



## **This Foolish Faith ... A Cross?!**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

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**1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

**[Video-Graham]** Billy Graham was pastor and counselor to 13 presidents, appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, was interviewed by Larry King, shared the gospel with the people like Woody Allen and Muhammad Ali, rebuked racism in America, held crusades all over the world, and preached the Gospel to more people than any other person in history. Billy Graham died last month at the age of 99. And for over 70 years, was untainted by scandal and never wandered from the cross of Jesus Christ.

The cross is the sacred symbol of our faith. It not only tells the story of what happened to Jesus; it tells the story of what happened to us.

The earliest Christians avoided the cross as a symbol.<sup>1</sup> It was too gruesome. On the walls of the catacombs – those secret, underground caves where Christians gathered and also buried their dead – were other symbols.<sup>2</sup> The earliest symbols for Christianity included a peacock as a symbol of immortality, a dove as a symbol of peace, and an anchor as a symbol of hope.<sup>3</sup> And there was the secret symbol of the fish. The Greek word for fish is ἰχθῦς, and an acronym for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.”

Yet, it is still odd that a tool for execution became the symbol of our faith and a symbol of pride for generations of believers. Yet, we proudly identify ourselves with the cross. We proudly display it, wear it, and decorate with it. It’s through the cross that we find salvation, joy, and eternal life. So we, like Paul, proudly say, “May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

It still sounds like foolishness to so many. The thought of nails and blood and a man dying on the cross is brutal and barbaric. Why would that be the basis of any religion? The Apostle Paul admitted the foolishness of the cross. ***“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). Today, and on Easter Sunday, I want to talk about ***this foolish faith*** of ours.

Listen to Paul explain why he believed in the foolishness of the cross.

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who do not believe and are headed for destruction. But to us, who do believe and are being saved, it is the power of God. The Lord said in the Scriptures, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? God made the wisdom of this world look foolish. God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom. Instead, he used the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miracles and Greeks search for wisdom. So when we preach Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Greeks say it’s all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man” (1 Corinthians 1:18-25, MW paraphrase).

To many, the cross is foolishness. How can the cross be the answer to humanity's problems? How can the cross be the answer to our search for meaning and happiness? The cross can't be the answer. Jesus can't be the answer. Oh, but He is. And *to us, to those who believe, the cross demonstrates the power of God, the grace of God, and the love of God.*

### WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT THE CROSS?

But ours is a post-resurrection faith, why go back to the cross? German theologian Martin Hengel answers that question in his definitive work on the crucifixion. Hengel insists that we must reflect on "the harsh reality of crucifixion" in order to "overcome the acute loss of reality."<sup>4</sup> Where there is loss of reality, there is loss of reverence! As we reflect on the six hours Jesus hung on the cross, may our sense of reverence be aroused. The historian Octavius was correct. "We do not reverence the cross, nor do we worship it."<sup>5</sup> We do, however, worship the one who endured it.

#### *So, what really happened at the cross?*

According to crucifixion history, the mode varied at the whim of the executioner. It was never the same, but it was always barbaric.<sup>6</sup> It was so horrible that Roman citizens were exempt from it. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst offenders of society.

The cross was a visual deterrent to crime. Crosses lined the busy roads coming into Jerusalem as a visual threat of what would happen to those who broke the law.<sup>7</sup> In Rome, Nero enjoyed strolling around his garden in the evening, which was lit by torching crucified bodies planted around the garden.<sup>8</sup> One popular Greek play included a mock crucifixion scene. Performed over and over, the play became boring. So Domitian ordered that a real crucifixion be included to make the play more exciting.<sup>9</sup> When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Roman general Titus ordered so many crucifixions that there were "not enough crosses for the bodies."<sup>10</sup>

Before Pilate sent Jesus away to be crucified, he was "scourged" (Matthew 27:26). Jesus was tied to a whipping post and the torture commenced by men called lictors. These lictors alternated strokes by flogging Jesus with a short whip called a flagrum, with braided leather strips that were tipped with pieces of metal or bone. Each stroke lacerated Jesus' flesh – His back, His buttocks, His legs. The wounds were deep. The pain was searing. The blood was flying.

Then "the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him" (Matthew 27:27). A Roman cohort was 500 soldiers, so up 500 ruthless soldiers gathered around Jesus for entertainment. Their sport was sadistic. "They stripped Him" (Matthew 27:28). Jesus was naked. God was naked, exposed, humiliated.

They "put a scarlet robe on Him. And they twisted together a crown of thorns and pressed it on His head, and put a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'" (Matthew 27:28-29). The robe, the crown, and the reed were meant to mock His claim to royalty.

"They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head" (Matthew 27:30). And, "those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads" (Matthew 27:39). It just

kept coming. There was no end to this verbal stoning. They were relentless in their contempt. “After they had mocked Him, they ... led Him away to crucify Him” (Matthew 27:31).

It was around 9:00 in the morning when the first nail was struck. Archaeological evidence of a first century crucifixion indicates that the nails were tapered spikes five to seven inches long.<sup>11</sup> These spikes were driven through the wrist, and not through the hand, to better support the weight of a human body.

Historian Frederick Farrar imagines what Jesus must have felt. “Death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have (that is) horrible and ghastly – dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever ... publicity of shame, long continuance of torment.”<sup>12</sup> All that pain Farrar writes, “intensified just up to the point at which (it) can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point ... (of the) relief of unconsciousness.”<sup>13</sup> “Every movement painful ... lacerated veins ... crushed tendons ... incessant anguish.”<sup>14</sup>

All that, Jesus suffered. For six hours, He ached and throbbed and groaned. For six hours, He labored for every breath. And after six hours, when He could endure it no longer, He breathed His last.<sup>15</sup>

At any moment along the way, Jesus could have stopped everything. But He did not resist. He did not abort. I believe He decided to go through with it because He cared more about saving us than saving Himself.

### WHAT DOES THE CROSS REALLY MEAN?

The physical act of the cross is so brutal and barbaric, it seems foolish to base one’s faith on it. *So, what does the cross really mean?*

The Gospel is a severe message. The severity of the cross exposes the severity of our sin. British theologian John Stott wrote, “Our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross ... It is impossible for us to face Christ’s cross with integrity and not to feel ashamed of ourselves.”<sup>16</sup>

The stinging indictment upon humanity is that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23). All of us. The Bible says what we already know. “There is no one who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46).

Sin is not a disease or a disorder or a dysfunction. Sin is a choice to rebel against God. When we sin, we declare our independence and snub our noses at God’s authority. When we sin, we choose self – self-will, self-reliance, self-indulgence. When we sin, we break God’s law and bring upon ourselves the consequences of His judgment. When we sin, we miss the mark and fall short of what God desires for us. And sadly, when we sin, we spurn the one who loves us the most, we break His heart, and we offend a holy God.<sup>17</sup>

Sin is not some misdemeanor. It’s not getting caught with a hand in the cookie jar. It is something far worse. The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), and those who sin against God are “worthy of death” (Romans 1:32).<sup>18</sup> What a chilling indictment!

But we don't feel that way. Our sins are not that bad. A little white lie. Speeding when no cop is around. Letting a curse word fly. We admit we're not perfect, but we're good people. Our sins just don't seem that bad. But the cross tells us something totally different about ourselves. The severity of the cross exposes the severity of our sin.<sup>19</sup> And that's exactly what the Bible says. "The wages of sin is death" and we are "worthy of death" (Romans 6:23, 1:32).

If that's not true, then God certainly overreacted at the cross. But He did not overreact, because the severity of our sin required a severe solution, the severe sacrifice of Jesus on a cross.

Isaiah 53 says of the Messiah, "The Lord laid on him the sins of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). He died for "our weaknesses ... our sorrows ... our rebellion ... our sins."<sup>20</sup> Jesus did not merely carry our sin and nail it to the cross. He became our sin. He absorbed our sin and nailed Himself to the cross. By doing so, He became our substitute and died in our place.

Cancer is a severe disease and a Band-Aid won't help. Cancer often requires chemotherapy. A severe disease requires severe treatment. The severity of our sin required the severity of His sacrifice. And nothing could be more severe than blood.

Jesus sacrificed His life on the cross. It was severe. He bled and died, so that we might be forgiven of everything we've ever done wrong. ***Thank God for His amazing, lavish, severe grace.***

#### **BUT IT STILL SOUNDS LIKE FOOLISHNESS**

***But it still sounds like foolishness. "The message of the cross is foolishness"*** ... to those who do not believe. To the earliest critics, Christianity was considered foolishness, madness, and insanity. Christianity was considered a "crazy superstition" believed only by those filled with "sick delusions."<sup>21</sup> Christians were lampooned for worshiping a crucified criminal, a dead deity.<sup>22</sup> On the wall of a Roman school for children of privilege, a crucified figure was drawn with a donkey's head.<sup>23</sup> The inscription includes the name of child they were mocking. "Alexamenos worships God." Roman children were taught to despise Christians and make fun of the cross.

Let's admit that the Christian story is a bit strange. A God we cannot see spoke one word and everything came into being. This God had a son, turned into a human being, and arrived on earth via a virgin birth. Then He grew up, performed miracles, and walked on water. And when the crowds turned against Him, He let himself be executed. But then, He came back to life, went back to heaven, and promised that He would return one day riding a white horse. Is that what you believe? Yes.

Of course, it sounds foolish. Of course, it sounds like nonsense. ***Except that, this is the plan and work of God.***

To those who say the cross is foolishness, Paul quoted the words of the Lord. "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent" (1 Corinthians 1:19).<sup>24</sup> God speaks from His throne in heaven promising to humble the wisdom of the world. Then Paul challenged the experts of his day to come forth and debate God. "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Corinthians 1:20). "The world through its wisdom did not come to know God" (1

Corinthians 1:21). What was true in Paul's day is true in our day. All the philosophical debate, scientific discoveries, technological inventions, and expanding knowledge is incomplete without God.

Historically, anything that science could not explain was attributed to the mystery of God. That's why He is often called the "god of the gaps." In the past, whatever we did not understand, we left God fill in the gaps. But the more science explains, the less need for God. And that was the belief of Stephen Hawking.

Stephen Hawking was a giant of the scientific world, and like Billy Graham, recently died. Hawking was a brilliant theoretical cosmologist and physicist at the University of Cambridge. In his study of black holes, Hawking blended Einstein's theory of relativity with quantum physics and came up with the theory of singularity, that the universe had a beginning and that the universe was spontaneously created from the big bang of a black hole. He believed that the universe created itself. Hawking was confined to a wheelchair most of his life, suffering with ALS. His only means of communication was using his cheek muscle to activate a computer to select letters and words enabling him to speak. Hawking became part of pop culture when his book *A Brief History of Time* sold more than 10 million copies. His disability did not deter him from studying the wonder of the universe. Listen to Hawking in his own words. [\[Video-Hawking\]](#)

Two giants died recently – Stephen Hawking and Billy Graham. Think of the contrast of their lives. One looked at the vast, majestic universe and concluded there is no God; the other looked at the vast, majestic universe and concluded there must be a God. Which one was right?

Hawking's ashes are to be buried in Westminster Abbey near the graves of Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. Before he died, he requested that his famous equation for the entropy of black holes be put on his gravestone. On Billy Graham's gravestone is a reference to John 14:6, where Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through Me."

I can't refute Hawking's science. And no doubt, Hawking was more brilliant than Billy Graham. But any explanation of life or death or the universe is incomplete if God is left out. The Bible says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1, ESV). So, who is the fool? The one who believes, or the one who does not?

## CONCLUSION

This is why we believe in the foolishness of the cross.

- The cross shows us that we are guilty, but it also shows us that we are forgiven.
- The cross shows us how unworthy we are, but it also shows us how loved we are.
- The cross shows God's anger toward sin, but it also shows His grace toward us.
- The cross shows us the penalty and punishment we deserved, but it also shows us that Jesus took our place, it shows us what Jesus went through for us.
- The cross shows us that Jesus absorbed everything we deserved for everything we've ever done wrong.

If you are not a Christian at this point in your life, I understand that the cross seems like foolishness to you. But the cross proves how much God loves you. Jesus took your place and paid the penalty for your sin. He died for you. That's how much Jesus loves you. In spite of who you are or what you've done, His grace is for you too. You can be forgiven of everything you've ever done wrong. You can become a child of God. You can receive the promise of eternal life. All you have to do is bow your heart before Jesus and ask Him to forgive you, and believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sin and believe that He supernaturally rose the dead, proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said is true.

To remember and to honor Him, we are now going to observe the Lord's Supper. It's called Communion. We are going to replicate what Jesus and the disciples did around the table, the last night before His crucifixion. The bread represents His body and the cup represents His blood. By eating and drinking these elements, we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me."

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), page 20.

<sup>2</sup> The graffiti of the catacombs included scenes from Bible stories that we still teach our children; such as Noah's ark, Jonah inside the great fish, and Daniel in the lion's den.

<sup>3</sup> Stott, page 20.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), page 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, page 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, page 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, page 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, page 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, page 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, page 25-26. See also Stott, page 24. Also *The Works of Josephus*, translated by William Whitson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), *The Wars of the Jews*, Chapter 11, paragraph 1, page 720.

<sup>11</sup> William D. Edwards, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; and Floyd E. Hosner, MS, AMI; "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of American Medical Association*, March 21, 1986, Volume 255, page 1459.

<sup>12</sup> Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands A Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1972, 1979), quoting Frederick W. Farrar, page 197.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See Mark 15:37.

<sup>16</sup> Stott, page 83.

<sup>17</sup> See Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*.

<sup>18</sup> This is not just physical death; it is spiritual death, spiritual separation from God.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Thomas dares to say what we need to hear. "The clear teaching of Scripture is that all of us deserve 'capital punishment.' ... The fact that anyone will be saved is an act of sheer mercy and compassion on God's part. We all deserve a spot on death row." [Gary Thomas, *Authentic Faith: The Power of a Fire-Tested Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), page 244.]

<sup>20</sup> See Isaiah 53:4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Hengel, page 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, page 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, page 19; also see Stott, page 25.

<sup>24</sup> This is a quote from Isaiah 29:14