

God chose the weak and foolish things

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[0 : 00] I want to make sure that the Bible is open in front of you. And as I open up God's Word now, let us pray once again for God's help. Heavenly Father, as I come and as your Word is proclaimed this morning, I pray that it would result in us resting on you and your power.

Father, I pray that even though my words on their own are not persuasive or eloquent, but in your power, Lord, it would result in us having a deeper trust of you.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now at Oxford University, quite a bit of teaching is done in the form of a tutorial. This is where a professor meets with a student one-to-one or sometimes one-to-two for an hour, where they will simply discuss the subject matter for that day. But you can imagine just how intimidating that can be when you're barely out of your teens and you're meeting with a world-class expert in that area. And I remember this one time when it was just me and another coursemate who also happens to be a Christian and we're meeting with this professor.

Now I don't remember any longer what we were talking about, but I do remember one moment in this tutorial. It was when for some reason or another, he began to talk about Christians and Christianity and he began to roll his eyes and make some mocking remarks.

[1 : 29] Now I don't think he realized that both of the students before him professed to follow Christ. Anyway, it was over pretty quickly and both of us kept silent as he spoke, even as we glanced at one another.

But obviously that moment generated quite a bit of emotion in us. We were a little upset, yes. After all, our faith had just been ridiculed.

We were also feeling inadequate, yes. After all, we all knew that this professor was really smart. But I think above all, we were both feeling a little insecure.

Although we wouldn't say it, I think we both kind of wish that the gospel could be, well, a little more impressive. That it wouldn't look so stupid to outsiders.

Have you ever had moments like this? Have you ever felt insecure about the gospel? Maybe you were having a conversation with a friend and somehow or other you got to talking about God and you began to wish that you just had something better to say than just Christ died for your sin.

[2 : 42] Wouldn't it be great if you had some electrifying message, the kind that would make your friend go, wow, and spontaneously applaud while falling down on his knees and crying out, so where do I sign up to become a Christian?

Or perhaps you brought a friend to some event. Or nowadays, a live stream. Perhaps this live stream. Where you knew that the gospel was going to be proclaimed. But you just kind of wish that the speaker would be a little bit more clever or a little bit more entertaining or a little bit more charming.

Just so that your friend could see that, hey, this Christianity thing can be quite cool too, you know. You want the gospel to be just a little more impressive.

Corinth was a pretty impressive place. Let me just remind you a little bit about the city. Situated strategically between east and west, Corinth was a major trade hub and as such a place of prosperity.

As a Roman colony, it had great religious and cultural diversity. And put simply, it's filled with success stories. They had attractive people, sophisticated people, powerful people in just about every neighborhood.

[4 : 04] And everywhere, people saw gaining networks of influence as important. And one way to do that is by public performance, by giving stirring speeches and great orations.

You know, the kind where you can outshine your competitor. Now, just imagine being a small little Christian community in such a city. You're not big.

You're basically nobodies. And you're not exactly successful by Corinthian standards. You would start feeling a bit insecure, wouldn't you? And so your temptation would be to begin dressing up the gospel.

Give it a little upgrade. Make it more relevant to your context. Make the gospel look a little more impressive. And that way, you can make yourself look a little more impressive.

That's what the Corinthian Christians were inclined to do. As we saw last week, they loved what verse 17 calls wisdom and eloquence.

[5 : 14] In other words, they loved the form and the wit and the polish of all the successful people that they saw around them. And that's what they wanted the church to have as well.

That's why they began boasting in leaders whom they believed possessed such skills. You know, those who could tell tear-jerking stories or could form the perfect sentence structure.

They saw the world's template. And they wanted it to be the church's template as well. But do you remember what Paul said last week?

Ironically, when we try to make the gospel more impressive, we end up draining the cross of its power. And so what should we do when we're feeling insecure about the gospel?

Well, that's what we're going to look at today. We're going to see that instead of trying to use the values of the world to prop up the gospel, we need to have our whole view of the world turned upside down by the cross itself.

[6 : 26] And for that to happen, we need to remember three truths. Firstly, God chose the weak and foolish things. God chose the weak and foolish things.

Just look at verse 18. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Or verse 23. And so it's clear, isn't it?

The cross looks stupid. It looks like nonsense. Now perhaps we've lost a sense of that because the cross has become a familiar thing to many of us.

Nowadays, we can go into a jewelry store and come out with a cross-shaped necklace. Or we can go around our city and see buildings with crosses on them.

I'm preaching to you in one right now. We might even associate the cross with positive feelings like peace and love. But we need to understand how scandalous the cross was in the ancient world.

[7 : 39] The cross is capital punishment. It's how the worst of criminals die. It's an electric chair. Just imagine wearing an electric chair necklace around your neck.

That would be in bad taste, wouldn't it? People would look at you funny. But even the image of an electric chair doesn't capture everything.

You see, today, if you're sentenced to death by electric chair, it would probably be a private affair. You know, just you and your executioner. And it would be over as quickly as possible.

The opposite is true of the cross. It would be a public affair. Because everyone can walk by and see you as you are crucified.

Everyone has identified you as a horrible human being. And it wouldn't be over in a matter of seconds. You would hang up there for ages and ages.

[8 : 45] And so perhaps a closer picture of the cross in our day is the hangman's noose. Now that's more public.

Although it still doesn't capture the excruciating nature of the cross. I don't know if any of you saw that photo of a hangman's noose being erected when the mob attacked the Capitol building in America around 10 days ago.

When I saw it, it literally made me sick to my stomach. It was repulsive. It was detestable. But that was exactly how people in the Roman world would have reacted to the cross.

And so famously, a piece of graffiti was found by archaeologists scratch on the wall. It depicts the figure of a man with a donkey's head on the cross.

And below is another man in a posture of worship. And there is an inscription that says, Alexamanos worships his God.

[9 : 56] The message is clear, isn't it? Oh, these Christians are so stupid, so disgusting. They may as well be worshipping a donkey. And that hasn't changed in 2,000 years.

I think I might have told this story before, but years ago I was riding on the LRT in KL. And there were a group of young adults who got on and they started talking amongst themselves.

And they began to describe some Christian event, it sounded like. And they started making fun of it. And one of them said, and you know what, they actually believe that believing in some man who died on the cross 2,000 years ago would actually save them.

And all of them laughed. I certainly felt like hiding after that moment. You see, it really is true.

The cross is foolish. Before we get too defensive, think about what we believe. We say, after all, that God became man.

[11:03] We say, God then got killed. And then we say that God actually wanted to get killed. And we say that the moment God got killed, that was the most momentous event in the entire universe.

And we say that that makes all the difference for your eternal destiny. If you've grown up in a Christian home, you might have forgotten or not even realized what you are claiming when you say you are a Christian.

And so think about it from a non-Christian perspective. Couldn't that sound like complete rubbish? And yet, this is exactly what God has chosen to broadcast to the world.

God chose the weak and foolish thing. The cross. Now, if you were a PR consultant, you would probably advise God, sorry, almighty, that's not what the people want.

Look at verse 22. Jews demand signs. And Greeks look for wisdom. And so you would say, God, you know, the Jews, that's a pretty important demographic.

[12:25] And they're really into power and miracles, you know. They like one of your earlier products. The one where you split the Red Sea with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

You know, they like that sort of thing. One of the most constant feedback that we're hearing from them is, give us a sign. Give us a sign. But God, I think they mean that kind of sign, not the cross. And the Greeks, God, you know, this is a very educated demographic. They want intellectual stimulation. They've got high academic standards. They want to make sure that your message is very reasonable, that it's been approved by experts, that your TED Talk speakers, you know, can endorse it and promote it easily.

God, the cross isn't going to do that. And God, not sure if the cross would make sense to Malaysians as well. I think they really like it if the message is all about how you would definitely bless them by sorting out their finances or their marriage or their health.

They're saying, hey, if God does this for me, you know, sort out all those things, then I'll happily devote myself to him. So that message, can I? Not this, Jesus paid the penalty for my sin thing.

[13:44] That's what the people want. And secretly, maybe that's what we want as well. Maybe we won't say it in such a way, but we want something impressive.

And that's certainly how the Corinthians felt. But God says, verse 23, nope, we preach Christ crucified.

The marketplace doesn't determine the criteria for the message. I do. I choose weak and foolish things. After all, didn't I choose you?

And what are you? Look at verse 26. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were caught. Not many of you were wise by human standards.

Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. By worldly standards, God says, not many of you are graduates of Harvard or Yale.

[14:51] Not many of you can sway public opinion. Not many of you are born into privilege. Now, some of you are. So God isn't saying if you're born into a rich family or graduated from a prestigious university, you can't become a Christian.

Clearly not, since we know from 1 Corinthians elsewhere that they were both rich and poor Christians. But God's point is this. Being weak and foolish, at least by the standards of the world, doesn't count against you.

It's not a disadvantage. How can it be when God chose you when you were like this? And if God chose you when you were like this, he can certainly choose the cross as his message.

In fact, it's good news that he does. For it means that even if you are feeling unimpressive or uninspiring, or insignificant, God says, don't worry, you're still on my team because my team is represented by the cross, which is similarly unimpressive, uninspiring, and insignificant in the world's eyes.

Now, Paul realized this. Look at 2 verse 1. He says, and so it was with me, brothers and sisters, when I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom, as I proclaim to you the testimony about God.

[16:33] In fact, down in verse 3, he knows that he is nothing but weak, and he comes with great fear and trembling. But he also knows this.

God chose him at his weakest and most foolish when he thought he was accomplishing God's purposes by persecuting God's people.

And because he knows that this is how God works, he no longer feels insecure about the gospel. For God chose the weak and foolish things.

But the first truth on its own is not enough. We need it to go together with the second and third truths. And so let's come to the second thing we need to remember.

Secondly, in God's reality, these weak and foolish things are actually strong and wise. Just look down at verse 25.

[17:39] with me. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Now here is the absolute genius of God. You see that phrase that you see in verse 23 and in chapter 2 verse 2, Christ crucified.

It shouldn't make any sense. In the first century, to say Christ crucified would have been like saying hateful love or square circle or reading this page has been intentionally left blank on a page.

Ever seen one of those? It makes no sense. And as the commentator Paul Barnett says, for Jews, their Messiah was to be powerful, a victor, splattered with blood perhaps, but with the blood of enemies he has vanquished.

To contemplate a Messiah who was powerless, bloodied with his own blood, humiliated as he hung naked, impaled on a stake by the hated woman, well, that was utterly unthinkable.

[18:56] But in God's wisdom, he transforms what looks like foolishness into wisdom. He transforms the idea of Christ crucified, not just into something that makes sense, but something that can actually save people.

Just look at verse 21. For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. You see, can the wisdom of the world finally resolve the problem of the sinful human heart? Can the wisdom of the world reconcile us back to God?

Can the wisdom of the world work out a solution to how God's justice and God's mercy can be put on display together at the same time?

No way. Just study human history. But God found a way. Christ was crucified. For at the cross, we find both the greatest exhibition of divine justice, mercy in condemning sin, as well as the most wonderful exhibition of God's mercy in pardoning sin.

[20:25] At the cross, we find the sun refusing to shine, and God hiding his face from Christ. And yet, at the same time, we see Christ becoming the light of the world, making his light shine in our hearts.

At the cross, we find God winning by losing, conquering by surrendering. At the cross, we see exaltation by humiliation, the establishment of God's kingdom via a suffering servant.

The world will never find a way to bring these opposites together. Only God, in his infinite wisdom, could accomplish such a paradox.

And the apostles get it. They gloried in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, just imagine if they had agreed with the world that the cross was nothing but weak and foolish.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, what would they then naturally do? Well, they would try to save his reputation. They would try to clear his name. They would try to right this wrong.

[21:40] Above all, they would try to make everyone forget that Jesus died on the cross. If all the cross was, was weak and foolish. But the complete opposite happened.

They proclaimed the cross every chance they got. They had the attitude described in 2 verse 2, resolving to know nothing. except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

They were clear that this unimpressive cross was the most impressive thing about the one they followed. because they understood truth one and truth two.

That yes, God chose the weak and foolish things, but that in God's reality, these things are actually powerful and wise.

They saw the cross as God's very power and wisdom. and they were right, weren't they? Because 2,000 years later, the Roman empire is long gone, but billions of people have found salvation in Christ.

[22 : 54] Because, well, think about it, what happens if we only get truth one without truth two? We won't act like the apostles.

Instead, we'll be tempted to dress up the gospel. We'll think, oh dear, I know God's decided to use the cross, but it sounds so foolish, so weak.

I'm sure God wouldn't mind if I help him out a little bit by just making it look a little bit better. You know, I'm doing him a favour. You see, sometimes we think that the real problem is that people don't find God's message all that impressive.

That's the real problem, we think. And so, if we can fix that, if we can just make the message a little wiser, with more obvious power, then everyone will become Christian.

And so, maybe let's tweak the message a little bit, and let's make it all about how the cross imparts spiritual authority to you, to declare instant healing, to bend reality to your will.

[23 : 59] Oh, that sounds powerful and attractive, doesn't it? Or maybe let's tweak it so that it's all about how the cross inspires you, so that you can change the world if you just see and follow Jesus as the greatest social activist who ever lived.

Oh, that would draw in the millennials. Let's just not make it about how Jesus died in your place for you, when you deserve to die instead of him.

That's not very exciting. we'll be tempted to dress up the gospel. Or, we'll be tempted to put our confidence in the window dressing, not the main product.

And so maybe, we'll put all our energy into making this live stream look incredible, with great visual and auditory effects, because, well, frankly speaking, the cross needs all the help that it can get.

Or, if it helps, maybe all our energies will go into finding that really smart Christian with a PhD. Or, that really successful Christian with his many multinational companies.

[25 : 11] Or, that really good-looking Christian with his magnetic personality. After all, we think, oh, we'll need such people to represent us, to have any chance with the world. Otherwise, the gospel wouldn't look good.

Well, at least with such Christians, well, people would then want to come to Jesus if we put them up front and center. Because they'll think, oh, Jesus will make me look good too, like all these shiny looking Christians.

And that's why the Corinthians were divided. Because they thought that maybe Paul, or Apollos, or Peter, were the silver bullet.

And anyone else would just drag down the gospel. people, they were putting their confidence in the window dressing, not the main product.

But God says, you've got it all wrong. It's not how good Paul or Apollos looks that saves. It's not how polished your sermons are that saves.

[26 : 19] rather, it is the cross, the one that looks stupid, that actually saves.

Look at verse 21 again. It is through the foolishness of what was preached that saves those who believe.

That's where the power is, the foolishness, the cross. We don't need to gain political power to help Jesus. We don't need to have cultural influence to have a leg up.

We don't need to make the gospel look more impressive. Jesus doesn't need our help. He simply wants us to show people himself this beaten and bruised and disgraced and marginalized and crucified man because according to verse 30 he himself is wisdom from God.

Our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption. And when people hear the message of Christ crucified two things happen.

[27 : 38] Look again at verse 18. either they will reject it as foolishness and so confirm their status as those who are perishing or they will be safe and they will marvel at God's power through weakness.

But that raises a question. Why did God choose to do it this way? Well, that brings us to truth number three. Thirdly, God did it this way so that we would boast in him alone.

God did it this way so that we would boast in him alone. That's affirmed again and again throughout this passage. Paul says it in verse 19.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate. He says it down in verses 27 to 29.

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the

things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him.

[29 : 02] Now, imagine that God was the director of our special forces. He's got lots of amazing people and tools at his disposal. He can send in the highly trained bomb disposal expert.

He can send in the ultra smooth hostage negotiator. He can send in the super tough elite commandos. But when he plans out his rescue operation, he decides to send in the janitor who kind of cleans the boots of the soldiers.

it's like he deliberately overlooks all sorts of rescues and rescuers who look impressive or all sorts of methods that look clever.

Instead, he says, let's do it this way. Why? To shame the wise, to shame the strong, to humble the proud.

God. You see, earlier, we said that often we think the real problem is that people don't find God's message all that impressive.

[30 : 09] And so, if we can fix that, we can help people know God. But God says, that's not the real problem. At the heart of humanity's problem is simply this.

We prefer to boast in ourselves than in God. we want to show that we can be righteous people on our own. We want to show that we can be special, set-apart people on our own.

We want to show that all the gifts that we have, all the wisdom that we possess, it all came about on our own. That's the real problem. That's the essence of sin.

We seek independence from God. But it's also the essence of foolishness to think that we can do life on our own without reference to the life giver.

And so God wants to expose that lie. And so he gives us the cross. He gives us a message that only people who are willing to be lowly and humble will accept.

[31 : 19] He gives us a message that only people who recognize that we can't do life on our own will accept. it's impossible to become a Christian while being proud.

The cross won't allow it. No. To be a Christian means they are willing to embrace a weak and foolish thing in the eyes of the world alongside people who are also not wise or influential in the eyes of the world.

And that would mean humbling ourselves and becoming dependent on God. It's to boast in Christ alone and nothing else.

And if Jesus is really the very wisdom of God, that is actually the wisest thing we can do. And here's the thing.

If this is God's strategy, then why do we often try to do the opposite? it. After all, let's think about whether those alternatives we mentioned earlier really work.

[32 : 28] So remember how the Jews won signs? Well, Jesus performed many, many miracles during his lifetime, didn't he? Did that bring many people to fall at his feet and worship him and follow him to the end?

On the contrary, they shouted to crucify him. Or how about Greeks and wisdom? Did Jesus not debate with some of the greatest teachers of his day and come out on top?

Did not the crowds marvel at his wise teaching? But did that make them fall at his feet and worship him and follow him to the end? On the contrary, they plotted to kill him.

They were too proud to do anything else. Well, if that's how they reacted to Jesus, what makes us think that our own attempts to bring people to God other than through the cross would be any different?

No. This passage makes it clear. For the Christian, there is no alternative path to glory except through the way of the cross.

[33 : 49] After all, when Jesus' good friend Peter suggested to him that the cross wasn't necessary, he said, get behind me, Satan. And so it's clear, we can't have Christ without his cross.

The Christian boasts in Christ alone, which means resolving to know Christ crucified. Christ. And we can't offer Christ to anyone else without his cross.

Now, here's a good test to know if someone has really become a Christian. Don't ask, are they attending church regularly or getting involved in church activities? Don't ask, do they think that Jesus is impressive?

No, ask instead. Have they truly understood and embraced the cross as the power of God to save them? And so here's the major application for today.

One that I've been stressing throughout the sermon already. Don't feel the need to dress up the gospel. But now let me state that application more positively.

[35 : 01] Trust that the cross is enough. You see, this is actually good news. If the cross itself is powerful to save and we don't have to dress it up, that means we no longer have to feel the pressure to make it look impressive.

We no longer have to worry about whether the speaker is cool enough or enough of a celebrity to win over our friends. We don't have to worry about whether we ourselves have all the answers or that we have to look like we have it all together before we can be a witness to others.

Now, of course, our actions shouldn't contradict our message. But we are free from having to appear incredibly wise and strong any longer. We don't need to become a Pole or an Apollos or a Peter.

We simply trust that the cross will do its work. In a classic book, *Out of the Salt Shaker*, Rebecca Manley Pippet tells of a time when she was a student.

Her friend suggested that she start a Bible discussion group for her friends, for seekers. She was reluctant, but she did so anyway, even though she thought no one would come.

[36 : 22] But when she invited people, she was surprised at their positive and enthusiastic response. And then she met this intelligent and rather sociable girl called Mary. Now, they got talking and Mary didn't know that Rebecca was a Christian.

And so she told her enthusiastically, oh, you know, it's been a very good month. I've actually persuaded three people not to become Christians this month. And Rebecca thought, oh, my goodness.

I'm so glad I didn't invite her. But on the day of the Bible discussion, well, not a single person that Rebecca invited turned up.

But the one person whom she didn't invite did turn up, Mary herself. Now, Rebecca was terrified, but she quickly prayed, she kind of talked with Mary, and then at the end she gave her a Christian book.

And then on the following week, when it was that Bible study time again, once again, only one person showed up, Mary herself. You know, Rebecca couldn't believe it.

[37 : 26] She had to run to the bathroom to compose herself and pray. And in fact, she prayed to God, God, please make Mary leave. But then Mary told her, you know, that Christian book that you gave me to read, I read it.

And I read the chapter on sin. And I wanted to hide under my bed. It was too real. And to cut a long story short, Mary told Rebecca that having heard the message of the cross, she wanted to become a Christian.

Now, nothing dramatic happened to her. She simply heard Rebecca in a rather stuttering manner share Christ crucified with her. And then she read that same message in the book later on, and her heart was softened.

You know, Rebecca was so shocked that she didn't know what to do, and she simply asked Mary to keep reading that Christian book and to come back next week. But that is the power of the cross.

I've seen it time and time again. I think of one of our very first Christianity Explored converts. I don't think she would say that anything mystical happened to her, like a grand vision or anything like that.

[38 : 37] She just heard about the cross. She heard about grace. And that was enough. She came to know Jesus, and she's following Jesus right now.

to have confidence in God's strategy. Humble yourself and submit to his way of doing things, even when it doesn't make sense in the eyes of the world.

Both in Christ alone, and rest on the Spirit's power. And as Dr. Humpak will show us next week, to rest on the Spirit's power isn't about doing miracles or having wise and persuasive words on our own, but about receiving and resting on the Spirit's words.

But let your faith be secure in the message of the cross. Recall once again how the cross saved you. And if it was powerful enough to do that for you, it's powerful enough to do that for others.

As you offer that message to others, pray that God will surprise you again with his upside-down way of doing things like he did for Rebecca. And as you adopt the values of the cross, pray that God will surprise you in what he will do in your life as you do so.

[40 : 04] As J.C. Rao, the great 19th century Christian leader, once said, let his blood be more precious in our eyes every year we live.

let's pray. Father, as we come to you now, we confess to you that sometimes we have regarded the cross and your way of doing things as completely foolish, as completely unwise, as full of weakness.

Father, we confess that sometimes we think that we know better than you, that we can do better than you. And so, Father, please humble us again.

Help us to remember that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and that the weakness of God, your weakness, is stronger than human strength, and you've demonstrated that at the cross.

Give us a renewed confidence in the cross again, to know that this very instrument is your instrument of power to save people, and that it is the way by which we continue to grow and to know you.

[41 : 23] And so, Father, give us a new resolve to know nothing except Christ and him crucified, and we pray for encouragement as well, that even as we hold out this message to other people, we pray even in the next week, in the next month, in the coming year, you would demonstrate that power of the cross by bringing someone we know to life through that very gospel.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.