



THE CROSS

There is no more central symbol of Christianity than the cross. Paul declares the cross the very core of the Gospel. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spend a third of their time on the passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand the Cross of Christ changes everything about how we understand God, the world—even life itself. When we consider all that Jesus did there, we stand amazed.

THE CROSS • I Corinthians 12:17–24 • Tim McConnell • March 10, 2019

What would you say is the single most important event in your life? What was the most important moment, the one that changed everything and sent you in a new direction? Guys, if you are sitting next to your wife, let me give you a hint. This is a good time to squeeze her hand. Gals, it's a good time to stare into your husband's eyes knowingly. Okay, we got that. Right. Now what else? Maybe it's a moment in your career. Maybe it's the day you got into a school. Maybe it was a risk you took. Maybe it was a sudden shift you didn't plan for; you and your family had to move, or you lost your job, or you were in an accident or diagnosed with a disease. It changed everything. You would call that moment the crucial moment. We use the word "crucial" to describe a moment that changes everything. "Crucial" comes from the Latin word "crux." "Crux" means "cross." The cross changes everything.

It's an odd thing to revere the cross the way we do. A cross is an instrument of torturous death. It was designed to publicly execute someone to the maximum of shame and the maximum of pain. Crucifixion is a uniquely horrible thing to do to a person. There are many less offensive ways to execute a criminal. We don't preach Jesus executed, we preach Christ crucified. He experienced the horror of the cross. Now you see crosses everywhere, from church tops and sanctuaries to earrings and necklaces. Church leaders, kids, actors, models and rappers all hang crosses around their necks. It's probably the most tattooed symbol of all time! (Although you might just check your Bible before you go get one, I'm just saying). Why does this torture instrument capture our attention?

The psychologist Carl Jung thought we were captivated by the cross because it looks a bit like the human face. As infants looking up at our mother or father in our first glim light of consciousness we saw the horizontal line of the eyes and the vertical line of the nose before the face disappeared and we were left to cry and sleep in our cribs, and something deep inside of us wants to find that face again. Fascinating to think about, but I think that's a pretty shallow explanation of why the cross matters. Tens of thousands of people were crucified through the course of the Roman Empire. In 73 BC, the senator Marcus Crassus lined the Appian Way with 6,000 crucified slaves for his triumphant parade to Rome after a military victory. But that's not why we revere the cross. We have a cross here because among all those thousands who died on this instrument of dehumanizing torture and death, there was one who changed the world. His name was Jesus.

There is no more crucial, more central, more world-alter-

ing moment in history than the day Jesus was crucified on the cross. A theologian named Karl Barth was asked by a group of students in 1962 when he got saved. They wanted to hear his personal account of salvation, when he came to know Jesus as Savior and Lord. But Karl Barth, being a pretty uniquely thoughtful guy, looked at them and said, "It happened one afternoon in A.D. 34 when Jesus died on the cross." There is no more pivotal moment in all of human history than when salvation was made possible for you and for me by the death of Jesus on the cross.

When Paul came to Corinth to share about Jesus, he claimed that the only thing he came to say, his only message, was the cross. The church he had planted in Corinth had so much going for it. It was diverse, it was in the core of a great city, it had powerful conversions and new life breaking out, but it was also threatened with fracturing apart into groups according to who baptized them (which Paul addressed already in this chapter) and here in our passage, the church was questioning whether they had been manipulated by emotion or met with something real when Paul told them about Jesus. Was it just that Paul was a great speaker? Was it fancy language and dramatic flourishes of oratory that moved our hearts? Paul responds, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." (1 Corinthians 1:17) Now of course Paul baptized. We know he performed baptisms. He means he was not sent to break them into groups, but to preach. And he was not sent to preach with showy, powerful flourishes of rhetoric. His preaching wasn't a show you'd sell tickets to like the dramatists and frankly the philosophers in the square. His message was all content, and the content was the cross. The cross has its own power. The cross communicates on its own authority. The people were used to being emotionally manipulated by fancy rhetoric. There's no trick to the cross. It is what it is.

Paul said the same thing in the next chapter: "And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1–2). It's not a show; it's a report. The message is the cross. That's what we have to say. We didn't expect it to be popular either. "Come follow a man who died on a cross as a criminal." People were trained to avert their eyes from men hanging on crosses, to shield their children. But this is the message I have, this is what I have come to tell you, the message is the cross. It's not an argument, it's not a philosophy, it's not a manipulative dramatic

presentation, it's not a sales pitch. It's a cross. Jesus died on it. It's an occurrence I have to tell you about, it's an event I have to relay to you. Jesus died on a cross. We preach Christ crucified.

"Jews demand 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" (1 Corinthians 1:22–24). Let's walk through this. It says "Jews demand signs." They wanted signs of power that Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted Him to take up a stone in His sling and slay a giant like David did with Goliath. They wanted Him to bring down a rain of fire over the unfaithful oppressors and false prophets like Elijah did on Mt. Carmel. They demanded signs they did not see; even though Jesus did signs they did not recognize. "Greeks look for wisdom." The church was diverse; Greeks and Jews together in Christ. Paul calls them both out. Greeks are looking for their kind of wisdom. Philosophy for a Greek was a way of understanding the universe in order to manipulate and control the world around them. If you know how something works, you can make it work to your advantage. "Hey, do you have power to make things work?" We would almost say "science and technology" today to match how Greeks viewed philosophy and wisdom. It's power; the demonstration of power. Jesus didn't demonstrate power the way the Greeks liked leaders to demonstrate power.

"Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified." We preach Christ crucified. You can't get there by your signs, you can't get there by your intellectual pursuits, you can't get up there—He comes down to you. We preach Christ. We declare that this Jesus is the Messiah, this Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the promised Redeemer, the Son of Man and Son of God, the fulfillment of all the promises of God that said "I myself will save; I myself will intervene; I myself will shepherd my people Israel." Jesus is the Christ, even though He didn't overthrow the Roman occupation. Jesus is the Lord, even though He looked weak to a Greek, pinned there helplessly on a cross. This is Christ. He came to us. God came down. But we preach Christ crucified. The cross is our message. Jesus, who was the Messiah, Jesus who must have actually been God, Jesus who is God—He was crucified. And we are just beginning to think we might understand why.

Actually for the next six weeks we are going to unfold layers of just what it meant, of just why Jesus died on the cross and what He accomplished for us there. There is no more central symbol of Christianity than the cross. I can't imagine anything more important to understand

than what Jesus did for you on that cross. Paul declared the cross the very core of the Gospel. The four Gospels spend a third of their time on the passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand the Cross of Christ changes everything about how we understand God, the world, life itself. Jesus went to the cross as an act of supreme love and personal sacrifice. Jesus went to the cross to free us from obligations to dark powers like sin, death and even Satan. Jesus went to the cross to show us that real power goes low to serve, not high to dominate. Jesus went to the cross to open up a threshold to new life, to show us the totality of what it means to follow Him—the old dies, the new comes in. But above all and through it all we must never forget, Jesus went to the cross *for us*, on our behalf, in our place. He went to replace us, to displace us from a position, a death, that we deserved. It wasn't an angry Father appeased by watching His own son die—that's a false understanding. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit contrived to bring salvation to a rotten and disobedient humanity, to a rotting and corrupted creation, through this loving, necessary, painful, selfless, open, vulnerable, humiliating, substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for our sins. He did it for us. As the Nicene Creed says, "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified..." For us. For our sake. That's why we preach Christ crucified. That's why our message is the cross. He did it for us.

What do we now find at the cross? Why are we so fascinated? We find all we need. John Calvin put it this way: "If we seek redemption, it will be found in his passion; if absolution, in his condemnation; remission of the curse, in his cross; satisfaction, in his sacrifice; purification, in his blood; reconciliation, in his descent into hell; mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; newness of life and immortality, in his resurrection; the inheritance of the celestial kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; protection, security, abundance, and enjoyment of all blessings, in his kingdom; a fearless expectation of the judgment, in the judicial authority committed to him. Finally, blessings of every kind are deposited in him; let us draw from his treasury, and from no other source, until our desires are satisfied." However much you have thought before about the cross, you have only scratched the surface. Commit to following this teaching as we expose layer after layer. I don't know which layer is going to unlock something for you. Whatever you are looking for, we will find it all at the cross of Jesus Christ.

"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" (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). A stumbling block. A scandal. Foolishness. Silliness. But to those called into salvation, both Jew and Greek—this or that, from here or there, approach the cross—to those being saved, "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." For those who have the saving power of Christ at work in them, the phrase "Christ crucified" translates "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Christ crucified means God's power in my life to save. Christ crucified means God's wisdom in my life to guide me home. I can't get to God by wisdom. I can't get to God by my power. But Christ crucified means God has come to me in my helpless estate, to rescue me from my own destruction.

Well, over the next few weeks, the biggest question is what does the cross mean to you? I can tell you all that we in Christian doctrine and Christian philosophy and Christian preaching think this means. I can show you arguments and scripture verses, but what does it mean to you? It happened, this cross. It happened, Christ crucified. What does it mean to you? Paul said, "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). For Paul, his only message was the cross. He is not a shifty salesman; eloquent and persuasive speech would empty the cross of its inherent power, he says. The cross preaches for itself. The plain preaching of the cross of Christ produces two results. Some are repelled by the foolishness. The Bible says these are the perishing. But for those who "are being saved," see the passive tense there? Are being saved. For those who have the saving power of God active in their life, for those who allow the work of the Spirit to speak to their hearts and believe the saving work of God through Jesus Christ, for those humble enough, honest enough, to admit they have no hope of reaching home, no hope of redeeming their past, no hope of making up for their sins on their own, for them... "to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Which are you today? That God sent His Son to die on a cross for us is the most profound, and for many the most ridiculous, statement that could ever be made. What is it to you? At the cross, we go down on our knees. At the cross, the power of God lifts us to eternal life. It is a place of decision. Will the cross of Christ push you away or draw you close? I can't decide for you, or determine it on your behalf. But I pray for you. Our message is the cross. It can be foolishness, or it can be the power of God in you for eternal life.

STUDY GUIDE

THE CROSS • "The Cross Is Our Message" I Corinthians 1:17–24

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read the passage for the week: 1 Corinthians 1:17–24. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

1. Reread verse 18. Why does the world consider the cross to be foolishness? How is the message of the cross "the power of God"?
2. Reread verse 20. Who does our society consider as "wise authorities" of our age? (Scholars? Celebrities? Etc.?) Why do we give them this level of authority?
3. How can we determine what "wisdom" from these sources has merit and what should be ignored?
4. Reread verses 22–23. The idea of God sending His Son to die on the cross is the most profound, and for many, the most ridiculous statement that could ever be made. What sorts of reactions do you typically get from non-Christians when you communicate this truth?
5. Our message is not an argument. It is a testimony to an amazing and awe-inspiring event: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth who must have been the Son of God. Who in your life needs to hear this testimony? What would it take for you to share this with them?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Name a person in your life whom you would like to bring along to Easter worship services on April 21. How will you go about asking them to join you?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Pray for the witness of our congregation. Pray for those working in schools and businesses, those who are serving underprivileged populations, for people in senior communities, etc.

Pray that we would be light and life for the city.