cross; (2) The Conquest of the Cross; (3) The Calling of the Cross; (4) The Community of the Cross.
 1. My aim in this series is to establish us immediately (though I know you’ve already been) as a cross-centered church that we might grow more and more into a cross-cultured church (by “cross-cultured” I mean that we would be a church that has a culture patterned after the cross of our Savior).

Why?!

- A. I’ll attempt to get us now into our particular angle for this morning by asking a question of the verse there in 1 Cor 2:2: namely, why? Why did Paul decide to know nothing among the Corinthians but Jesus Christ and Him crucified? Certainly it was not to gain for himself a following of fans. Everywhere he preached the cross he was all but crucified himself by the crowds. So why?
 1. To answer this I actually want to broaden the context to include the entirety of the Biblical narrative. When we do this we find that Paul didn’t invent this cross-focus. God did. The cross is the central feature in the storyline of Scripture, and this is because it is the central feature in God’s plan of redemption, and therefore it must be the central feature of Paul’s (and now our) preaching and life.
 - a. We will take these as our 3 headings under which I will organize my thoughts—starting with the broadest context and narrowing in towards our text in 1 Corinthians.

(1) The Centrality of the Cross in the Storyline of Scripture

The Cast Stone of God's Decree

A. The cross is the central feature in the storyline of Scripture. Now, by this I do not mean that it is merely central in location (the Gospels occur near the middle of our Bibles), but central in significance (no matter what page you open to, the cross of Christ comes into view!). Everything in the Old Testament looks forward to the cross and everything in the New Testament looks backward to the cross.

1. It's as if God, from all eternity, cast a stone forward into the future and as it lands in the water of His providence, ripples issue out from it. Now the stone is the cross of Christ as God decreed it from all eternity; the ripples backward are all the promises, prophecies, symbols, and shadows of His cross that permeate the Old Testament; and the ripples forward are the showing and sharing of His cross that continue in and through His people as they take up their own crosses and follow Him.

B. Seeing this in the Old Testament can often be the most difficult, so let me give you an example using a text from our book of focus, 1 Corinthians.

1 Cor 10:1b–4 [Paul directs the Corinthians back to the Old Testament...]

¹ ...Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,

² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,

³ and all ate the same spiritual food,

⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

1. Who would see this at first glance?! But when you investigate more closely it is there! Just as the rock ("at Horeb" [Exo 17:6]) was struck by the staff of Moses and water flowed out for the covenant people of God to drink as they traveled through the wilderness on their way to the promised land, so too Christ was struck by the full weight of the curse of the law of Moses on the cross and from Calvary's fountain living water now flows out for the covenant people of God to drink during our wilderness sojourn on earth as we travel toward the heavenly city! Paul is here inviting us to look for Christ all over the Old Testament, because He is there!

(2) The Centrality of the Cross in the Plan of Redemption

A. Now we must ask why? Why is the cross at the center of the storyline of Scripture? Why all the ripples backward and forward? The cross is central in the storyline of Scripture because it is central in God's plan of redemption. Revelation always has redemption as its goal. God doesn't send humanity into exile and then leave them alone. He loves. He pursues. He speaks. He puts ripples of the cross all through the Scriptures because the cross alone is the solution to man's deepest problem.

The Problem

- A. But what is this problem at root? Let's investigate it now together that we might see more clearly how the cross answers to it. For this, turn to Genesis 3. The fall is where everything went wrong. It's where the genetic code of our sinful nature and the structure of this now fallen world was established.

Gen 3:1–8 [God created realms, then filled those realms, with man as the capstone of all, all was very good, and all was given to man, except for the fruit from a single tree, it was by the fruit of this tree that man's allegiances would be tested...]

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,

³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.

⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

⁸ And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

(1) THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

1. What happened here? It seems to me, borrowing the language of our text, what Adam and Eve wanted most was wisdom and power: "...the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (v. 6b); and "...you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (v. 5b). The desire for wisdom and power in itself, interestingly, is not an evil desire. God intended for them to grow in wisdom and in His likeness. The deep root of our problem emerges in the way they attempted to attain this wisdom and power: they exalted themselves over and against God rather than humbling themselves under and walking with God. We were created by God for God to flourish under and with God, and we would have none of it. We would be God or we would be nothing. "You will not reign over me."
 - a. We have, then, at the root of our dilemma, a God-impeaching, man-enthroning pride. Here is what I would call the ancient antithesis: man over and against God. It is established at the fall and carries on into our day.

2. This makes sense of the goal we see driving God's activity back in 1 Corinthians 1. If you look closely, you will see that God is on the warpath. But who/what is He at war with?
 - a. "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise" (v. 19a, quoting Isa 29:14).
 - b. "The discernment of the discerning, I will thwart" (v. 19b, cont. quote).
 - c. He is making "foolish the wisdom of the world" (v. 20b).
 - d. His aim is "to shame the wise" and "to shame the strong" (v. 27).
 - e. And "to bring to nothing the things that are" (v. 28).
 - f. And then, finally, the ultimate goal is made crystal clear: "so that no human being (flesh) might boast in the presence of God" (v. 29).
3. Boasting is the issue. Boasting in God's face. That's what He is looking to silence. The cross is God's attempt to confront the ancient antithesis, the proud heart of man that exalts itself over and against His Creator.

(2) THE RESULT OF THE PROBLEM

1. There is something else that is important for us to note if we are to make sense of Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 1. It is traditional to speak of what happens in Gen 3 as the fall. And this is right. The capstone of God's creation fell from his high and honorable place in the created order. But there is more. It is also a flip. We are not now merely living life on a lower plane, we are living life upside-down. There is descension but there is also inversion.

Think with me here about the order of creation: vegetation is put under the animals, the animals are put under humanity, with the woman put under the man, and the man put under God. Now consider the fall: the fruit is leveraged by the serpent ("beast of the field" [v. 1]), given to the woman, who gives to the man, who directly disobeys the covenant of God. It is precisely the reverse. It is the undoing of the created order. Man's reach for wisdom and power over and against God, capsizes the entire creation! And this inversion was sealed in the curses of God.

2. This makes sense of the irony that permeates Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 1. If the world truly is upside-down now, then what seems to natural man as wisdom would truly be foolishness, and what seems to him as power would truly be weakness, and vice versa.

B. Consider a few illustrations of this:

1. Remember King Nebuchadnezzar who, when he's walking on the roof of his palace says to himself: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" And then we're told: "While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, '...The kingdom has departed from you...and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field'" (Dan 4:30-32). The more wise and powerful he thought himself the more beastly he became!

2. Remember Herod, when he had given a speech and all the people were shouting: “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” and then Luke records, “Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (Act 12:22-23). When he’s high and lifted up, eaten by worms!
3. It’s not just in the Bible, it’s in our hearts. What are we gonna do?

The Solution

- A. We can do nothing. All of man’s attempts to save himself—whether by science, education, government, etc.—are ironically mere expressions of his deep problem, not solutions to it. Man’s attempt to self-realize and self-save, by virtue of his own (and not God’s) wisdom and power, is the very essence of His depravity and dilemma.
- B. The only One who could save us was the one we so terribly offended: namely, God. And He does it! The very first curse after the fall was, ironically, at the same time, the first promise of the cross. God cursed the serpent by promising the Messiah.
 1. We rebelled against God’s authority, and in so doing we inverted the created order of His world. But He doesn’t give us the death sanction we deserve. Instead He enters into this world Himself, to save us. And when God enters into an upside-down world He becomes a man, Jesus Christ. On the cross we watch as the only righteous One is made to be sin; as the only wise One is made to be foolish and laughable; as the One strong enough to uphold all things by the word of His power, is made so weak that He can’t even uphold His own head; as the One who is love itself is thrown to the wolves of hatred; as the One who once knew only the riches of God’s glory, is made poor and naked; as the true Son of God is disinherited and abandoned by His Father; as the light of the world hangs suffocating in darkness; as the Author of life offers himself up to death.

Here is the ghastly climax of this inversion: man kills God!

2. But wonder upon wonder, the ghastly climax of this inversion, by God’s amazing grace, actually sets in motion the glorious beginning of a grand reversion. While we thought we were killing Him, He was actually saving us!!!
 - a. In the resurrection of Christ, God declares a new beginning. Our sins have been paid for in full. And we can come home! He begins to put us back right side up. In Christ now, the poor are made rich; the mourning are comforted; the meek are given the world; the hungry and thirsty are satisfied; the lost are found; the sick are healed; the deaf hear; the blind see; the lame walk; the dead live!

(3) The Centrality of the Cross in Paul’s Preaching & Life

Diagnosis & Cure

- A. The cross is central in the storyline of Scripture, because it is central in the plan of redemption, and therefore it must be central in Paul's preaching. God has so designed the cross that it would be both diagnosis and cure of man's deepest problem. The preaching of the cross brings us face to face with both our problem and its solution!
1. It is diagnosis in that it exposes the deep root of our God-impeaching, man-enthroning pride. For to the proud heart the cross appears as only foolishness and weakness.
 2. But it is cure in that the cross makes a way for us to be born again. Christ pays the penalty for our God-impeaching pride. He takes on the fall and the flip so that we can be brought back to God and put right side up. And when the preaching of the cross is accompanied by the power of the Spirit, blind men's eyes are opened to see it as it truly is: the wisdom and power of God.

Boast!

- A. I stated earlier that God with the cross was aiming to silence man's boasting: "so that no human being (flesh) might boast in the presence of God" (v. 29). That was only partially correct. Put more precisely, it is the object of our boasting that is God's concern. We were actually created to boast, only not in man, but in God. "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (v. 31)—we were created to see and savor His glory! We were created to behold and boast in Him! And situated between the wrong boasting (v. 29) and the right boasting (v. 31) is the work of Christ on the cross (v. 30). It's the cross that makes possible this transfer of boasts (bringing things back into created order).
1. Let me leave you with a single point of application: boast, louder than you've ever boasted before...in the Lord of the cross. Get haughty, get puffed up, with praise for the King of Calvary. Be as arrogant, as proud, as conceited as you can about your crucified Savior. Brag about His wisdom, His power, His love, His grace!
 - a. Corinth and San Jose in all their glory are but foolishness and weakness when compared to this God. We were created to behold and boast in Him! It is the cross that gets us there. Let's decide as a church, then, even when we stand before this world in fear and trembling, to together know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified!