

## Jesus Christ and Him Crucified

### 1 Corinthians 2:1-9

Introduction: Those who love the Lord Jesus love His cross. They love it because it is there that wrath and mercy made peace. It is there that righteousness and grace were united. Because of the salvation made possible by the cross, Christians will boast in it and nothing else (Gal. 6:14). The cross is our delight, our joy, our hope, our all. It grieves us when the spiritually lost, the “perishing” of 1:18, do not see the cross and love the cross as we do. However, the Bible tells us why this is so. They can’t make sense of how a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew dying on a cross could be the means of our salvation. Those who are intellectually driven will go so far as to call it foolishness (1:23). The simple message of the cross has no attraction.

Now, this reality opens the door to a dangerous temptation. Perhaps what we need to do is adorn the cross; make the message more attractive with eloquence and stirring rhetoric. Maybe if we just get the presentation right, people will respond. To such thinking Paul gives a resounding “No!” The power is in the content of the message not the delivery of the messenger. It is in the work of the Spirit not the wisdom of man.

Paul arrived in Corinth after a tough time in Athens (see Acts 17-18). Few had believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is likely he was questioning his methods.

Perhaps he even asked himself, “should I adjust the message?” His conclusion is clear: I will not change a thing! The gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. Paul addresses both in 2:1-9.

## I. The Cross Reveals the Power of God 2:1-5

Paul had determined in his soul that, “He was an ambassador, not a “Christian salesman”” (Wiersbe, *Be Wise*, 34). God had saved and called him to preach not perform. Paul knew that the power to give spiritual life to spiritually dead people was in the preaching of the cross plain and simple. To faithfully carry out this assignment Paul notes four essential elements.

### 1) The method is to be simple 2:1

Paul says, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery (*ESV*, “testimony”) of God to you, I did not come with brilliance (*NIV*, “eloquence”) of speech or wisdom.” Paul was not interested in impressing people with his oratorical abilities. He was not interested in people saying after he finished speaking, “what a great preacher!” Paul knew there is always a danger of the messenger getting in the way of the message, and he was always on guard to make sure this did not happen. He knew for people to be saved they needed to see Christ and Him crucified. John Henry Jowett (1863-1923), pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, echoes the heart of the apostle Paul, “What we are after is not that folks shall

say at the end of it all, “What an excellent sermon!” That is a measured failure. You are there to have them say when it is over, “What a great [Savior]!” It is something for men not to have been in your presence but in His” (Quoted in *Context*, 12-1-97; p. 2). When we preach or share the gospel, keep the method simple. Be sure to point them to Jesus, not you.

2) The message is to be clear

2:2

When we share the gospel, regardless of the context, our message must be clear. It is “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Paul said he had “decided to know nothing” among the Corinthians other than this. I am convinced he made this determination because he knew this is the only way of salvation. Now, I am certain Paul believed there are many important issues that the church needs to address and teach on. The rest of 1 Corinthians clearly affirms this. But, that which is foundational and of first importance is the gospel of a crucified and resurrected Savior (1:18; 15:3-6). Paul knew, and we must always remember, if Christianity ever loses the centrality of the cross it will lose Christianity. Further, the message is simple and must always be presented clearly. It needs no addition and it must never be subtracted. That Jesus died in our place (substitution) and paid in full the penalty of our sin (penal) is a non-negotiable of biblical truth. This message needs no adjustment. Share it in unvarnished clarity and trust God’s Spirit

to do His work. My friend Paul Tripp is spot on, “The cross confronts us with how we really are (sinners) and what we need (rescuing and forgiving grace)” (*Journey to the Cross*, 9). Present the gospel simply. Present the gospel clearly.

### 3) The messenger is to be dependent on God 2:3-4

Paul is autobiographical and honest in verses 3-4. In verse 3 he bares his soul and says his coming to Corinth was characterized by 3 things: 1) “weakness,” 2) “fear” and 3) “much trembling.” These phrases describe Paul’s state of mind when he arrived at Corinth. He was not self-confident and certainly not cocky. He was scared and weak. His heart was pounding and he was weak in the knees. If anything good happened it would be God’s doing not his. Today we would say such an assignment is beyond me, over my head, above my pay grade. But, and this is good news, this is exactly where God wants us and this is where God can use us greatly. Paul would say this exact thing in 2 Cor. 12:10, “For when I am weak; then I am strong.” God delights in working through weak, God-dependent vessels. This mindset impacted Paul’s approach to ministry and preaching as verse 4 makes clear. “My speech (*NIV*, “message”) and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom.” Paul would not fall into the trap of the Greek rhetoricians and sophists who would flatter, entice and manipulate their

audience in order to gain applause and also line their pockets. He knew if he talked them into making a commitment or decision someone else could talk them out of it. Therefore, Paul would rely on “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Paul would preach and the Spirit would work. Paul would preach and the Spirit would convert.

Tom Schreiner points out that in many ways, “The life of the apostle replicates...and matches the life of our Lord. The pathway to power is through weakness” (*1 Cor.* TNTC, 77). I would also note that though Paul did not preach to entertain and receive this applause of men, he did recognize the need to be clear and also persuasive in the right way. He knew that what we say is more important than how we say it, but how we say it is important! We do not honor Christ and Him crucified with poor preparation and presentation. Our great Savior always deserves our best, weak and feeble as it may be. Curtis Vaughn is our helper when he writes, “Nothing in Paul’s words should be seen as an invitation to the contemporary preacher to make his words dull and insipid. God’s message is to be presented in a creative arresting manner. The gospel must also be plain, clear, and undiluted. Paul feared greatly the dilution of the gospel by an excessive emphasis on form. So long as the content of the gospel is kept intact, the method of presenting it may be adjusted to the audience.” (*1 Cor.* BSC, 34).

Better to say something poorly than to say nothing well. Better still, to say something well and depend on the Spirit to do His work. It is said of Charles Spurgeon that as he would enter the pulpit he would repeat the words, “I believe in the ministry of the Holy Spirit.” If this is true of the “Prince of Preachers,” how much more should it be true of us?

4) The motive is to be sincere 2:5

When it comes to preaching or sharing the gospel the question of our motives is unavoidable. Am I seeking my glory or God’s? His praise or mine? I have known of contemporary evangelists who would guarantee that a percentage of those in attendance in their meetings would “make decisions.” Such men, I dare not call them preachers, were masters of manipulation. Their ability to move people from one geographical location in an auditorium to another might be impressive, for a moment, to human eyes, but it bordered on blasphemy to God’s. Our goal as those who faithfully proclaim the gospel is never to add another person to our spiritual trophy case. No, it is to simply proclaim clearly “Christ and Him crucified” and trust in the power of God to give saving faith to those who hear. Paul teaches us that simply proclaiming, “Christ and Him crucified” is the means that opens the door to “the Spirit’s power” (v. 4), “God’s power” (v. 5). Saving faith, real faith, cannot be found in “human wisdom” no matter how

brilliant and attractive it may be. Saving faith must have a saving object, and that object is “Christ and him crucified.” Leon Morris is right, “a faith that depends on clever reasoning may be demolished by a more acute argument, but the faith which is produced by the power of God can never be overthrown” (*1 Cor.* TNTC, 52).

## II. The Cross Imparts the Wisdom of God 2:6-9

The cross is both God’s power (2:1-5) and God’s wisdom (2:6-9).

Unfortunately, we are always in danger of losing both. By neglect or adjustment, the message of the cross can be explained away and lost. A.W. Tozer expressed this very concern with respect to our own day when he writes, “If I see aright, the cross of popular evangelicalism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is, rather, a new bright ornament upon the bosom of a self-assured and carnal Christianity whose hands are indeed the hands of Abel, but whose voice is the voice of Cain. The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it. The old cross brought tears and blood; the new cross brings laughter. The flesh, smiling and confident, preaches and sings about the cross; before that cross it bows and toward that cross it points with carefully staged histrionics – but upon that cross

it will not die, and the reproach of that cross it stubbornly refuses to bear.” (*The Divine Conquest*).

It is wise for us to be reminded that Paul wrote these verses to the church and not to the world, to the saved and not the lost. His fear is that blood bought believers could lose the power of the cross and miss the wisdom of the cross.

He was then, as we must be today, well aware of the evil seductions of the flesh, the world, and Satan. He has addressed the power of the cross. Now, he turns to address its wisdom, building on what he previously wrote in 1:18-31.

Once more Paul instructs us by making a sharp contrast.

1) There is a wisdom that will not last 2:6

Paul begins by saying there is a wisdom in Christ and Him crucified, but it is not connected in any way to “human wisdom” (v. 5) or the “wisdom of this age” (v. 6). However, it requires spiritual maturity to rightly appreciate God’s wisdom. Now in a sense, Paul would consider all Christians as “the mature” in contrast to the lost. However, he recognized they don’t always act mature! Amazingly, God’s wisdom is quite simple. It is not complex. It is the preaching of the cross. To go beyond the cross or away from the cross reveals you are acting like a spiritual baby (3:1). Further, the wisdom of this world will not last. It is a wisdom that is at home in this present evil age (cf. Ga. 1:4; 1 Tim. 6:17) and characteristic of the evil rulers of this age (human



not demonic). Such a wisdom is “coming to nothing,” headed nowhere.

The way this world thinks and evaluates things is a dead end that will not deliver what it promises. Fee is right, “Those whom the Corinthians would especially give deference do not really know true wisdom; indeed they are themselves “coming to nothing”” (*1 Cor.* NICNT, 111). You want to know just how bankrupt their wisdom is? Look what they did to “the Lord of glory” (v. 8).

2) There is a wisdom for our glory 2:7-9

Romans 1:22 says of fallen, sinful humanity, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” Perhaps nothing proves this truth more clearly than what “the rulers of this age” did when they “crucified the Lord of glory” (v. 8). I suspect Paul had in mind both Jewish and Roman leaders, particularly the Sanhedrin, Herod and Pilate. Yes, the wisdom of this age is bankrupt, but that does not mean there isn’t a true and authentic wisdom, a wisdom of God. John Piper is right, “The Bible may condemn the wisdom of men but it will not surrender wisdom to the enemy” (“The Wisdom We Speak,” 7-20-80). “The wisdom of this age is coming to nothing” (v. 6). But, “on the contrary,” Paul writes, “We speak God’s hidden wisdom in a mystery, a wisdom God predestined before the ages for our glory” (. 7). Let’s unwrap what Paul is saying here.

First, the idea of a “hidden wisdom in a mystery” draws from the language of Daniel 2 (see 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47; also 4:9). A “mystery” in the New Testament speaks of something previously hidden but now revealed. It speaks of something humans could only know by divine revelation.

Second, God’s hidden wisdom has a paradoxical nature to it. The fact is God had promised a deliverer, a Savior, throughout the Old Testament.

There were promises, prophecies, shadows and types. However, these is a big problem. Because of human sinfulness, those very promises were misunderstood and misinterpreted. Two things are a part of God’s hidden mystery that brought clarity: the cross/resurrection and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (2:10-13, 15-16). Don Carson is especially helpful when he writes, “The point is that however much the Old Testament points to Jesus, much of this prophecy is in veiled terms – in types and shadows and structures of thought. The sacrificial system prepares the way for the supreme sacrifice; the office of high priest anticipates the supreme intermediary between God and sinful human beings, the man Christ Jesus; the Passover displays God’s wrath and provides a picture of the ultimate passover lamb whose blood averts that wrath; the announcement of a new covenant (Jer. 31) and a new priesthood (Ps. 110) pronounce the obsolescence in principle of the old covenant and priesthood.

Hypothetically, if there had been some perfect people around to observe what was going on, people with an unblemished heart for God, they might well have observed the patterns and understood the plan. But the world has been peopled with sinners since the fall, and the Old Testament Scriptures God gave were often in some measure misunderstood. That there was human fault in this misunderstanding is presupposed by Jesus himself when he berates his followers: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:25-26).” (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 49).

Third, Paul notes that this marvelous wisdom was “predestined before the ages.” This was not a new idea in the mind of God, as if that ever happens! (see Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:5, 11). God planned what would happen and when it would happen (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12, 20).

Fourth, the hidden and mysterious wisdom of God revealed in “Christ and him crucified” is for our “glory.” This is unexpected but so wonderful. We know the cross brings glory to God, but now we learn it is for our glory too! This glory begins the moment we are saved. O’, but it does not stop there. It will grow and increase until the day of our glorification and our perfect confirmation to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:28-30). Contrasting our

destiny with the rulers of this age, J.B. Lightfoot writes, “Our glory increases, while their glory wanes” (Quoted in Kistemaker, *1 Cor.*, 82).

Verse 8 drives home the point that this marvelous mystery and hidden wisdom was completely missed by “the rulers of this age.” Indeed, “None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (*NLT*, “glorious Lord; cf. James 2:1). What sinful humanity did to the “Lord of glory” in nailing him to the cross reveals just how evil is our hearts and how blind is our eyes.

“Lord of glory” is used of God in the Old Testament (Ps. 24:10; 29:3). Now it is applied to Jesus. Leon Morris notes, “More than one scholar has thought that this is the loftiest title Paul ever applied to Christ. It stands fitly alongside the application to him of words originally referring to Yahweh (1:31). Both show that Paul habitually assigned to Christ the highest place of all.” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 55).

We would be negligent in our exposition if we did not note once again the dance in Scripture between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

The cross was God’s plan marked out before time began. The cross is also the responsibility of the wicked “rulers of this age” who crucified the Lord of glory.” Perhaps the apostle Peter says it in the simplest way in Acts 4:27-28, “For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles

and the people of Israel, assembled together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your will had predestined to take place.” The evil “rulers of this age” did it and God determined it would happen. Divine mystery indeed!

In verse 9 Paul writes words often read at a funeral about the wonderful glories that will be ours in heaven. However, in context, he is not talking about what will be ours in the future but what is ours right now. Paul brings together a number of Old Testament text (Isa. 64:4; but also see Isa. 52:15; 65:17; Jere. 3:16). They demonstrate that humans could never learn the wonderful wisdom of Christ crucified on their own. No eye, ear or heart could conceive (ESV, “imagine”) such a thing. God had to reveal it, and He has “for those who love him.” Rationalism cannot reason to God.

Empiricism cannot locate God. But, as John MacArthur puts so well, “What man cannot find God has given. Man cannot come to God on his own, but God has come to him” (*1 Cor.*, 62).

Conclusion: We conclude our study with a word from the wonderful medieval mystic Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). He says it so simply and so beautifully, “In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection against our enemies; in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; in the Cross is excellence of virtue; in the Cross

is perfection of holiness. There is no salvation of soul, nor hope of eternal life, save in the Cross.” (*The Inner Life*).