

2. The Message of the Cross (3Q 2026 1 and 2 Corinthians)

Biblical material: 1 Cor. 1:17–31, Col. 1:20, 1 Pet. 2:24, Acts 13:16–47, 1 Cor. 2:1–5.

Quotes

- “By grace you have been saved,” he [Paul] wrote to the Ephesians, and grace was his key word. *Grace*. Salvation was free, gratis. There was nothing you had to do to earn it and nothing you could do to earn it. “This is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast,” and God knows he’d worked, himself, and boasted too—worked as a Pharisee, boasting about the high marks he’d racked up in heaven till the sweat ran down and Christian heretics dropped like flies—only to find en route to Damascus that he’d been barking up the wrong tree from the start, trying to beat and kick his way through a door that had stood wide open the whole time....
- And *Christ* was his other key word, of course. Christ—the key to the key. He never forgot how he’d called him by name—twice, to make sure it got through—and “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” he wrote out for the Romans (Romans 5:6) and for the Galatians again, “I have been crucified with Christ”—all that was dried up in him, full of hate and self-hating, self-serving and sick, all of it behind him now, dead as a doornail—so that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). And then, to the Philippians by registered mail, return receipt requested: “For me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21), and to the Ephesians, for fear they’d feel neglected if the mail carrier came empty-handed, “You he made alive when you were dead” (Ephesians 2:1). Alive like him. *Frederick Buechner*

Questions

Why did Paul decide to preach nothing but Jesus and him crucified? How do we best explain “the message of the cross”? What dangers are there in developing a theology that concentrates on the cross, especially if it is seen as a sacrifice needed by the Father? Why has the resurrection often been left out of the gospel message, as if it was only Jesus’ suffering that was “required”?

Bible summary

In 1 Corinthians 1:17–31 Paul explains the message of the cross, most importantly saying, “our message is of Christ killed on a cross—offensive to the Jews, and foolishness to the foreigners. However, for those who are called by God, both Jews and foreigners, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). Colossians 1:20 affirms that Jesus provided the means of reconciliation through the cross. Peter states that “He took the consequences of our sins on himself in his body on the cross, so that we could die to sin and live rightly” 1 Peter 2:24. Acts 13:16–47 is the speech Paul gave at Antioch of Pisidia, explaining Jesus in a Jewish context. In 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 Paul says he didn’t come to present the good news with oratory or philosophical wisdom, but simply Jesus, and him crucified.

Comment

After what happened in Athens, Paul decided on a different approach in Corinth. “I decided that while I was with you I didn’t want to concentrate on anything except Jesus Christ, and that he was crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2. Of course, we need to look more closely at this statement. If all Paul did was present Jesus as someone who was crucified, the people of Corinth would surely have said that they too had seen plenty of crucifixions under the Romans. Crucifixion was a very common form of punishment under the Romans, especially for rebels who threatened the state.

The vital difference was of course Jesus’ resurrection. The gospel would have made no sense if Paul had focused solely on Jesus’ death on the cross. The good news was that Jesus was raised from the dead and that he could save those who trusted in him.

The crucifixion is both attracting and repelling. In recognizing the wonderful love of God, we are drawn to the cross. But in its harsh reality, its cruel suffering, it rightly repels us. It is here that we see the consequences and answers to the universe-wide rebellion; the results of sin; and the lengths God will go, not just for our salvation, but to restore harmony throughout the universe. Here we see God as he really is. Read again the biblical material that recounts the crucifixion: Matt. 26:37, 38; 27:46; Mark 14:33, 34; Luke 22:40–44; John 19:28–30.

What do we see? The king of the Jews, as Pilate said? Yes, and yet from the Jewish leaders point of view, no. He is the despised, rejected king. Is he the victim of Roman brutality, the national leader cruelly executed to warn others? Yes from Pilate's perspective perhaps, and yet again no. Is he, as the mockers around the cross sarcastically say, the Son of God? No, not for them, and yet yes!

The issue is always about who Jesus is. For if he is truly God, then—but if not... As the mockers recognized, perhaps unconsciously, the fundamental point is Jesus' divinity: "He trusts God so confidently—well let God rescue him now if he wants him, because he claimed 'I am the Son of God.'" Matthew 27:43.

That the cross brings atonement is not in question. The issue is over how, and what exactly is achieved! For depending on what is perceived to be the problem, the cross as a means of atonement can be seen in many different ways. Add to this the challenge that we have become familiar with the cross as a symbol in our society. To that extent the cross has lost its capacity to shock—for in the ancient world the cross was an object of shame, not of glory. Then again the cross has been given other interpretations that owe much to pagan understandings, and is devalued and misunderstood as a result. So in this most important area of salvation, we need to look again and to ask "what does the cross really mean? What does Jesus' death actually achieve? And how does this relate to us, as well as the on-looking universe? Nor must we forget that without the resurrection, the cross says nothing. For many men were crucified, many also suffered this ignominious fate. Yet only one is our Savior, only one makes atonement possible. While the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross says so much about God, it must be set in the context of his life, both before and after, and what this also demonstrates about God and his answers to the issues in the cosmic conflict.

We cannot truly understand the cross except in the light of his resurrection. All too often, focusing on elements of sacrifice, we miss the whole point. Jesus died, *but then he rose again!* Without the resurrection, what would the cross be but a magnificent gesture? The resurrection gives the cross meaning and certainty, for without the resurrection there is no future.

A major criticism of many "theories of the atonement" is that they leave out the resurrection. The emphasis is on making blood-payment, on providing sacrifice, on moral influence, on being a legal substitute and so on. But these images cannot contain the transforming, amazing demonstration of resurrection. They limit the act of God to transaction and payment, or "mere" moral appeal, and can be as dry as bones, as lifeless as a dead body. But the resurrection makes the atonement pulse with life, confirms the animating power of God, and guarantees the present and future presence of God. *Now that's atonement!*

Ellen White Comments

"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." "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." (1 Corinthians 1:18, 27.) Many great scholars and statesmen, the world's most eminent people, will turn from the light in these last days. Yet God's servants are to communicate the truth to these men and women. Some will take their places as humble learners at the feet of Jesus, the Master Teacher. {ULe 90}

The Greeks sought after wisdom, yet the message of the cross was to them foolishness because they valued their own wisdom more highly than the wisdom that comes from above. {AA 239 }