

# The Message of the Cross



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Cor. 1:17–31, Col. 1:20, 1 Pet. 2:24, Acts 13:16–47, 1 Cor. 2:1–5.*

**Memory Text:** “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, NIV*).

Cicero, a pagan Roman writer and orator, had told the Roman people to not even think about the cross, so abhorrent was it as a means of death. Although Cicero died about a half century before Jesus was born, his statement illustrates the contempt with which the Romans had held the cross. It was so bad that they should not even think about it.

In contrast, Paul would write: “The message of the cross . . . is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NIV*). For Paul, the Cross is the instrument of reconciliation between God and man (*Eph. 2:16, Col. 1:20*), the supreme symbol of Jesus’ humility (*Phil. 2:8*), and the place where our immense debt was paid (*Col. 2:14*).

The Cross is Paul’s answer to the problems in Corinth. You don’t have to go very far in 1 Corinthians to realize that he is very concerned about one major issue: divisions in the church. Paul is so perplexed that right after the greetings (*1 Cor. 1:1–3*) and the thanksgiving section (*1 Cor. 1:4–9*), this is the first topic he addresses (*1 Cor. 1:10–17*). This week, we will turn to the powerful message of the Cross as the answer to this problem and to other issues in Corinth.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 11.

## The Gospel of the Cross

Paul says that the message of the Cross is the power of God to us. It is not surprising that “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is the center of his preaching (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:17–31. What important point is Paul making here?**

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In 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, Paul deals with a contrast between human foolishness and divine wisdom. The Cross has the power to display the worst of man and the best of God. This section of 1 Corinthians is introduced by the statement in 1 Corinthians 1:17. Because the cross of Christ is not supposed to be emptied of its power (*1 Cor. 1:17*), the message of the Cross must occupy the central place of our preaching (*see also 1 Cor. 2:2*).

Paul says that he was sent not to baptize, but to preach the gospel of the Cross. This statement requires two important observations. First, the Greek verb translated as “to send” is *apostellō*, which stems from the same root as the word “apostle.” Thus, Paul’s fundamental apostolic task was the proclamation of the gospel. Second, Paul’s words about baptism did not mean that baptism was not important, or at least not as important as preaching. He was, instead, rebuking those who made a big deal out of who were the ones doing the baptizing as opposed to the One, Jesus, into whom they have been baptized.

By “wisdom of words” (*1 Cor. 1:17*), Paul is not implying that eloquent speeches are bad in themselves. The point is that human wisdom should not obscure the message of the Cross. This phrase refers to Greco-Roman rhetoric. In Athens, Paul used logic, science, and philosophy, but this resulted in little fruit. So, “he decided to follow another plan of labor in Corinth in his efforts to arrest the attention of the careless and the indifferent. He determined to avoid elaborate arguments and discussions, and ‘not to know anything’ among the Corinthians ‘save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’” —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 244.

**In what ways can elaborate discourses obscure the message of the Cross? Why did the proclamation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified produce more fruit in Corinth than logic, science, and philosophy did in Athens? Might there, however, be times that logic, philosophy, and science could be helpful in proclaiming the gospel?**

## Foolishness to Those Who Are Perishing

In contrasting human foolishness to divine wisdom, Paul states that the “message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV*). This is the first of six references to foolishness or foolish in 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:20, 21, 23, 25, and 27. How do these references to foolishness help us understand what Paul meant when saying that the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing?**

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The Greek word for “foolishness” in 1 Corinthians 1:18 is *mōria*. This word occurs only five times in the New Testament, and all in 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 1:18, 21, 23; 1 Cor. 2:14; 1 Cor. 3:19*). Apart from *mōria*, other words from the same family occur numerous times in the New Testament.

The reference to foolishness in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23 is not denigrating the Corinthians’ intellectual capacity but directing attention to their unwillingness to consider the truth of the gospel. As a result, Paul also had to confront immoral behavior and thought, lack of discernment, and even rebellion against God.

Think about Paul’s situation in this city. He comes to a place that prides itself on its own so-called knowledge and wisdom and cultural sophistication. And, in this context, he talks about a Galilean Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans and then raised from the dead—all in order to pay for not only their sins but for the sins of the world. *Can this guy be serious? Who was he kidding?* This wasn’t some deep new philosophical concept, either, that could be parsed and analyzed by philosophical tools; it seemed to be lunacy, nonsense, nothing that any smart and educated Corinthian could take seriously.

And, as foolish as Paul’s message sounded to the pagans, for many of the Jews, the message of the Cross sounded worse. What Jew was expecting a Messiah to be executed by Rome? The Messiah was supposed to overthrow the Romans, not be crucified by them.

Thus, from the start, Paul had a lot going against him in Corinth. And yet, despite all this, souls—Jewish and Gentile—were won to the gospel.

The message here?

Whatever opposition we face, God has people who are open to hearing the truth. We must be ready to be used by Him to reach these people wherever they are, even in places today that are as bad as, or even worse than, Corinth was.

## Power to Those Who Are Being Saved

The message of 1 Corinthians 1:18 is too clear for one to miss the point. What the Cross means depends on the way one looks at it. It is foolishness for those in rebellion against God, but it is power for those who long for His salvation.

**Read** Colossians 1:20 and 1 Peter 2:24. What did Jesus accomplish for us on the cross?

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As we have already seen, in preaching the gospel, one must avoid “words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17, *ESV*). In light of 1 Corinthians 1:17, it becomes easier to understand why the opposite of foolishness is the power of God and not human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18). The Cross, which is so contrary to human wisdom, reveals just how foolish human wisdom really is.

The Greek text of 1 Corinthians 1:18 suggests that “those who are perishing” (*NKJV*) are receiving the result of their actions. The text can read like this: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are destroying themselves.” The Greek verb *apollymi* (“to perish”) can also mean “to destroy” (*John 10:10*). In fact, *apollymi* is translated as “destroy” in 1 Corinthians 1:19.

What is happening here? Paul provides a biblical foundation for this statement in verse 18, about these people perishing, by quoting in verse 19 God’s words in Isaiah 29:14. In verse 19, God is the one behind the destruction, which seems to contradict the self-destroying pride mentioned right before. However, there is no contradiction. The idea is that God will destroy that which already is destroying itself.

In contrast to those being destroyed, the phrase “to us who are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18, *NKJV*) indicates that salvation comes only from God. Paul is saying that we are being saved; that is, we are not saving ourselves. We, of course, can’t. Our salvation has an external source. While destruction is self-caused, salvation can only be granted, a gift of grace to sinners. As is clear in 1 Corinthians 1:21, it is God who saves those who believe. Foolishness, in this sense, is the act of rejecting what God has offered humanity through the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:30), thus bringing destruction upon oneself.

**“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23, *NKJV*). In what ways does this verse restate what Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 19?**

## A Messiah Crucified

Paul wrote that the “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom” (*1 Cor. 1:22, ESV*). The Cross—the idea of God, the Messiah, being crucified—was not a sign that the Jews had expected. Nor was it the kind of wisdom that the Greeks wanted. It went against everyone’s expectations.

In fact, all one has to do is read how the disciples reacted to the idea of Jesus being crucified (*see Mark 8:31, 32; Mark 9:30–32; and Mark 10:32–34*) to begin to see how alien, and repulsive, the whole notion was, especially to the Jews. As said before, the Jews expected the Messiah to conquer the Romans; that is not what happened, at least not in the worldly military sense of “conquer.”

For centuries, the cross has been, for Christians, a symbol of faith. It is hard for twenty-first-century Christians to understand how crazy the idea of a crucified God was for the first-century mindset.

However, it is precisely because this was such a shocking message that makes it worthy of our most profound reflections. The portrait of a crucified Messiah makes it entirely clear to the whole universe how far God was willing to go to complete the plan of redemption. The idea of the cross itself, and of the Lord’s dying on the cross, is astonishing enough to us, sinners here on earth. (Imagine, though, what it must have meant to the sinless beings who knew, and worshiped, the Lord Jesus in heaven!)

**Read Acts 13:16–47 (especially verses 26, 38, and 47). What does this passage teach us about the meaning of the Cross?**

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Paul says Christ sent him to preach the gospel. And so Paul preaches the message of a crucified Messiah (*1 Cor. 1:23*). He resumes these ideas in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5. The apostle was faithful to Christ’s commission. In proclaiming the gospel, he didn’t employ “lofty speech or wisdom” (*1 Cor. 2:1, ESV*); instead, he focused only on “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, ESV*). His speech and message “were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (*1 Cor. 2:4, ESV*) because, in fact, “the wisdom of men” stands in visible contrast with “the power of God” (*2 Cor. 2:5, ESV*).

**A crucified Messiah was something completely unexpected by the Jews and the Greeks. What does this tell us about the fact that God does not always act the way we expect? Why is this an important concept to grasp, especially when things don’t go as we have expected?**

## Christ, the Power and Wisdom of God

In 1 Corinthians 1:19, 20, 30, and 31, Paul talks about how God’s wisdom and human wisdom are incredibly different and, thus, mutually exclusive. Notice that Paul does not reject wisdom as such, but he rejects the kind of human wisdom that tries to compete with God. Human wisdom is incapable of freeing men from sin. Only Christ, the wisdom of God, can perform this work. See the table below.

but to us who are being saved	[the message of the Cross] is the power of God	1 Cor. 1:18 (NKJV)
but to those who are called	Christ [is] the power of God	1 Cor. 1:24 (NKJV)

Both 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 1:24 show that Christ is the power of God, in the sense that He has the power to save people from their sins. Indeed, “it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21, NKJV). The phrases “us who are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV), “those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21, NKJV), and “those who are called” (1 Cor. 1:24, NKJV) refer to the same group, namely, people living the experience of salvation through faith. “The gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16, NKJV).

Christ is not only the power but also the wisdom of God. This means that through Him God faced and solved the problem of sin, a problem that human wisdom was powerless to solve. The wisdom of this world is unable to make people know God (1 Cor. 1:21). Conversely, through Christ we become wise for salvation (2 Tim. 3:15).

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:24–29. Notice the words there, such as “foolishness,” “weak,” “power,” and “wise.” What point is he making?**

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In reading 1 Corinthians 1:24–29, one should also notice the terms *foolish* (or *foolishness*) and *weak* (or *weakness*). The point is that human wisdom may consider the message of the Cross to be foolishness and weakness. However, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25, ESV). This doesn’t mean that God is weak or foolish; it’s merely an expression showing how God’s power and wisdom far exceed anything human.

**Dwell on the words “that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor. 1:26, NKJV). What message is there for us?**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “Calvary,” pp. 741–757, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“To the minds of multitudes living at the present time, the cross of Calvary is surrounded by sacred memories. Hallowed associations are connected with the scenes of the crucifixion. But in Paul’s day the cross was regarded with feelings of repulsion and horror. To uphold as the Saviour of mankind one who had met death on the cross, would naturally call forth ridicule and opposition.

“Paul well knew how his message would be regarded by both the Jews and the Greeks of Corinth. . . . Among his Jewish hearers there were many who would be angered by the message he was about to proclaim. In the estimation of the Greeks his words would be absurd folly. He would be looked upon as weak-minded for attempting to show how the cross could have any connection with the elevation of the race or the salvation of mankind.

“But to Paul the cross was the one object of supreme interest. Ever since he had been arrested in his career of persecution against the followers of the crucified Nazarene he had never ceased to glory in the cross. At that time there had been given him a revelation of the infinite love of God, as revealed in the death of Christ; and a marvelous transformation had been wrought in his life, bringing all his plans and purposes into harmony with heaven. . . . He knew by personal experience that when a sinner once beholds the love of the Father, as seen in the sacrifice of His Son, and yields to the divine influence, a change of heart takes place, and henceforth Christ is all and in all.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 245, 246.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1** In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (*Matt. 26:39, NKJV*). What does this prayer say about the immense price Jesus paid on the cross?
- 2** Paul says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men” (*1 Cor. 1:25, NKJV*). In what ways is the wisdom of God so different from human wisdom?
- 3** The message of a crucified Christ was a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. What biblical themes that we preach today can produce the same effect in modern audiences, and why?
- 4** Paul says that “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God” (*1 Cor. 2:14, NKJV*). So, how can we speak about Jesus to these people in a way that could touch their hearts? Or maybe our actions alone will reach them.

## A Touch That Transforms

By VYACHESLAV DEMYAN

Fabiola lived in the peaceful surroundings of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, yet peace was the last thing she felt. A breast cancer diagnosis had shaken her world, and with the added fear of COVID-19 spreading across the country, death felt closer than ever.

Meanwhile, in the city of Salvador, Luisa's world was collapsing. A betrayal shattered her marriage of 23 years, leaving her to discover she had contracted syphilis from her husband. Additionally, her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and she witnessed a neighbor take her own life. The thought haunted her—maybe she should do the same.

Both women were drowning in their suffering. Like the woman who had bled for 12 years in the biblical story of Mark chapter 5, Fabiola and Luisa were desperate for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. They each needed a touch of hope.

On two separate evenings, God intervened in a surprisingly similar way. As Fabiola tried to escape her anxiety by watching TV, her small dog hopped onto her lap, accidentally stepping on the remote and switching the channel to Novo Tempo, Hope Channel in Brazil.

Some 800 miles away, Luisa's dog did the same thing. In Fabiola and Luisa's darkest moments, one divinely placed paw on a remote revealed the life-changing love of a Savior.

Both women felt a wave of hope wash over them.

Today, Fabiola has found renewed purpose, encouraging those around her with the same message of comfort she received. The messages from Novo Tempo reshaped her outlook on her illness. She no longer saw cancer as a punishment but as a part of something God allowed to help transform her. Now, as she waits for her medical appointments, she shares Christian books, speaks of Jesus, and encourages those around her with the hope she found.

For Luisa, the programs she watched helped her recognize she was battling depression. She was able to receive treatment that became her turning point, helping her emerge from darkness into the light of God's love.

"I was that lost, dirty, empty daughter," she reflects. "But [after His touch], I never want to leave His presence."

Hope Channel exists for people like Fabiola and Luisa—people searching for hope, for healing, for Jesus. Thousands are waiting to be reached. Eighty-four Hope Channels around the world are reaching people through life-changing content, offering Bible studies, and connecting seekers with Christ.

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