

“God’s Foolishness”

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 (1 Corinthians 1:18).

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 (read vv. 18-24) ¹

Have you ever done anything really foolish? The list of my offenses is long, but my most consistent foolishness has had to do with automobiles—the three that you see on the screen in particular—one of which I’ve bought in Columbia.² And that’s all I’m going to say about that. What do you remember?

The word, “foolishness,” occurs in the New International Version eight times, of which seven occurrences are in Paul’s letters to Corinth, and four occur in the larger setting of today’s text. Andrew’s just read this, but these verses are so important that I’m going to read them again, and I ask you to ponder them with me:

*¹⁸ 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. . . . ²¹ 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. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ **but we preach Christ crucified**: a stumbling block to Jews and **foolishness** to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21-24).*

Let’s think about this.

There are many people these days who say that they don’t believe that there is a God. For many of those who *do* believe in a divine being, the idea that God would assume human flesh—what Christians call “the Incarnation”—is absurd. And for many of those who might possibly grant that there is a God who once lived on Earth as one of us, the idea that God would submit to being killed in a horribly cruel and degrading way is both offensive and unbelievable in the highest degree. Yet this is exactly what Paul was talking about when he wrote that “*we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*”

When Paul wrote about “Jews and Gentiles,” those categories included everybody. The Jewish folk of Paul’s day expected God to send a Messiah, but they expected this person to free Israel from Roman domination. When Jesus failed to do this, and especially when He was crucified, He was twice disqualified to be the Messiah they wanted and expected. Did not the Law of Moses clearly say that persons “hung on a pole” were under God’s curse?³

The Jewish folk of Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to do “signs and miracles” such as Moses and the prophets had done. Jesus did many such things, *and* He told them that the primary sign they would receive would be “the sign of Jonah”: “*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” (Matthew 12:40). He predicted His crucifixion, but they missed the point.

On the other hand, the “Greeks,” or the Gentiles, the non-Jews, were enamored of those who could speak skillfully and impressively. Such folk were the “rock stars” of Paul’s time. But Paul wrote that skillful speaking, even if capable of selling “bridges in the desert,” was not the way in which God is known.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 5, 2020.

² 1972 green Buick Skylark; 1978 white Olds Dynamic 88; 2013 black Toyota Avalon

³ Deuteronomy 21:23

The truth of the matter is that we know God in ways similar to the ways in which we come to know each other—by self-revelation. There are many things you’ll not ever know about me—such as my foolishness with automobiles—unless I tell you about them. And most of the things we can know about God come in the same way: through God’s self-revelation.

You and I don’t get to determine how God is known. God alone determines that, and Paul wrote that God has chosen to be known, not through human wisdom, but through the foolishness of the Cross. Nobody expected the Cross. Nobody. The Jews didn’t expect it. The Greeks didn’t expect it. And the spiritual forces of darkness “*that rule this world*”⁴ didn’t expect it.

With respect to those rulers, just a few verses after today’s text, Paul wrote that God’s wisdom is “*a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*” (1 Corinthians 2:7-8). These things are mysteries, for sure.

While God’s method of redeeming us through the Cross of Jesus was a complete surprise in one way, in another way, God’s Plan had been published among the Jews from the time of Abraham onward. As Sherlock Holmes often noted, if you want to hide something, leave it in plain sight. Here are three of those “hiding places”:

- To the serpent in the Garden of Eden, in the third chapter of your Bible, God said, “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). That was a prediction of Jesus’ crucifixion.
- Here’s another prediction of His crucifixion: ³ *He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.* ⁴ *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.*

⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

⁶ *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:3-6). There are a number of other predictions of Jesus’ crucifixion, more easily seen looking backward than forward:

- And in this morning’s text, Paul quotes Isaiah, noting that ¹³ “*These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.*

¹⁴ ***Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish***” (Isaiah 29:13-14). And Paul tells us that the astounding wonder Isaiah foretold was the crucifixion of God’s Messiah.

Well, so why did God need to become human? And why did God choose to die as a human? And why did God choose to die a horrible death as a criminal? Those are all important questions with which scholars have wrestled now for very nearly two thousand years. A few months ago I read a recent, award-winning, highly-acclaimed 700-page theological tome that

⁴ Ephesians 6:12

wrestled with these questions,⁵ and it essentially concluded that, while we have some guesses, *we really don't know why.*

There are many aspects of our lives in which our situation is similar to this. There are many things about physics, astronomy, and medicine, for example, that we know are true, but we don't know why they're true. We know that certain things work, but we don't know why they work.

And while we don't know why the crucifixion was God's plan for our redemption, we do know that this redemption is powerful and effective. We know that it works. We know that the Cross of Jesus sets us free from the power of sin and death. We know that the Cross of Jesus makes possible our forgiveness, our Purpose, our Hope.

We know that while *"the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* We know that Jesus, now raised from death and here present with us at this very moment, *"has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption"* (1 Corinthians 1:18, 30).

Pastor John Hutton liked to tell a story about a man who had been an awful drunkard but who was transformed by the Crucified Christ. His friends and drinking buddies challenged him, saying that "Surely a sensible man like you cannot believe in the miracles that the Bible tells about. You cannot, for example, believe that this Jesus of yours turned water into wine."

"Whether He turned water into wine or not," he replied, "I do not know. But in my own house, I have seen Him turn beer into furniture."

It's pretty hard to argue against the proof of a transformed life, and two thousand years of transformed lives are testimony to the efficacy of the crucified blood of Jesus. Here are some more examples

Anyone who watched the New York Giants defeat the New England Patriots in 2008's Super Bowl remembers the catch made by David Tyree, a receiver for the Giants. Eli Manning, quarterback for the Giants, threw what looked like a desperate pass. Tyree somehow jumped high above defensive coverage, picked the ball out of the air, pinned it to his helmet, and fell to the ground for a completion. The Giants went on to win the game, 17-14.

In the wake of his new fame, Tyree talked openly about his troubled past. Tyree started drinking when he was in junior high. By his junior year in high school, he was regularly drinking and drugging, and this continued throughout his college career.

After he was arrested for selling drugs to pay off a fine he had incurred during his rookie season with the Giants, Tyree's pregnant girlfriend threatened to leave him. "I had no peace," he said. "My life was obviously [a mess]."

But when David Tyree picked up a Bible and began to read its message of redemption, he decided to never drink again and started attending church for the first time in a long time. Tyree is now sober, married . . . and is still a Super Bowl hero. Looking back on his life so far, David Tyree says, "This is more than just a feel-good story. This is about destiny and purpose."⁶ And this is about the transforming foolishness of a Crucified God.

⁵ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Eerdmans, 2017).

⁶ "Tyree's Big Comeback," *The Week* (3.29.08), 10.

When U.S. bombers dropped napalm on her village in 1972, nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc was set ablaze, and doctors said she'd never survive. But after fourteen months in the hospital and seventeen surgeries, she was able to go home.

Despite her recovery, Kim was seldom free of pain, of nightmares, or of anger. "The anger inside me was like a hatred as high as a mountain," she said, "and my bitterness was as black as old coffee. I hated my life. I wanted to die many times. Doctors helped heal my wounds, but they couldn't heal my heart."

Then one day, while she was reading in a library, Kim found a Bible and began reading the New Testament's stories of Jesus. Eventually, Kim chose to allow Jesus into her heart, and she later reported that "Jesus helped me forgive my enemies and finally gave me peace in my heart." "Now, when I look at my scars and suffer pain, I am thankful that God reminds me that He is with me all the time."⁷ **We don't know WHY the foolishness of the Cross works, my friends, but we do know THAT it works!**

Another pastor⁸ tells the story of Kathi, a woman who left behind a life of witchcraft and Wiccan paganism to become a follower of Jesus Christ. Immediately after Kathi's decision to become a Christian, she told Thom how God delivered her from the powers of evil in her life, as well as from her physical deafness:

"That next day [after I accepted Christ], we left on our family vacation, camping on the beach. I found a small church for us to attend. Most of the time when I lip read, I am able to follow less than half of what someone is saying. But I was able to understand every word of the preacher at this church.

"When the service was over, I spoke to the preacher and asked him how he was able to speak so well for lip readers. He was puzzled, as he had done nothing special. I explained to him my condition of deafness, and he asked to pray for me. No one had ever done that before, but he prayed for my hearing to be restored."

After Kathi and her family returned to their camp site, she fell violently ill. "It was at that point that I sensed God was speaking to me again," she says. "He told me that the other gods I had been worshipping had to go. Up to that point, I had seen my conversion [to Jesus] as a lateral move. I still had my other gods. I wasn't convinced they were evil or that paganism was wrong. But now God said they had to go. I hesitated at first because I had become so comfortable with these other gods. They had been with me for many years."

Kathi started calling each of the gods by the pagan names she knew and telling them in Jesus' name they had to leave her life. There were many of them. Kathi also told anything she had worshiped as a Wiccan that it had to go, too.

"They resisted at first," she said. "But once they heard the name of Jesus, they left. As each god left, I saw them as they were, no lovely masks anymore. Instead, they had horrible, evil faces. It scared me witless. I knew then that these were no gods at all, but demons."

Immediately after Kathi cast out these demons, she recovered from her illness and began to tell her husband what had happened. When he responded, she heard every word he said—but

⁷ Ruth Schenk, "Napalm Attack Begins 36-year Journey to Faith and Forgiveness," *Southeast Outlook*, 9.11.2008.

⁸ Thom Rainer, *The Unexpected Journey: Conversations with People Who Turned from Other Beliefs to Jesus* (Zondervan, 2005), pp. 121-122.

without hearing aids in her ears. She was able to hear everything—the ocean, the birds, and her children's voices. Her hearing had been restored.

When Kathi returned to the doctor who had initially treated her hearing problem, he said he had never seen a condition like hers reverse itself. Kathi simply said, “God did it.” **We don’t know WHY the preaching of the Cross works, my friends, but we do know THAT it works!**

Well, I began with a football illustration, and I’ll end with one. If you watch football, you know that for forty-five years, Pat Summerall’s voice and face meant FOOTBALL. Pat anchored CBS and FOX’s NFL telecasts (often alongside John Madden) and broadcast sixteen Super Bowls (and served as a CBS Radio analyst or pregame reporter for ten more). That’s what most people know about Pat Summerall. Here’s the rest of the story

Pat was an only child whose parents divorced before he was born, leaving him feeling empty and alone. He became an alcoholic, living from drink to drink. During the 1994 Masters tournament—he also did voiceover work for high-profile golf tournaments—Pat faced up to his situation: “I’d been getting sick a lot, throwing up blood—and I got sick again at 4 a.m. I looked in the mirror, saw what a terrible sight I was, and said to myself, *This isn’t how I want to live.*”

Pat spent 33 days in the Betty Ford Center in Palm Springs, California, which helped him deal with his alcohol problem but didn’t address his spiritual emptiness. Then Pat “happened” to bump into Tom Landry, his old football coach from his days as a star kicker. Landry told Pat about Jesus and connected him with Dallas Cowboys’ Chaplain John Weber.

Through those conversations, Pat Summerall chose to accept Jesus’ forgiveness through the Cross. His life was transformed, and he was baptized at the age of 69. Chaplain Weber later noted that “Pat was once the life of every party with a drink in his hand. Now he gets his power from another source.”⁹

Oh, my friends, we don’t know WHY the preaching of the Cross works, but we do know THAT it works! *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!* (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Will you invite Him into your heart?

⁹ Art Stricklin, *Sports Spectrum*, as paraphrased in the October 27, 2009, entry of *Men of Integrity* (September/October, 2009)