

2015-03-08

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

“For the message of the cross is foolishness 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; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” (1Co 1:18-25 NIV)

### The Message

A Jewish scholar, Jacob Neusner, wrote a book in 1993 entitled “A Rabbi talks with Jesus”. It is a very sympathetic and insightful commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, in which he says that in nearly everything Jesus said and did was an implicit claim to be God incarnate. Neuser is seriously impressed by Jesus but ultimately concludes that he was not the Messiah partly because he views Jesus’ teaching as a departure from the Law and partly because he did not bring world peace.

Neusner provides an example of the problem that Paul describes: “in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him”. For reasons we may not be able to fully understand, God in His wisdom, has hidden Himself from discovery through human wisdom.

This is such an important point, and one which causes a great deal of offence. It exposes our stubborn pride and self-sufficiency. Wise man stamps his feet and says, “Well if it isn’t reasonable, how can you expect me to believe. That’s just ridiculous.” But that is the point: God is not reasonable, by which I mean that God is not subject to our powers of reason. Elsewhere, Paul says,

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” (Rom 11:33).

It is the height of arrogance for us to say, “Unless God conforms to my understanding, I will not believe.” God has made it clear that He hides himself from scholarly investigation and worldly wisdom and philosophical reasoning. Even Christian reasoning fails to capture God’s wisdom.

During my own studies I have read some of the greatest Christian thinkers, such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. These great men, along with a host of others, tried to apply philosophical reasoning to understanding God’s sovereignty and they got themselves into a mighty tangle. They each tried to discover a deeper understanding of God’s ways through constructing a logical philosophical framework that drew together many different aspects of Gods ways as revealed in the scriptures.

Their efforts have provided doctrinal foundations for generations of Christians since their day, yet we also have to acknowledge that their work is flawed and some of their

conclusions go beyond the scriptural revelation. Others, like Martin Luther have been notable for their ready recognition of the limitations of their powers to fathom the mysteries of God. "Thus far we are permitted to go" he said, "and no further".

Yet this is not just an issue for great scholars; it is an issue for us all. We all have a God-given drive to understand the world around us. We have an inbuilt curiosity and conviction that there is some sort of order in the chaos of life. In our age, everything from Darwin's "survival of the fittest" to Richard Dawkins, "selfish gene" to Edward Lorenz "Butterfly effect" has been put forward as the explanation for the way things are. Reason has become the arbiter of truth.

In the midst of this yearning for understanding, Paul says that "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

It seems odd that Paul accuses the Jews of demanding signs, since that is surely what Jesus provided. The testimony amongst the Jews was "No one could perform such signs if God were not with him." The Pharisees witnessed Jesus healing hundreds of people wherever He went and feeding thousands from a few loaves, yet they still demanded of Him signs to prove His claim to be the Messiah.

Paul himself goes on to say "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Cor 2:4)

Paul's ministry was routinely accompanied with miracles and healings as we read again and again in the Acts. There was no shortage of signs, and yet still Paul accuses the Jews of demanding miraculous signs. The signs were never enough.

Human understanding does not bring faith, and neither do signs. But why does Paul focus on the cross rather than the resurrection or Pentecost? For a long time, this puzzled me.

It is in the resurrection that we see the victory of Jesus over the powers of darkness and the sufficiency of His sacrifice in dealing with our Sin. The Good News can hardly be ascribed to the cross! If that had been the end there would be no good news.

The resurrection is the good news that validates all that went before. But even the resurrection was not the climax of Jesus' mission. The real fulfilment and ultimate meaning of His mission is found at Pentecost – the fulfilment of all those OT promises that a New Covenant would be established in which God's Holy Spirit would be poured out upon all God's people, bringing a heart of flesh instead of their hearts of stone and writing His Law on their hearts instead of on tablets of stone.

It was the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost that brought about transformation in people's lives and ultimately changed the world. Without that all we would have is ancient documents providing the biography of a radical Jewish prophet.

So why does Paul focus so strongly on the cross in his preaching. "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Paul had tried persuasive arguments on Mars Hill at Athens, and he got no-where. That was a turning point in His approach to the Gospel. Intellectual arguments and demonstrations of God's power can only get you so far. The foolishness of the cross has to be faced and either accepted or rejected.

The power and victory of God is demonstrated in the resurrection, but the wisdom of God is demonstrated in the cross. Belief in a powerful God is not so difficult – but belief in a divine wisdom demonstrated through a crucified and defeated saviour – that is a stumbling block.

It is the stumbling block for Islam. They like the Mighty God of Abraham, and admire Jesus as a prophet, but they are adamant that Jesus was not crucified and no death was required for our forgiveness. Paul was absolutely right: the cross is a stumbling block. All the other religions of the world promise hope to those who try hard to live good lives and none have a defeated saviour.

The cross challenges us to recognise that we are the cause of His death. Not just our sin, but our unbelief. It was not sinful habits in the lives of the leaders that caused them to seek Jesus' death, but stubborn unbelief that this Jesus, who did not fit with their expectations, could possibly be the Messiah despite all He did.

And this remains the prevailing issue with God-fearing Jews today, as Neusner so powerfully illustrates.

So where does all this leave us. Can we sit comfortably pointing our finger at others? Paul presents us here with a truth we need to reflect on for our own lives. Neither signs nor understanding deliver us from the basic problem of unbelief or distrust of God.

I can tell you from personal experience that neither understanding nor miraculous signs automatically produce faith in God. Certainly my lifelong studying of the Bible has been an essential foundation to my faith today, but it has not of itself produced faith. I have to make the choice to believe. And I have to make that choice every day. I know what I know, but walking with Jesus takes more than knowing. I have to say, "I choose to believe that God is faithful as the scriptures claim. I choose to believe that God loves me and hears my prayer as the Gospels say."

Every setback or disappointment is a challenge to my confidence in God. My life is a continuous discipline and fight of faith in which I frequently fail. The cross shows me that God's wisdom is not my wisdom. That victory follows defeat. That the wine comes from crushed grapes.

The crux of the matter for me, and I think for many of us, is how we handle disappointment. If everything went along like clockwork, and every prayer was immediately answered and good deeds were rewarded with blessing and bad deeds with strife, then faith in God would be much more straight-forward. God could have designed the world like this, but in His unfathomable wisdom he didn't.

So what do we do when things go wrong? When we have been hanging on in prayer for some situation which ultimately ends in defeat? How do we respond to God in the face of our failures? They hurt and confuse us. They undermine our confidence. They deter us from going out on a limb again. They fill our minds with questions we wish God would answer for us. They leave us wounded.

But then we must choose. Are we going to accept defeat, or get up and re-engage with the battle of faith with renewed determination? We can pick at a wound and keep it raw, or put balm on it and speed its healing. We can display our battle scars in the hope of getting sympathy, or bear them with humility. They can stop us from progressing further, or remind us how far we have journeyed.

The easy way out is to avoid disappointment by having low expectations, and I am afraid that that is the most common response. But that is not worship. That is not honouring to God. God wants us to grow in our faith and boldness before Him.

When the Canaanite woman wanted Jesus to deliver her demonised daughter she was first put off by his disciples, and then by Jesus Himself, but then, Matthew tells us “she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!"”

Although the incident looks like Jesus was reluctant to help her, we actually realise that Jesus went up out of Israel for that very purpose, and having granted her request He immediately departed. The woman thought she was having to try and persuade Jesus, but in fact, Jesus was persuading her to be bold and courageous in her request.

That, my friends is worship. Boldness to ask God for help, no matter what has gone wrong, no matter what disappointments we have already had. God is not pleased when we shrink back in fear of more disappointment.

The Cross reminds us that the wisdom of God confounds the wisdom of men. Choose to believe Him. Press through and you will find God was all the time urging you on to victory.