

The Preaching of the Cross

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Date: 09 October 2016

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[0 : 00] I'm on the screen from Acts 17, and this gives a sort of background to what we're going to be considering in verses 18 to 25 of 1 Corinthians.

So we look then at Acts 17, verse 16. Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who chanced to be there.

Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him, and some said, what would this babbler say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he preached Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areacobus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears.

[1 : 14] We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

And then in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 18 to 25. 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. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.

Where is the wise man? Where is the expert in Jewish law? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

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.

[2 : 22] For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Amen. May the Lord bless those readings. May he be to his praise and to his glory. Up to now, in verses 10 to 17, we looked at this report which those of Chloe's household had brought.

And this was to the effect that there were quarrelling and divisions existing in the church at Corinth. And so, with this report, what has happened is that the apostle has launched in to the main theme of the first part of the epistle, namely, the divisions of the church at Corinth into parties of one sort or another.

When we come to look at the next section, in verses 18 to 25, it appears that something different is under consideration by the apostle.

[3 : 45] And one of the factors you have to take into consideration when you read the epistles of Paul is, and we're finding it here, that he will start a theme and then break off and go a tangent.

And sometimes he comes back to it, sometimes he partly comes back to it, and sometimes he never comes back to it. Now, this makes the epistles of Paul difficult to read.

And if you find them difficult, you are in good company. Because in 2 Peter chapter 3, he says, concerning the forbearance of our Lord, our beloved brother Paul has much to say about this in all his epistles, containing some things which are hard to understand.

So right way back there in the first century, in the thinking of Peter, he found all of this somewhat difficult. Now, this secondary theme is to the effect of the preaching of the gospel, and he now considers this in chapter 118 to chapter 2, verse 5.

When he gets to chapter 2, verse 6, he then considers another theme, which we'll come to in due course, so that the main theme, this division problem, doesn't come back into his thinking until the beginning of chapter 3.

[5 : 22] Think of the effect of the cross in the first place. 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.

So here's the first point in this direction, this digression. It's to show that the preaching of the cross has the effect of destroying the wisdom of the world.

And he gets to that by a scriptural quotation from Isaiah 29, 14. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent I will set aside.

One of the things you have to bear in mind is that in the first century, normally, when they refer to the Old Testament, it's not the Hebrew text they're referring to.

It's the Greek version, which scholars have called the Septuagint. And what this is, it's a paraphrase of that Greek version. And he's quoting it because it's giving substance and authority to what he wants to say about the preaching of the cross.

[6 : 44] Now, there's a reason given for this in verse 21. For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through its own wisdom.

That scripture simply means that the world of that day and ours could not know God through its own intelligence, through its own thinking, or its own wisdom.

So, in the previous verse, he says this, where is the wise man? Where is the expert in law? Where is the skillful debater of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this age? Now, there are three terms that are being used here and it's relevant for us to consider what they mean.

And they're all to do with practitioners of earthly wisdom. Although there are, in fact, only two classes being discussed.

[7 : 57] The first term is in Greek sophos, which means a wise person, a wise man. And it's generally thought that what's meant by this is that of the Greek philosopher.

Now, in that passage that we read from Acts 17, you could see that the Greek philosophers were there in the marketplace with their eloquence, with their reasoning, with their profound thinking, speaking to whoever would listen.

Now, an example of such a philosopher is that of Aristotle. He lived from 384 to 322 BC and he said this about God.

God is the first unmoved mover. And by that statement he meant that everything that lives and moves in the universe owes its existence to God.

Is that a profound statement? Yes, it is. Is it worth thinking about? Yes, it is. Does it challenge you? No, it doesn't.

[9 : 11] It's clever, but it's devoid of any power to save anyone's soul. The second term used here is grammatois, which actually means scribe.

But I've translated it as the expert in Jewish law. When we turn to the Gospels, we find that there are 61 references to these people who were continually in opposition to the ministry of Jesus.

And in the Gospels, they're given three different titles. Jesus refers to them as scribes, doctors of the law, and lawyers.

But they're all the same people. They were non-ordained members of the Pharisees who were concerned with minutiae of the Jewish law.

Now, the kind of minutiae they were interested in was, if you take the question of when the Passover starts, they had an answer to that question.

[10 : 23] And when the Passover starts, it's on the day, which would be a Saturday, and the sun shines through your windows, and the curtains turn turquoise.

that is the moment the sun has arisen. That is the commencement of the Passover. Ah, what a clever mind says. What if it's a cloudy day?

Now, they've got a different set of rules for that, which we're not going to go into. But this is the kind of minutiae they were interested in. When you see films, and you definitely do see them, and you see the rabbis arguing over an open book.

The open book is in fact called the Talmud, and it's a commentary on the Jewish law. So, here are two sets of individuals, the Greek philosopher, and the expert in Jewish law.

How would you become one of these? Aristotle sat at the feet of his master, who was Plato, and inherited a lot of his teaching, refined it, corrected it, and eventually became tutor to the person who ended up as being Alexander the Great.

[11 : 49] He was his tutor when Alexander was still at school. As far as the Jewish rabbis concerned, of course you would have to be a member of the synagogue.

You would have to have faith, but you would have to have gone to the Jewish seminary. Now, the Jewish seminary has a title in Hebrew which is Yeshiva, derived from the Hebrew word verb yashav, which means to sit down.

So, you be required to sit down and listen to the teaching of more profound minds than yours, that you might inherit the teaching of the expert in Jewish law.

Now, by contrast, that is not how the minister of the gospel is made. And Paul says in Ephesians 3 verse 8, to me, the least of all saints was this grace given.

What has qualified Paul to be a preacher of the word is not his learning. it's his experience. That's the difference.

[13 : 04] And there's a third term, which is best translated, skillful debater. It only occurs here in the New Testament and it's thought not to apply to a separate class on its own but to these two other classes.

What the apostle is trying to do here is to show this, that in the early verses of this section, clever as these individuals are, their reasoning, their utterances have entirely been set aside by the preaching of the cross.

And in verse 22 he gives you the reason. For Jews demand signs and Greek seeks wisdom. Into the Jewish mind had come the concept that one day the Messiah will come with extraordinary power and signs by which the domination of Rome will be set aside and the Jews will be vindicated and exalted as the nation in that day.

To them, with this hope and this political interpretation of what the Messiah was to do, the message of the cross is foolishness to them.

By the same token, the Greeks who are in search of wisdom or of the philosophy, which can be demonstrated with clever arguments and which is satisfying to the human mind, he says that has been set aside because it doesn't lead you to an experience with God.

[14 : 57] And that is the whole point of preaching the gospel. It isn't to demonstrate how clever we might be or how lack of clever we might be, but it is to demonstrate the power of God in salvation.

So think with me, secondly, the preaching of the cross. verse 17, which was the former section we looked at, closed with this statement by the apostle.

Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of his power.

So what he's saying here is, I'm not like a Greek philosopher. I'm not absorbed with the futility of the wise man.

I'm not using this with eloquent wisdom. And the reason is, I don't want the cross of Jesus Christ to be emptied of its power.

[16 : 25] And the verb that's being used here is to deprive of power, make of no meaning or effect. So the meaning and purpose of this message of the cross is that it should be handled with reverence and care.

It is a meaningful and powerful message. So in that verse that we looked at, where it said, in the wisdom of God, the world through its own wisdom did not know God, he goes on to say this, it pleased God through the folly of what is preached to save those that believe.

Here is something very wonderful and very profound. It cannot do what the philosopher will do. The philosopher can fill your mind with sound reasoning and clever words, but this message can bring you into a relationship with God.

And the word that describes the message simply means that, what is preached message or proclamation. And he has already preached this with great power to the people at Corinth.

So we read in Acts 18 5, when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

[18 : 11] His message, his method, his practices were successful. It pleased God through the folly of what is preached to save those that believe.

But he uses a word in connection with this. He says it's the folly of what is preached. Now he's been about great pains to say that this is a powerful message, an effective message.

There are people in Corinth who have proved it. But he says it's called, he attaches the word folly to it. to make foolish or make tasteless.

In other words, he's also saying this, that although the message is powerful, it saves, it brings you into a direct and intimate relationship with God, in the ears of some, it has no meaning or interest whatsoever.

going back to the beginning, in Isaiah 29, 14 he had quoted, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the intelligent of the intelligence I will set aside.

[19 : 39] And then he's gone on to apply this to these two groups of people, where is the wise man, where is the expert in the Jewish law? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

If you had lived in the first century, there were only two groups of people who had something to say about the next world. And these were the Greek philosopher and the expert in Jewish law, sometimes referred to as the scribe.

But what the apostle is saying is that in the proclamation of the cross, God has cast aside these methods and made them foolish.

And he gives you the reason. The Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. The Jews have failed because they thought of a political Messiah who would abolish the kingdom of Rome.

the Greeks have failed because they have sought after a wisdom that would satisfy their own mind and have nothing to do with salvation.

[21 : 01] To all such people, he's very clear to say the message of the cross and a crucified Messiah is meaningless.

so he now goes on to consider something else. And that's the success of preaching the cross. Verses 23 to 24.

24. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

But to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. God and God and when you consider what the apostle is saying here about this message being foolish, it does seem that this message has been rejected by most of humanity and thus you could come to the conclusion that Christ has died in vain.

But in order to show that's not the case, he now goes on to give his confession of faith. we preach Christ crucified.

[22 : 17] This word crucified is very interesting. Let me tell you something about the Greek language. The Greek language uses a tense and it's used here called the perfect tense.

It's unlike any English tense because what it's telling you is that whatever it refers to happened in the past but the results of that action are still with us in the present.

So when Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 talks about reminding them the gospel that he preached to them unless you have believed in vain, he then defends it as Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

So that verb there raised is in the perfect tense. Why? The resurrection is in the past but the effect of the resurrection is felt right here tonight in this church.

So it is with the preaching of the cross. it's past. But there flows from Calvary's side a river of forgiveness that's with us in the present.

[23 : 46] That's why it's so interesting to see all this. He has accurately described the action of Christ dying for our sins. The effects of that action are still available to the sinner who repents tonight, tomorrow, or whenever.

We preach Christ crucified, he says, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

So here's a new idea. The message is a stumbling block to the Jews. He's not mentioned this before, although he has done so in the epistle to the Romans.

And speaking of a lack of response, in Romans 9 he says this, they, the Jews, have stumbled over the stumbling block as it is written.

Behold, I am laying on Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make men fall, yet who he believes in him will not be put to shame.

[24 : 57] And he arrives at this conclusion by referring to Isaiah 8, 14 and 28, 16, and these two things are brought together to give him the authority to say, the Jews have stumbled.

Hosea 14, 1, return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

the Greek word that's used here by the apostle is skandalon, which is that which causes sin, gives occasion to sin, or is an obstacle.

It's the Greek word from which the English word scandal is derived, and the gospel has become an obstacle to the Jews over which they are failed to receive the true words of grace.

Now in the history of conversions, it is true that not many people from the Jewish race have been won for their savior and lord, but there are notable examples.

[26 : 10] There was a gentleman called Alfred Edersheim, who was a converted Jew. he was actually converted by a university professor.

You might not have heard of him, but he went under the name of Rabbi Duncan, and he went under that name because he had a ministry to Jews, and Alfred Edersheim was one of those, and he went on to read, to write, the life of our Lord according to the gospels, and it's still worth reading today.

So the word of the cross is a stumbling block to Jews, but it is also folly to the Gentiles.

And he has the Greeks in mind here because during their time and their history, they produced a galaxy of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.

They were looking for a god whose nature is completely perfect. So the idea that God in Christ was crucified and died for their sins is irreconcilable with this idea of a perfect God.

[27 : 37] So having said all this about the negativity of human beings, he now says this, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

God so the success in preaching the gospel is in that phrase of verse 24, to those who are called.

There is what is called an effectual call that comes through the message of the cross. It finds its mark on the hearts of those that truly listen to it.

and it does something in their experience. Why is this? Listen to this.

Romans 10 17. Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes from the preaching of Christ.

[28 : 57] In other words, this. it doesn't matter who the person is, how intelligent they are or lack of intelligence. Where the gospel is preached in sincerity, there is a power that comes out from it.

And it grabs hold of your soul, your mind, your intelligence. You have no alternative but to bow the knee to the one who called you.

and the one who called you is the one who Paul preached as Christ crucified, whose death was 2,000 years ago but whose effects are still felt tonight in this church.

And very shortly we're going to come round the communion table and we're going to remember the one that we've received. And we've received it because of this powerful preaching of Christ crucified.

Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

[30 : 29] It's what people found on the day of Pentecost, did they not? And 3,000 people were turned to the gospel. it's what people found in Corinth, that city stained with sin, shapen with corruption and iniquity.

It's what people find in our own generation. We preach Christ crucified.

I'm going to sing effectively our communion hymn and we're going to do it like this. I'm going to sing the first three verses of that hymn when I surveyed.