

## **“The Word of the Cross”**

**1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-25**

**February 3, 2019 “The Word of the Cross”**

**1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-25**

**February 3, 2019**

**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

As I mentioned last time, coming to the end of my tenure as pastor of this church I have been concentrating on the main points of Christian faith and life. And we have come today to one of, if not the most fundamental of them all: the cross of Jesus Christ.

For a very long time now the cross has been a fixture among the most important symbols of Western Civilization, indeed its most sacred symbol. It continues to secure that status everywhere else in the world. One does not have to travel far to see a cross atop a church. One has only to mingle among people virtually anywhere to notice someone wearing a cross of gold or silver suspended from a chain around the neck. Many flags are emblazoned with a cross. This is because for Christians the cross stands for so much. Even in cultures that make no claim to being Christian in any serious sense, the cross has become, by some manner of unwitting attraction a symbol of beauty, goodness, and love. It certainly provoked no offense, at least until recently. When in France recently students were banned from wearing the cross to school, at the same time Muslim girls were banned from wearing their head coverings, it came as a powerful reminder of the power of the cross as a symbol of Christian faith in Jesus Christ.

And so it has been for a long time very difficult for anyone in the Western world to appreciate how utterly foreign this exaltation of the cross, this fondness for the cross, this aura of sanctity and beauty that gathers around the cross would have been to the people of the Roman world to whom the message of Christ’s crucifixion was first proclaimed.

Paul, a citizen of that world, fully understood that the cross, far from being a symbol to which people would be attracted, far from a symbol that people would want to wear about their necks in silver or gold, was in fact a symbol that was *bound to discredit the gospel* in the minds of most people. He says plainly in v. 18 that any announcement that mankind’s eternal happiness is suspended on the death of someone on a cross is going to be regarded by most people as outrageous. Such a message will not be regarded as worthy of people’s attention, certainly not worthy of the commitment of their lives. He will say again, in v. 23, that the Christian message, centered as it is on the death of Jesus on the cross, was bound to run into fierce resistance from both Jews and Gentiles, each with their separate reasons to think foolish, or even wicked, any philosophy of life that requires someone to believe that his hope of salvation depends upon a crucifixion. However far removed we are from that world and those days, we should not have much difficulty understanding why the people of that time and place found the message of the cross foolish and repugnant.

For *the Jews* the cross was a scandal, a stumbling block, an impediment to Christian faith because the Law of Moses taught that the exposure of a human body on a tree was a sign of that person’s being under God’s curse. Further, their antipathy toward crucifixion had been deepened as so many of their own countrymen had been executed by the Romans by crucifixion. The idea

of crucifixion for Jews then had something of the same visceral repugnance that concentration camps have for Jews today.

What is more, the Christians were saying that the Son of God had died on the cross, an idea that Jews, with their high view of the divine transcendence and their inflexible commitment to monotheism found blasphemous. It was the strength of Jewish feeling about this message and the depth of their intellectual and theological opposition to it, that accounted for Paul's determination – before becoming a Christian himself – not simply to speak against this new movement and its message, but actually to hunt Christians down, to agitate against them, to seek their imprisonment, even their execution, and, in every way he could, to destroy the message before it had a chance to spread.

For the *Gentiles* there was a completely different set of reasons why they were either amused or revolted by a philosophy that proclaimed that the meaning of life was to be found in the crucifixion of some Jew. *First*, there was the stigma attached to crucifixion itself as a form of capital punishment. Educated, elite Romans were embarrassed that crucifixion even existed as a penalty in the Roman legal system. Scholars have pointed out how rarely in the surviving literature of the Greco-Roman world crucifixion is even mentioned. Crucifixion was regarded as the worst form of death – worse than being torn to pieces by wild animals in the arena, worse than being burned to death. It was a brutal business, crucifixion, and to have suffered that form of death marked someone out as the worst kind of miscreant. That is why early Christians were mocked for worshiping an evil man, a criminal. Today we do not find ourselves normally inclined to think highly of people who die in the electric chair or by lethal injection and would never think of hanging little electric chairs or gurneys around our neck. That is the sense that J.B. Phillips caught in his translation of Philippians 2:8. With his rare insight, he rendered the last phrase of that sentence, “and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.” Not much of a recommendation to the Gentile world of that day.

*Further*, the message of the cross was not about the martyrdom of some Roman statesman, a Julius Caesar or some Greek philosopher, such as Socrates, but was instead about the death of some obscure Jewish carpenter and amateur rabbi. The Jews were a significant minority in the Roman world and, in certain circles, were considered with respect. But no Roman was likely to think that the secret of human life was to be found in the death of some rabble-rousing Jewish rabbi in far distant Judea. The situation Paul faced in preaching the message of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the great cities of the imperial world would not be psychologically dissimilar to what would be faced today were some missionaries to attempt to persuade members of the political elite in Washington D.C., or the chief executives of Fortune 500 companies, or the faculties of American universities, that the meaning of life was disclosed and the way of eternal life opened by the life and the death by firing squad of some obscure Mexican peasant who had never traveled beyond the boundaries of his homeland in the Yucatan.

Now, in a way and to a degree that would not have been true even thirty years ago, these verses from 1 Corinthians 1 speak with living voice and immediate relevance. For we Christians are once again living in a culture that is very like that culture that found the Christian message bizarre and offensive when it first heard it. It should cease to surprise us, as it never surprised the Apostle Paul that a great many people today now find the idea that they and everyone else can be

saved in no other way than through the long-ago death of a Jewish man more than faintly ridiculous and the idea that every other philosophy of life and religion in the world is rendered false in the face of this single event in history strikes them as repugnant.

In the biography of the late John Stott, the influential Anglican pastor and writer, there is this story. Stott was converted as a teenager while a student at Rugby, one of the legendary English boarding schools. He went on to Cambridge having been a Christian for only two years.

"It was when I was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge. Only recently I had come to Christ myself, and now – clumsily, I am sure – I was trying to share the good news with a fellow student. I was endeavoring to explain the great doctrine of justification by grace alone, that salvation was Christ's free gift, and that we could neither buy it nor even contribute to the purchase, for Christ had obtained it for us and was now offering it to us gratis. Suddenly, to my intense astonishment, my friend shouted three times at the top of his voice, 'Horrible! Horrible! Horrible!' [Dudley Smith, *John Stott*, I, 127]

It was not merely that he failed to see the glory and wonder in the gospel of God's free love in Christ, not only that he found the gospel unappealing or unconvincing. He found it disgusting.

And so, an increasing number in our culture today. The cross has been recently vilified by feminists and liberal academics as child abuse, an angry father brutally punishing his son for somebody else's mistakes. How could such cruelty be the salvation of the world? We are now confidently told that God would never do such a thing – punish his son to save us, told that even by people claiming to be Christians. It is important that we understand where this repugnance comes from and how it is to be overcome. Paul knew from his own experience how scandalous the message was. He had found it so himself before he became a follower of Jesus Christ. He too had despised the message and those who proclaimed it. But, the antipathy of the culture notwithstanding, now he and countless others had embraced the message of the cross and were confidently summoning others to do the same. What was it that made a message so naturally repugnant so wonderful? What made an idea at first so absurd into the cause of such happiness?

Well Paul tells us in v. 24. When the grace of God is given to a man or woman by the Spirit of God, when God summons that heart to himself, what was first thought foolishness is recognized as the deepest wisdom; what he or she at first thought weak and silly is nothing less than the power of God.

Now how does this happen? What makes for such a dramatic revolution in viewpoint? How does the mind change? Well, we learn in the rest of the Bible how this usually happens. The reason the cross becomes light and life to a person is precisely because it finally dawns on that person that nothing short of the death of the Son of God would be adequate to atone for his or her sins. For all of man's vaunted self-confidence and for all his claim to moral goodness, for all the good intentions that he imputes to himself, ordinary daily life exposes the fact time and time again that man is a sinner, that he violates the code of conduct that God has laid down for human life; that he violates even the code of conduct he himself demands of others. What is more, he is an inveterate sinner, no more able to rid his life of pride selfishness, impurity, hypocrisy,

dishonesty, envy and indifference toward God than he is able to turn straw into gold or fly without wings. Many is ugly inside and once he knows that he is in a fair way of thinking very differently about the cross.

Let a person once feel the true weight of his own moral failure as a human being and suddenly the cross is no longer foolishness or a stumbling block – *it is the only sure way to escape the burden of sin*. Let a man or a woman once see the holiness and feel the justice of God and, in that instant, the cross becomes the exact reverse of what it once was – no longer a silly religious idea – but the powerful means by which God dealt with our sin. The cross remains terrible, it was terrible suffering and death for Jesus, but terrible *because it had to be terrible* – only such suffering, only such a sinless victim, God himself now become man, could avail to pay the debt we owe to the justice and the goodness of God. Suddenly it is the cross and only the cross, or, better, Jesus on the cross, that stands between me and the judgment of God. And in that moment the most luminous, the most perfectly obvious, the most heart-melting truth in all the world is that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung upon a tree,’” or “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” or “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” No wonder Paul begins his summary of the gospel with the words, “that Christ died *for our sins* in accordance with the scriptures.” *The problem for Jew and Gentile was the same: they both proudly indulged the illusion that they didn't need the Son of God to die for their sins.*

I owed a great debt and on the cross Jesus paid that debt for me. Once that is realized the fact that the cross was the most ignominious of deaths does not speak *against* it, but *for* it. It needed to be a great suffering if it were to pay my great debt. And the same thing happens, the same revolution occurs in one’s thinking about the cross of Christ *when one realizes the love and the goodness that is in it.*

It seemed at one time absurd to Paul and to many of his contemporaries who later became Christians like himself that anyone could find a rationale in the message of the cross. But once they realized that it was, in fact, a substitution; that the Son of God was taking our place in that cruel death, that he was suffering *on our behalf*, that in that execution he was enduring the punishment that we deserved, they could see in the cross not foolishness but a supreme love.

In the first century people said as they say today: give us a religion that makes sense: an intelligent, sophisticated religion. Give us a religion that tells us how to live. That is what we need. Give us a religion that helps us feel better about ourselves, that makes us better people and helps us to face the trials of life. Give us a religion that satisfies our intellect without offending our sensibilities or our standards of fair-play; that doesn’t ask too much of us.

Well, Christianity did all that far better than Roman civil religion or any of the ancient superstitions of the Greco-Roman world; far better than the popular mystery religions which, like modern cults, competed for the attention of people seeking the meaning of life; far better than the philosophies of the time. But, along with the truth about God, the world, about man, about sin, about righteousness and right living, the gospel, the good news proclaimed by Paul and many others brought knowledge of a great love at the very center of the universe, a love God had for

man, a love so strong, so pure that it sought man's salvation, his eternal joy *even at the cost of his humiliation, suffering, and cruel death.* No other religion then or now reveals the heart of God as a heart of immortal love. The cross is a pulpit and its message is the love of God!

There is no freedom in the world to be compared with the sense of release that comes with the realization of the forgiveness of God; when, in one liberating moment, I see the cross as the saving act of God and know that he loves me in spite of my sin. [Earnshaw-Smith in Dudley-Smith, I, 216] No other faith has ever offered this discovery to human beings. No other faith says this to mankind:

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16)

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (4:9-10)

Here was the power, the goodness, the truth that sent vast multitudes of people, whose culture and whose training had led them to think the Christian message foolish or positively evil, rejoicing into the church, proclaiming the praises of Jesus Christ and looking to him for the fulfillment of all their longings as human beings. The cross is the watershed of humanity, where – as with the two thieves dying either side of the cross – all society is divided into two great streams that move inexorably toward heaven or hell.

And so it was that in Paul's day, as it is in ours, the world continues to be divided among those who think the message of the Son of God dying on a cross to save sinners strange, improbable, unsophisticated, even offensive to cultured tastes on the one hand, and, on the other, those who, having been made by the Spirit of God to see and to feel the terrible reality of their own sin in the face of the fearful holiness and purity of the living God and to feel the immeasurable wonder of God's love for poor sinners. The one finds the cross at best uninteresting and at worst actually offensive; the other finds it the most important discovery of their lives, the most crucial moment in the history of mankind, the most decisive and indispensable foundation of all human happiness and hope. One finds it little more than an odd superstition; the other realizes that it is nothing less than the manifestation of the wisdom, power, goodness, compassion, and love of the one, living and true God.

Let me illustrate the difference between these two camps, these two schools of thought about Jesus and his death on the cross, in this way, from just a few moments in the life of a single individual.

Winston Churchill tells this story about his time on the western front during the First World War. He had left a Cabinet office in England in which he had been consistently frustrated to take a position with the fighting troops on the front. He served as a major in the trenches for half a year. He had fought in wars before, heard the bullets fly and, remarkable man that he was, he distinguished himself as a soldier once again, winning the loyalty of the troops under his command and the grudging admiration of his political enemies.

On one occasion during his six months at the front, sitting in his sandbagged shelter in the trenches he received word that the corps commander, an important general, wished to see him; a car would meet him at a certain crossroads. It was a muddy, three-mile hike, under German observation most of the way. The shriek of enemy shells was constant but, as he put it, he and his batman “toiled and sweated on.” When finally arriving at the crossroads where the general’s car was to meet them he was dumbfounded to learn that the general had changed his mind. “What,” Churchill asked the staff officer, “was to be the point of the meeting?” “Oh, it was nothing in particular,” the officer replied. “He thought as he was coming up this way he would like to have a talk with you.” Churchill was furious. He began the “long, sliding, slippery, splashing waddle back to the trenches...”

He cursed the thoughtless general for having wasted his day and making him hike so far for nothing. When he got back to his shelter, however, he found that it no longer existed. Five minutes after he left it that morning his dugout had been penetrated by an artillery shell and destroyed. The officer with whom he shared it had been annihilated. As Churchill records his thoughts,

“Suddenly I felt my irritation against the General pass completely from my mind. All sense of grievance departed in a flash. As I walked to my new quarters, I reflected how thoughtful it had been of him to wish to see me again, and to show courtesy to a subordinate when he had so much responsibility on his shoulders.” [Cf. William Manchester, *The Last Lion*, I, 581-582]

His entire attitude toward the general had changed because the general’s summons had saved his life. It is in a similar way that people’s minds are changed and changed forever about the cross of Christ. *The difference, of course, is that Christ saved his people on purpose, not by accident and at the greatest cost to himself.* When they realize, when the Holy Spirit brings them to realize, that the cross is all that stands between them and the just judgment of Almighty God, suddenly the cross is the furthest thing from foolishness, from a stumbling block and becomes in fact the power of God and the wisdom of God. Let them once realize that they are God’s enemies and, in that same moment it will come rushing into their minds what a marvel it is that “while we were his enemies Christ died for us.” Suddenly, for those erstwhile despisers of the cross, there is not a more sensible, more logical, more reasonable, more morally compelling sentence in all the Bible or in all the world, than this:

“God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When this good news of Christ dying for sinners was first proclaimed to the world, when it first broke upon the guilty conscience of mankind, it transformed the world. The cross became, almost overnight, the world’s most precious symbol of new life and of great love. Here is the early Christian father, Tertullian, describing the place the cross came to have in the hearts and lives of these new believers.

“At every forward step and movement, and every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on

couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [of the cross].” [*De Corona*, iii]

Now you know, even the few of you who may not be Christians, in the heart of your hearts, you know who is thinking rightly, thinking soundly about the cross. It is not the Jew or Gentile who cannot find the sense in it; it is rather the multitudes of Jews and Gentiles who have been transformed by the cross, whose hearts have been filled with the love of God and Christ that is manifested in the cross. A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential here. Christ took it for granted that we are bad and need deliverance from sin. Until we admit this about ourselves we will find our objections to the idea that Christ was dying for us on the cross. When we realize that truth about ourselves then it is that the cross towers above us as the way, the truth and the life.

John Stott, who in the middle of his life was to write *The Cross of Christ*, one of the great books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a modern classic, in the preface of his masterpiece said this:

“I try to show that the cross transforms everything. It gives us a new, worshipping relationship to God, a new and balanced understanding of ourselves, a new incentive to give ourselves in mission, a new love of our enemies, and a new courage to face the perplexities of suffering.

“In daring to write...a book about the cross, there is of course a great danger of presumption. This is partly because what actually happened when ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ’ is a mystery whose depths we will spend eternity plumbing; and partly because it would be most unseemly to feign a cool detachment.... For willy-nilly we are involved. Our sins put him there. So, far from offering us flattery, the cross undermines our self-righteousness. We can stand before it only with a bowed head and a broken spirit. And there we remain until the Lord Jesus speaks to our hearts his word of pardon and acceptance, and we, gripped by his love and brimful of thanksgiving, go out into the world to live our lives in his service.”

God grant that the people of Faith Presbyterian Church will always find in the cross the real heart of the gospel, a living, humbling, bracing, inspiring power in their hearts, and the supreme proof of the mighty love of God. If they do, whatever storms may come, they will *never* be forsaken of God!

### **The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

As I mentioned last time, coming to the end of my tenure as pastor of this church I have been concentrating on the main points of Christian faith and life. And we have come today to one of, if not the most fundamental of them all: the cross of Jesus Christ.

For a very long time now the cross has been a fixture among the most important symbols of Western Civilization, indeed its most sacred symbol. It continues to secure that status everywhere else in the world. One does not have to travel far to see a cross atop a church. One has only to mingle among people virtually anywhere to notice someone wearing a cross of gold or silver suspended from a chain around the neck. Many flags are emblazoned with a cross. This is because for Christians the cross stands for so much. Even in cultures that make no claim to being Christian in any serious sense, the cross has become, by some manner of unwitting attraction a symbol of beauty, goodness, and love. It certainly provoked no offense, at least until recently. When in France recently students were banned from wearing the cross to school, at the same time Muslim girls were banned from wearing their head coverings, it came as a powerful reminder of the power of the cross as a symbol of Christian faith in Jesus Christ.

And so it has been for a long time very difficult for anyone in the Western world to appreciate how utterly foreign this exaltation of the cross, this fondness for the cross, this aura of sanctity and beauty that gathers around the cross would have been to the people of the Roman world to whom the message of Christ's crucifixion was first proclaimed.

Paul, a citizen of that world, fully understood that the cross, far from being a symbol to which people would be attracted, far from a symbol that people would want to wear about their necks in silver or gold, was in fact a symbol that was *bound to discredit the gospel* in the minds of most people. He says plainly in v. 18 that any announcement that mankind's eternal happiness is suspended on the death of someone on a cross is going to be regarded by most people as outrageous. Such a message will not be regarded as worthy of people's attention, certainly not worthy of the commitment of their lives. He will say again, in v. 23, that the Christian message, centered as it is on the death of Jesus on the cross, was bound to run into fierce resistance from both Jews and Gentiles, each with their separate reasons to think foolish, or even wicked, any philosophy of life that requires someone to believe that his hope of salvation depends upon a crucifixion. However far removed we are from that world and those days, we should not have much difficulty understanding why the people of that time and place found the message of the cross foolish and repugnant.

For the Jews the cross was a scandal, a stumbling block, an impediment to Christian faith because the Law of Moses taught that the exposure of a human body on a tree was a sign of that person's being under God's curse. Further, their antipathy toward crucifixion had been deepened as so many of their own countrymen had been executed by the Romans by crucifixion. The idea of crucifixion for Jews then had something of the same visceral repugnance that concentration camps have for Jews today.

What is more, the Christians were saying that the Son of God had died on the cross, an idea that Jews, with their high view of the divine transcendence and their inflexible commitment to monotheism found blasphemous. It was the strength of Jewish feeling about this message and the depth of their intellectual and theological opposition to it, that accounted for Paul's determination – before becoming a Christian himself – not simply to speak against this new movement and its message, but actually to hunt Christians down, to agitate against them, to seek their imprisonment, even their execution, and, in every way he could, to destroy the message before it had a chance to spread.

For *the Gentiles* there was a completely different set of reasons why they were either amused or revolted by a philosophy that proclaimed that the meaning of life was to be found in the crucifixion of some Jew. *First*, there was the stigma attached to crucifixion itself as a form of capital punishment. Educated, elite Romans were embarrassed that crucifixion even existed as a penalty in the Roman legal system. Scholars have pointed out how rarely in the surviving literature of the Greco-Roman world crucifixion is even mentioned. Crucifixion was regarded as the worst form of death – worse than being torn to pieces by wild animals in the arena, worse than being burned to death. It was a brutal business, crucifixion, and to have suffered that form of death marked someone out as the worst kind of miscreant. That is why early Christians were mocked for worshiping an evil man, a criminal. Today we do not find ourselves normally inclined to think highly of people who die in the electric chair or by lethal injection and would never think of hanging little electric chairs or gurneys around our neck. That is the sense that J.B. Phillips caught in his translation of Philippians 2:8. With his rare insight, he rendered the last phrase of that sentence, “and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.” Not much of a recommendation to the Gentile world of that day.

*Further*, the message of the cross was not about the martyrdom of some Roman statesman, a Julius Caesar or some Greek philosopher, such as Socrates, but was instead about the death of some obscure Jewish carpenter and amateur rabbi. The Jews were a significant minority in the Roman world and, in certain circles, were considered with respect. But no Roman was likely to think that the secret of human life was to be found in the death of some rabble-rousing Jewish rabbi in far distant Judea. The situation Paul faced in preaching the message of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the great cities of the imperial world would not be psychologically dissimilar to what would be faced today were some missionaries to attempt to persuade members of the political elite in Washington D.C., or the chief executives of Fortune 500 companies, or the faculties of American universities, that the meaning of life was disclosed and the way of eternal life opened by the life and the death by firing squad of some obscure Mexican peasant who had never traveled beyond the boundaries of his homeland in the Yucatan.

Now, in a way and to a degree that would not have been true even thirty years ago, these verses from 1 Corinthians 1 speak with living voice and immediate relevance. For we Christians are once again living in a culture that is very like that culture that found the Christian message bizarre and offensive when it first heard it. It should cease to surprise us, as it never surprised the Apostle Paul that a great many people today now find the idea that they and everyone else can be saved in no other way than through the long-ago death of a Jewish man more than faintly ridiculous and the idea that every other philosophy of life and religion in the world is rendered false in the face of this single event in history strikes them as repugnant.

In the biography of the late John Stott, the influential Anglican pastor and writer, there is this story. Stott was converted as a teenager while a student at Rugby, one of the legendary English boarding schools. He went on to Cambridge having been a Christian for only two years.

“It was when I was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge. Only recently I had come to Christ myself, and now – clumsily, I am sure – I was trying to share the good news with a fellow student. I was endeavoring to explain the great doctrine of

justification by grace alone, that salvation was Christ's free gift, and that we could neither buy it nor even contribute to the purchase, for Christ had obtained it for us and was now offering it to us gratis. Suddenly, to my intense astonishment, my friend shouted three times at the top of his voice, 'Horrible! Horrible! Horrible!' [Dudley Smith, *John Stott*, I, 127]

It was not merely that he failed to see the glory and wonder in the gospel of God's free love in Christ, not only that he found the gospel unappealing or unconvincing. He found it disgusting.

And so, an increasing number in our culture today. The cross has been recently vilified by feminists and liberal academics as child abuse, an angry father brutally punishing his son for somebody else's mistakes. How could such cruelty be the salvation of the world? We are now confidently told that God would never do such a thing – punish his son to save us, told that even by people claiming to be Christians. It is important that we understand where this repugnance comes from and how it is to be overcome. Paul knew from his own experience how scandalous the message was. He had found it so himself before he became a follower of Jesus Christ. He too had despised the message and those who proclaimed it. But, the antipathy of the culture notwithstanding, now he and countless others had embraced the message of the cross and were confidently summoning others to do the same. What was it that made a message so naturally repugnant so wonderful? What made an idea at first so absurd into the cause of such happiness?

Well Paul tells us in v. 24. When the grace of God is given to a man or woman by the Spirit of God, when God summons that heart to himself, what was first thought foolishness is recognized as the deepest wisdom; what he or she at first thought weak and silly is nothing less than the power of God.

Now how does this happen? What makes for such a dramatic revolution in viewpoint? How does the mind change? Well, we learn in the rest of the Bible how this usually happens. The reason the cross becomes light and life to a person is precisely because it finally dawns on that person that nothing short of the death of the Son of God would be adequate to atone for his or her sins. For all of man's vaunted self-confidence and for all his claim to moral goodness, for all the good intentions that he imputes to himself, ordinary daily life exposes the fact time and time again that man is a sinner, that he violates the code of conduct that God has laid down for human life; that he violates even the code of conduct he himself demands of others. What is more, he is an inveterate sinner, no more able to rid his life of pride selfishness, impurity, hypocrisy, dishonesty, envy and indifference toward God than he is able to turn straw into gold or fly without wings. Many is ugly inside and once he knows that he is in a fair way of thinking very differently about the cross.

Let a person once feel the true weight of his own moral failure as a human being and suddenly the cross is no longer foolishness or a stumbling block – *it is the only sure way to escape the burden of sin*. Let a man or a woman once see the holiness and feel the justice of God and, in that instant, the cross becomes the exact reverse of what it once was – no longer a silly religious idea – but the powerful means by which God dealt with our sin. The cross remains terrible, it was terrible suffering and death for Jesus, but terrible *because it had to be terrible* – only such suffering, only such a sinless victim, God himself now become man, could avail to pay the debt

we owe to the justice and the goodness of God. Suddenly it is the cross and only the cross, or, better, Jesus on the cross, that stands between me and the judgment of God. And in that moment the most luminous, the most perfectly obvious, the most heart-melting truth in all the world is that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung upon a tree,’” or “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” or “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” No wonder Paul begins his summary of the gospel with the words, “that Christ died *for our sins* in accordance with the scriptures.” *The problem for Jew and Gentile was the same: they both proudly indulged the illusion that they didn't need the Son of God to die for their sins.*

I owed a great debt and on the cross Jesus paid that debt for me. Once that is realized the fact that the cross was the most ignominious of deaths does not speak *against* it, but *for* it. It needed to be a great suffering if it were to pay my great debt. And the same thing happens, the same revolution occurs in one's thinking about the cross of Christ *when one realizes the love and the goodness that is in it.*

It seemed at one time absurd to Paul and to many of his contemporaries who later became Christians like himself that anyone could find a rationale in the message of the cross. But once they realized that it was, in fact, a substitution; that the Son of God was taking our place in that cruel death, that he was suffering *on our behalf*, that in that execution he was enduring the punishment that we deserved, they could see in the cross not foolishness but a supreme love.

In the first century people said as they say today: give us a religion that makes sense: an intelligent, sophisticated religion. Give us a religion that tells us how to live. That is what we need. Give us a religion that helps us feel better about ourselves, that makes us better people and helps us to face the trials of life. Give us a religion that satisfies our intellect without offending our sensibilities or our standards of fair-play; that doesn't ask too much of us.

Well, Christianity did all that far better than Roman civil religion or any of the ancient superstitions of the Greco-Roman world; far better than the popular mystery religions which, like modern cults, competed for the attention of people seeking the meaning of life; far better than the philosophies of the time. But, along with the truth about God, the world, about man, about sin, about righteousness and right living, the gospel, the good news proclaimed by Paul and many others brought knowledge of a great love at the very center of the universe, a love God had for man, a love so strong, so pure that it sought man's salvation, his eternal joy *even at the cost of his humiliation, suffering, and cruel death.* No other religion then or now reveals the heart of God as a heart of immortal love. The cross is a pulpit and its message is the love of God!

There is no freedom in the world to be compared with the sense of release that comes with the realization of the forgiveness of God; when, in one liberating moment, I see the cross as the saving act of God and know that he loves me in spite of my sin. [Earnshaw-Smith in Dudley-Smith, I, 216] No other faith has ever offered this discovery to human beings. No other faith says this to mankind:

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16)

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (4:9-10)

Here was the power, the goodness, the truth that sent vast multitudes of people, whose culture and whose training had led them to think the Christian message foolish or positively evil, rejoicing into the church, proclaiming the praises of Jesus Christ and looking to him for the fulfillment of all their longings as human beings. The cross is the watershed of humanity, where – as with the two thieves dying either side of the cross – all society is divided into two great streams that move inexorably toward heaven or hell.

And so it was that in Paul's day, as it is in ours, the world continues to be divided among those who think the message of the Son of God dying on a cross to save sinners strange, improbable, unsophisticated, even offensive to cultured tastes on the one hand, and, on the other, those who, having been made by the Spirit of God to see and to feel the terrible reality of their own sin in the face of the fearful holiness and purity of the living God and to feel the immeasurable wonder of God's love for poor sinners. The one finds the cross at best uninteresting and at worst actually offensive; the other finds it the most important discovery of their lives, the most crucial moment in the history of mankind, the most decisive and indispensable foundation of all human happiness and hope. One finds it little more than an odd superstition; the other realizes that it is nothing less than the manifestation of the wisdom, power, goodness, compassion, and love of the one, living and true God.

Let me illustrate the difference between these two camps, these two schools of thought about Jesus and his death on the cross, in this way, from just a few moments in the life of a single individual.

Winston Churchill tells this story about his time on the western front during the First World War. He had left a Cabinet office in England in which he had been consistently frustrated to take a position with the fighting troops on the front. He served as a major in the trenches for half a year. He had fought in wars before, heard the bullets fly and, remarkable man that he was, he distinguished himself as a soldier once again, winning the loyalty of the troops under his command and the grudging admiration of his political enemies.

On one occasion during his six months at the front, sitting in his sandbagged shelter in the trenches he received word that the corps commander, an important general, wished to see him; a car would meet him at a certain crossroads. It was a muddy, three-mile hike, under German observation most of the way. The shriek of enemy shells was constant but, as he put it, he and his batman "toiled and sweated on." When finally arriving at the crossroads where the general's car was to meet them he was dumbfounded to learn that the general had changed his mind. "What," Churchill asked the staff officer, "was to be the point of the meeting?" "Oh, it was nothing in particular," the officer replied. "He thought as he was coming up this way he would like to have a talk with you." Churchill was furious. He began the "long, sliding, slippery, splashing waddle back to the trenches..."

He cursed the thoughtless general for having wasted his day and making him hike so far for nothing. When he got back to his shelter, however, he found that it no longer existed. Five minutes after he left it that morning his dugout had been penetrated by an artillery shell and destroyed. The officer with whom he shared it had been annihilated. As Churchill records his thoughts,

“Suddenly I felt my irritation against the General pass completely from my mind. All sense of grievance departed in a flash. As I walked to my new quarters, I reflected how thoughtful it had been of him to wish to see me again, and to show courtesy to a subordinate when he had so much responsibility on his shoulders.” [Cf. William Manchester, *The Last Lion*, I, 581-582]

His entire attitude toward the general had changed because the general’s summons had saved his life. It is in a similar way that people’s minds are changed and changed forever about the cross of Christ. *The difference, of course, is that Christ saved his people on purpose, not by accident and at the greatest cost to himself.* When they realize, when the Holy Spirit brings them to realize, that the cross is all that stands between them and the just judgment of Almighty God, suddenly the cross is the furthest thing from foolishness, from a stumbling block and becomes in fact the power of God and the wisdom of God. Let them once realize that they are God’s enemies and, in that same moment it will come rushing into their minds what a marvel it is that “while we were his enemies Christ died for us.” Suddenly, for those erstwhile despisers of the cross, there is not a more sensible, more logical, more reasonable, more morally compelling sentence in all the Bible or in all the world, than this:

“God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When this good news of Christ dying for sinners was first proclaimed to the world, when it first broke upon the guilty conscience of mankind, it transformed the world. The cross became, almost overnight, the world’s most precious symbol of new life and of great love. Here is the early Christian father, Tertullian, describing the place the cross came to have in the hearts and lives of these new believers.

“At every forward step and movement, and every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [of the cross].” [*De Corona*, iii]

Now you know, even the few of you who may not be Christians, in the heart of your hearts, you know who is thinking rightly, thinking soundly about the cross. It is not the Jew or Gentile who cannot find the sense in it; it is rather the multitudes of Jews and Gentiles who have been transformed by the cross, whose hearts have been filled with the love of God and Christ that is manifested in the cross. A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential here. Christ took it for granted that we are bad and need deliverance from sin. Until we admit this about ourselves we will find our objections to the idea that Christ was dying for us on the cross. When we realize that truth about ourselves then it is that the cross towers above us as the way, the truth and the life.

John Stott, who in the middle of his life was to write *The Cross of Christ*, one of the great books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a modern classic, in the preface of his masterpiece said this:

“I try to show that the cross transforms everything. It gives us a new, worshipping relationship to God, a new and balanced understanding of ourselves, a new incentive to give ourselves in mission, a new love of our enemies, and a new courage to face the perplexities of suffering.

“In daring to write...a book about the cross, there is of course a great danger of presumption. This is partly because what actually happened when ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ’ is a mystery whose depths we will spend eternity plumbing; and partly because it would be most unseemly to feign a cool detachment.... For willy-nilly we are involved. Our sins put him there. So, far from offering us flattery, the cross undermines our self-righteousness. We can stand before it only with a bowed head and a broken spirit. And there we remain until the Lord Jesus speaks to our hearts his word of pardon and acceptance, and we, gripped by his love and brimful of thanksgiving, go out into the world to live our lives in his service.”

God grant that the people of Faith Presbyterian Church will always find in the cross the real heart of the gospel, a living, humbling, bracing, inspiring power in their hearts, and the supreme proof of the mighty love of God. If they do, whatever storms may come, they will *never* be forsaken of God!