

A Stumbling Block

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

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Imagine you have moved to a new community, a thousand miles from friends or family and you don't know a soul. In your first days there, a neighbor-family from across the street befriends you, brings you drinks and snacks and welcomes you to the neighborhood. They are delightful and warm-hearted. And you are so glad to have such welcoming friends in this new place!

At the end of the week, your neighbors invite you to go to church with them. Truth is, though you consider yourself a good and principled person, you did not grow up in a church family. In fact, you have never been to church. But your neighbors have been so helpful that you decide that you will accept their invitation simply out of respect and gratitude.

The neighbors don't tell you what kind of church it is... and truth is, you don't know enough even to ask. When you get there and sit down in the sanctuary, you are taken aback! Hanging in the front, suspended from the ceiling, is a chair, an electric chair! It is so odd that you want to head for the door! "What kind of cult is this?" you wonder. But you restrain yourself because these neighbors are so kind ... plus it's obvious that the other people there care for one another and have a real sense of community. You decide to stay.

In the pews are pamphlets describing what this church believes. It tells the story of an innocent man who was electrocuted by the state because people in power saw him as a threat and as a radical. These people believe, the pamphlet says, that when they are together, this executed man is also mysteriously with them in spirit.

The electric chair, says the pamphlet, is the symbol for this community; for though some see it as offensive and distasteful, for this worshiping community, it means something very different... it is a symbol of the love and power of God.

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"For the message about the cross is foolishness!"

That's what Paul writes. To the mostly new Greek Christians in Corinth, Paul is in his role as an interpreter of faith.

“For the message about the cross is foolishness... but to us ... (the cross) is the power of God.

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Writes Paul.

Paul understands that Christ crucified, the cross, is for many foolishness and a stumbling block.

Paul understood Greek culture.

The Greeks were sophisticated thinkers who debated philosophy and who valued the importance of ideas, learning and thought. The Greeks were not Christian or Jewish, but they had their philosophical ideas about God. They believed that God would never stoop to be human. Nor was God a feeling God because that was seen as weakness. No, God was above such things.

So imagine how absolutely ridiculous it must have sounded to the Greek Corinthians to hear these “cult” preachers, these “Christians,” invading their land with this nonsense about the cross. How absurd and foolish was the notion that a God-man had suffered and had been put to death by capital punishment. Worse the cross was a core message and their symbol!

Talk about crass! To the sophisticated Greeks, such an idea was absurd and scandalous.

It was as if these new Christians were wearing tiny electric chairs around their necks!

This is to say the cross was a huge stumbling block for some; for others, a foolish and absurd idea.

And I am pretty sure that for many, the cross is still a stumbling block and a foolish idea not wanted in our day. Right?

Truth is, many would rather have a feel good religion, an upbeat, positive thinking faith, rather than one whose symbol is the electric chair. What a downer. Right?

So today I want you to think about the cross and ponder this question: What does the cross mean to me?

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First, I want to say that what we believe matters. What we believe frames our world view, how we think and act.

Second, the cross and the death of Jesus are synonymous. Paul says, “Christ died for our sins.” What does it mean?

The church has wrestled with the meaning of Jesus’ death, the cross, for all these centuries. And scripture itself presents several ideas about the meaning of Jesus’s death. So very briefly I want to offer those images to you. This is not church-lite and I’ll need you to focus.

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Image one is the financial image. Jesus often referred to himself as the *Son of Man*, so he says in Mark, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”(Mark 10:45)

A ransom. So imagine the scene is a slave market. You and I have been abducted from our homes and are being sold into slavery. The auction to sell us begins. However, a man steps up and pays the necessary price (the ransom money) to purchase us and our freedom. Jesus is the man who pays for our freedom. But the ransom price is high... it’s not money but his life... this is, it is his life for ours. But Jesus pays it anyway.

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Image two is a military image. Paul expresses this in his letter to the Colossians: “(God) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son.” (Colossians 1: 13)

This time the scene is a battlefield. God and Satan are at war over who will own us, possess us. In fact, Satan has stolen us from the Kingdom of God and carried us off to his kingdom of darkness. But Christ, the warrior Messiah, invades the realm of darkness and brings us home... into God’s kingdom. However, Jesus is killed in his successful effort to free us.

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Image three is a sacrificial image. Listen to Paul in Romans: “Through... Christ Jesus... God put forward... a sacrifice of atonement by his blood.”

This time the scene is a religious temple and in the center of the temple is a bloody altar where animals are presented as sacrifices. The sacrifices appease God. A temple priest comes forward he makes a sacrifice to atone for our sin. Blood is shed— a life is offered up which cleanses us from the stain of sin. But this priest is different from all others. He

sacrifices not the life of an animal but his own life. His blood is shed in order to make peace between God and us. Of course, the priest is Jesus.

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Image four is a legal image. Listen to Paul in Corinthians: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” (2 Corinthians 5: 19)

The scene this time is a courtroom. God, the just Judge, sits behind the bench, and we, who have broken the law, stand in front on trial. We hear the verdict: Guilty. We receive the sentence: Death. But a righteous man who has obeyed the law perfectly comes into the courtroom and stands beside us; he takes the death sentence upon himself, and suffers the consequences of our guilt. We are acquitted and freed. Of course, the righteous man, who stands in for us and takes the death sentence, is Jesus.

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“Christ died for our sins,” says Paul.

These images...the slave market, the battlefield, the temple altar, and the courtroom help us understand what the cross means for us.

But in my mind, all of these images are flawed. Why? Because they tend to view God as a God who needs “buying off,” as a God who needs God’s wrath satisfied.

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Therefore, in order to make these images work, and to be theologically viable, we have to understand Jesus as God in all the images. In other words, it is not Jesus on our behalf against God. They are the same. Jesus is both God and man.

So, try this on by revisiting the legal image. Back to the courtroom where the scenario is understood this way: when the Judge gives us the sentence of guilt and death, he, the Judge, steps from behind the bench and is also the righteous man who stands beside us. In other words, the righteous man and the Judge are one; God is both the judge and the receiver of judgment!

Ah! That is an image that makes sense! Are you with me?

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Now just one final thought. The cross is a symbol of suffering. And though we'd like for our life and our religion to be upbeat, positive and beyond suffering, the truth is that life has its share of suffering and hardship. Just think of the losses we experience ...from death, to sickness, to heartbreak, to betrayal. Life is full of pain and suffering...just ask the families who lost their children in the Parkland, Florida, shootings, or the husband whose wife has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, or the child whose family now lives in their car.

To have a God who embraces suffering...who would suffer, who would submit God's self to humiliation and then crucifixion, says something about the character of God...and the character of the faith we Christians proclaim.

Some believe that Christians have an image problem because the cross represents us. Why not a fish? And some new and emerging churches, who gather in auditoriums or build theatres for worship space, choose not to display a cross, or if they do it's subtle or in the background.

But if we listen to Jesus, he says upfront that if you and I live a life worth living, in which we love or stand up for others or align ourselves with his gospel, it will cost us something, it will be like carrying a cross.

So when we experience pain or suffering this cross means something.
This cross represents something.