

God's Foolish Choice

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Date: 17 October 1999

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of October 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled God's Foolish Choice and is from 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.5 Let's pray that God will help us to understand that passage and apply it in our lives.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for speaking to us through your word and we pray that not only will we understand it and believe it, but also that we will live it. And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

There are three types of hero. If you go to a film and there's a hero in it, I reckon it's bound to be one of three types.

There's the Arnold Schwarzenegger type of hero. Or for those older, the John Wayne type of hero. The one who just uses brute force.

[1 : 17] Guns blazing, boots and all. Brute strength. Harrison Ford, Superman, hero after hero are like that. Just full of great big hulk and muscle.

But there's another type of hero. The Inspector Morse type of hero. You can't imagine Inspector Morse rushing into a building and punching the daylights out of people.

No, he wins his issues and solves his battles and solves his problems through the little grey cells up here. Through his mind. Through his cleverness.

Through his ingenuity. That's not just mystery type things. Tom Cruise in A Few Good Men was the lawyer who outwitted and outsmarted by his cleverness. Those that were seeking injustice.

It's like the Robin Williams character, the psychologist in Good Will Hunting. Through their cleverness. Through their thinking and their strategy. They solve their problems or win their battles.

[2 : 22] Two types of hero. The ones who are just body people. And the others who are the mind type people. It's the difference between the fast bowler and the spinner.

Between McGrath and Warne. Or between Tony Lockett's brute force and Paul Kelly's cleverness. But there is a third type of hero.

And a lot of films have this sort of hero in it. It's the unlikely hero. Very often it's a comedy. Because the unlikeliness of the hero creates the humorous effect.

Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau. Or Maxwell Smart in Get Smart. They're such bumbling idiots. They don't have any decent mind.

Nor any great brute strength. The trouble is they keep solving the problems. And winning the battles. The unlikely hero. Well in films or books or whatever it is.

[3 : 25] And whichever of the three types of hero it is. The point about it all is that they solve the problems. That they rescue the lost. They win the battles.

In the Old Testament the people of God anticipated God's action as a mighty work.

And the basis for that expectation was that several hundreds of years before Paul wrote these words and before Jesus lived. God had brought the people of Israel out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

And the traditional way of remembering that event was to describe it as with an outstretched arm and a mighty hand. It was an act of great power. Because God sent ten different plagues against Pharaoh.

The Nile turned to blood and there were locusts and people died. And all sorts of powerful things. And then the mighty waters of the Red Sea opened up. And then they swallowed up Pharaoh's army and so on.

[4 : 26] Acts of incredible power. It's type one type hero stuff. That's going on in the Old Testament. And time and again in the Old Testament that's how God worked to save his people.

When they were in a predicament. God would act in powerful and mighty ways. Always type one. So no wonder in Jesus' day and in Paul's day.

When the Jews looked to see where God was working or acting. They looked for signs of power. Signs of strength.

Or brute force. They were looking for a type one hero. But side by side with the Jewish expectation in Jesus and Paul's day was the Greek culture.

And in that culture what was esteemed most was cleverness. Was the use of the mind.

[5 : 29] So the heroes for the Greeks were type two type heroes. The ones who through strategy and ingenuity proved to be cleverer or wiser than the rest.

And so if you were to discover God in the Greek world. You would pursue the mind. Philosophy. Thinking. Ingenuity. Intellectual capacity.

And so on. God would be found there. In wonderful and lofty thoughts. In eloquent oratory. And rhetoric. Now even today.

Those two types of thinking. And those searches for type one and type two heroes. Are very common. In religious and even Christian circles.

There are lots of people who search for God in the miracles. They yearn for God to act with a great act of power. They search for healing. They search for signs of God's power.

[6 : 28] And they despair when there is weakness in the church or in their life. On the other hand there are those who prize the mind. So their quest for God comes through their thinking.

And often their thinking puts aside the simplistic Bible. And considers that things like death and resurrection are really just metaphors and not real events. That God is somehow enshrouded in mystery beyond our knowing.

And all we can do is pursue our minds thoughts to their furthest extreme. In contrast to both those types.

And both those ways of searching for God. This passage in 1 Corinthians reminds us. That God's hero is a most unlikely hero.

And God's power and wisdom. Is not found in brute force. Nor is it found in clever thinking. It's found in the most unlikely of places.

[7 : 35] Where the hero dies on a cross. But this is no unlikely hero that is a comedy figure. For the issue that we're dealing with tonight.

Is the very heart of Christianity. It is about how God saves you and me. You see at its center.

The Christian gospel is about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. And that's not the center.

Because of the nature of his death. That is the heart of Christianity is not the cross.

Because the cross was excruciating. The heart of Christianity is not the cross. Because it's an unusual form of death. The heart of Christianity is not the cross. Because it was an unfair or unjust death.

The heart of Christianity is the cross. because it's in the cross that God saves people like you and me. That's the crunch. That's what it's all about.

[8 : 39] Yes, a Jewish carpenter's son who happened to be an itinerant preacher for some of his time, one who performed some miracles and said some wise things and had a small motley band of followers dying on a cross 2,000 years ago in Palestine is a very unlikely figure to save the sins of the world.

What? It's foolishness to think that. It's madness to think that. It's nonsense. But it's true. When you play chess, the aim of the game is not to lose your pieces, in part, and capture their king.

And if you lose a piece, normally you're hoping that in the losing of your piece you gain a piece of the equal standing of the piece that you lost. And the most important piece, in effect, is the queen in a game of chess.

Now, sometimes there are places where it may actually be a good move to sacrifice a piece. But the chances of a good move sacrificing a queen are very remote.

If you're a chess player, don't go around sacrificing your queen. I don't think you'd win very often. But what if you were to sacrifice your king?

[10 : 05] Well, the rules would say you can't sacrifice your king. If you sacrifice your king, you surrender. I mean, it would be foolish to sacrifice your king. You couldn't win. You can't win.

If you sacrifice your king. Who would ever, if you were a chess player, dream up such a gambit as this, sacrifice your king to win? It's not in any of the chess books.

I'm sure of that. But the cross, where Jesus died, is the king's sacrifice that wins. Oh, it's foolish. It's stupid. You don't play a game of chess like that. You don't have a means to get to God like that, where there's a king's sacrifice. The gospel gambit isn't in any of the textbooks of religion.

Who could dream up something like that? It's not very wise. It's not very clever. It's not very strong. If you sacrifice your king, you're creating the weakest possible position.

[11 : 08] And the most foolish. But with God, that's how he wins. By sacrificing the king.

Bizarre playing. But God's gospel gambit works. And that's what Paul is saying in this passage. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

It's nonsense. It's weak and foolish. But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. It's almost as though we can't explain it, but it works.

It is God's power to save. That's the crucial thing about Christianity. Jesus' death on the cross. To save us from our sins.

To save us from eternal death. To save us from eternal punishment. To reconcile us to God. It's a foolish, mad, nonsensical way of achieving it. But it's how God does it.

[12 : 10] And what's more, it pulls the rug out from under the feet of the wise person. The person whose clever thinking says, that can't be the way to God, it's got to be in the pursuit of our thinking and philosophies and wisdom.

Paul says, God's not on about the wise. He's always on about pulling the rug out from under their feet. It's not just in the cross that he does that, but for hundreds of years, that's what God has been on about.

So Paul quotes an Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, in verse 19. God says, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. So Paul then taunts the hypothetical philosopher and wise man who's standing by as this letter is being read.

Where is the one who's wise, he says? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

They've all gone strangely silent in the light of the cross, in the light of God's foolishness.

What's left of your wisdom, Paul taunts them, in the light of Jesus' death on the cross? You see, wisdom fails to know God.

[13 : 22] Stephen Hawking, at the end of his book, A Brief History of Time, I think says something like this, that we are on the verge of knowing the mind of God.

He's wrong. The mind of God is known in the cross, not in the cleverness of human scientists or thinkers.

The mind of God is found not through human wisdom, but through God revealing himself in his son's death on the cross.

That's what Paul's saying in verse 21, 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.

Wisdom only produces ignorance of God. I remember when I used to visit Oxford for seminars when I was studying in England. Some people would wear t-shirts and they'd be sold in the shops with something like, the more you study, the more you know.

[14 : 31] The more you know, the more you realize you don't know. The more you realize you don't know, the more ignorant you are. So why study? In a sense, that's Paul's argument here.

The wiser you are, gets you nowhere with God. All it does is create greater ignorance of the God who's revealed his mind on the cross of Jesus.

Paul's argument so far is really targeting the type 2 thinkers, the people who are looking for a wise, clever Inspector Morse type hero. But now he turns his attention also to the type 1 seekers, the Jews.

Jews demand signs, he says in verse 22, and Greeks desire wisdom. But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles or Greeks.

You see, if the cross is just foolishness to the Greeks who try to think cleverly and don't understand what's going on in the cross, it is an offense to the Jews.

[15 : 47] That is, it's not just something that they think, oh, that's a bit stupid of God to do that.

They're actually scandalized by it. They find it repulsive and offensive to think that the Messiah could be crucified.

That's a contradiction in terms for them. To think that the Saviour, God's sent Saviour, could somehow hang cursed on a cross, or anyone who hanged on a cross was cursed by God himself. To think that such a person could be the Messiah, Saviour, was offensive, if not almost blasphemous. That's why before he was a Christian, Paul was so antagonistic to the Christians. Because he found the Christian message about Jesus Christ utterly offensive and scandalous and repulsive. It was blasphemy. And that's why Christians deserved, in his mind, to be put to death. Maybe today we've lost something of how mad and offensive the cross was in the first century. For us it's become a sterilized symbol of salvation.

[16:54] Something that's rather neat and tidy and clean. But in the first century, especially for Jews, it was degrading, offensive, scandalous.

It wasn't just foolish. It was utterly revolting to think that there were people who thought that somebody dying on a cross was God's Messiah.

But Paul became a Christian. He discovered the reality of it all. It wasn't a scandal or an offense after all.

But rather, as he says in verse 24, to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Yes, he looked impotent on a cross, but it's the power of God. He looked foolish hanging naked on a cross, but it's the wisdom of God to save.

[17:52] You see, the point is, the cross is effective. It does what God set out to do. It accomplishes his plan to save sinful people like us. Wisdom cannot find God.

The cross reveals God. Wisdom cannot save us from our sin. The cross does. On the cross, God outsmarted humanity.

The humans who thought that they were bringing to an end this plan of this Jesus, God outsmarted them. His wisdom was far greater than theirs.

God's foolishness was greater than human wisdom. So Paul says at the end of the paragraph, verse 25, for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. And God's weakness, where they thought that they'd somehow stopped and stifled this plan of God, was in fact stronger than human strength.

The sign-seeking Jews were blind to the real sign. The wisdom-seeking Greeks could not comprehend the truth. Paul's argument here is about the fundamental nature of the Christian message or gospel.

[19:14] It's very central. And he illustrates it now with two illustrations. The next paragraph to the end of the chapter is an illustration of the Corinthians themselves.

And then at the beginning of the second chapter, the illustration is of Paul and his preaching. He says to them in verse 26 to 31, if you think my message is strange, then think about yourselves. You see, you're the result of the weak and foolish cross. And you Corinthians, yourselves, are basically weak and foolish. There's nothing special about you, he says.

Consider, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you were of noble birth. Oh, there were a couple. There was Crispus, who was the Jewish synagogue leader who'd become a Christian.

But basically, these were normal people. They weren't particularly wealthy. They weren't particularly academic or intellectual or influential or significant. They were just normal people.

[20:19] And in the eyes of the world, fairly weak and fairly foolish. Paul is saying that the church is like the cross.

The cross is weak and foolish and so is the church. Because after all, if God's means of saving is through something weak and foolish, well, the result will be the same.

Now, sometimes we're tempted to give up on the church because of its failings and failures. Yet there is something in the essence of the church that is itself weak and foolish.

And in fact, the very weakness of the church points to God's power in a strangely ironic way. pastorally, the weakness of the church ought to encourage us.

Firstly, because there's a place for all of us. You don't have to be strong and wise to be a member of the church. You don't have to be particularly competent or gifted. If you think you're nothing special, how could God use you so you just sit back, think again.

[21:31] We're all weak and foolish just like you. And yet God uses us and calls us to be His church on earth. So don't be afraid of failing in church.

Don't be afraid of failing in the Christian life. I don't mean go out and sin regardless but rather failure is not the end.

But on the other hand, don't think yourself too good either. Don't think that somehow you're special material that God's chosen because you're particularly good and gifted. I'm afraid to tell you you're weak and foolish like all of us.

Notice what Paul says about the Corinthians from verse 27. Not that they chose God or found God or were wise enough for God or powerful enough for God but rather that God chose them.

It's God's initiative at every point. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

[22 : 34] God chose what is low and despised in the world things that are basically nothing. That's us folks to reduce to nothing things that are.

And the point of it all so that no one might boast in the presence of God. We've got nothing to boast about. It's all God's doing.

It's not our achievement. It's not the result of our wisdom or our strength. All of salvation comes from God. As Paul goes on to say in verse 30 God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

In order that as it's written he quotes Jeremiah the prophet let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. Now we see even more clearly why the cross is offensive to people.

Because the cross is the great leveller. There is only flat ground in front of the cross. You see the cross means that we all stand there equally.

[23 : 52] Equally weak and equally foolish. You see the cross in the Christian gospel is about what the Bible calls grace. God's free gift.

And grace demolishes self-reliance. Grace demolishes our own claims of strength and wisdom.

Grace demolishes our own cleverness. Grace obliterates our grounds of boasting.

Grace strips naked of pride and pretension. Grace means coming empty handed to God.

One of the hymn writers put it like this nothing in my hand I bring simply to thy cross I cling naked come to you for dress helpless look to you for grace.

that's scandalous. No one wants to be told that we contribute nothing to God and salvation but we don't contribute a thing.

[25 : 08] And it's foolishness. Why doesn't God choose competent people? Why doesn't he choose the influential significant people? Surely the gospel would prosper in the world far more quickly and mightily if God chose great people.

but he doesn't. He chooses us. And thereby ironically his power is even more evident.

Paul's second illustration is himself. He says when I came to you brothers and sisters I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. He didn't come as a rhetorician or an itinerant Greek philosopher who people prided because of their use of words.

He came simply stating the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Ineloquent lacking in rhetorical flourish a simple foolish message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And Paul himself came in weakness and fear and trembling. There was no self confidence there rather even terror at coming up to mighty Corinth.

[26 : 24] My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom. And the result not failure but rather that because Paul was so weak the results of his preaching were obviously God's work not his.

For the Corinthians could say we are Christians not because Paul twisted our arm to become Christians not because Paul's powerful use of words somehow persuaded us like those door to door salesmen that make us buy what we don't want.

No the Corinthians could say we are Christians because God has made us such. Paul is nothing. His preaching was nothing but what he said was powerful and changed our lives.

And that's what Paul's saying. I'm weak. I'm nothing. But the gospel is everything. And so as he finishes that paragraph he says this was so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

250 years ago one of the great Christian preachers in the world ever was a man called Jonathan Edwards in North America. He was a professor at Princeton at some point but he would preach to thousands of people up to 20,000 at a time and without a microphone in the open air on the hillside.

[27 : 54] It was the beginnings of the great awakening in North America. Jonathan Edwards was very short sighted. Not only that he spoke or preached from a fully written text unlike just a few notes as I preach from.

And apparently he would preach like this. And he wasn't eloquent. And he read his script short sighted so he had to get so close to it.

I mean what a stupid preacher. Surely his minister when he was a child would have told him you're not cut out to be a minister. Go and do some administration or something in the office. But God knew better.

Thousands and thousands and thousands were converted through his preaching. not because he was persuasive or powerful or a great orator. But because the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified is the power of God to salvation.

Like Jonathan Edwards no one became a Christian because of Paul's rhetoric. Only because of the cross of Christ. This my friends is a very important argument to get right.

[29 : 07] This is fundamental to what it means to be a Christian. And throughout the letter of 1 Corinthians Paul will tackle a whole array of issues. Spiritual gifts, the nature of love, the nature of authority and division in the church, issues of sexual immorality, of taking other Christians to court, the truth about the resurrection, whether you should wear baseball caps in church or orange hair or something like that.

But all of it is based on getting the gospel right. And if the gospel is not right, no church life will ever be right. This is not just about you and God being right, it is about all of us as a church being right with God.

If we do not know the gospel right, our church life will fall apart. That's the evidence of Corinth. It's the evidence in church history everywhere.

Know that you come to God empty and naked, the rug pulled out from under your feet. It is entirely of grace, not your cleverness and not your brute force.

The hero of world history is a type three unlikely figure and it's no joke. It is Jesus' death on the cross. But there extraordinarily in the king's sacrifice is the victory that gives us eternal life.