The Beauty of the Cross

First in a Lenten series, “The Wonder of the Cross”

# Scripture: 1 Cor.1:18-31

# Key thought: When we understand God’s plans, the cross becomes beautiful.

# Intro:

There have been many amazing misjudgments in history!

In 1899, Literary Digest published an article which said that he auto would “never, of course,” come into as common use as the bicycle.

The Captain of the Titanic was sailing full speed ahead despite being warned of icebergs because he believed that icebergs had little effect on large liners.

In 1945, Vennevar Bush, then President of Carnegie Institute, told President Truman, “As an expert in explosives, the bomb will never go off.”

In 1956, one yr. Before Sputnik, the first Soviet satellite, British royal Astronomer Richard Van Der Riet Wooley said, “Space travel is utter bilge.”

However, no misjudgment was greater than that of the Jews and Greeks of Jesus’ day in their opinions about his cross! Paul says that neither Jews nor Greeks of his day respected the cross of Jesus.

# Why was and is the cross underappreciated?

## In the Roman world, the cross was an ugly cruel thing

When I was a boy, the favorite him most people was titled, “The Old Rugged Cross”. Many of you are very familiar with it as well. But some of you may not be. The first line of the hymn goes like this, “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.” When we sing the hymn as we hope to do later in the service today, we skip over that line quite quickly because it’s not where our focus is, and rightly so. But if we are to understand Paul’s writing today we need to remember that line, for it reminds us of the truth of history of what the cross really was. In Roman times, the cross was a method of capital punishment. It was among the cruelest of methods of execution used by the Romans. It was considered so cruel that it was unlawful to put a Roman citizen to death by that means. When Jesus hung on the cross, he died within a few hours. Pilate was very surprised that he had died so quickly. Normally it took days for victims of crucifixion to expire. The cross was a symbol of shame and cruelty in the Roman world.

## The Jews could not relate to the Messiah crucified

Paul writes that the cross was a “stumbling block” to the Jewish people. Why? Well, remember, that their expectation of a Messiah was kingly. The Jews were looking for a success story. David was their model. When Jesus first told the disciples about his coming death, Peter rebuked Jesus, saying, “This shall never happen to you!” (Matt.16:22 NIV). But Jesus had to in turn rebuke Peter and counsel him that he did not have in mind the things of God but rather the expectations of his culture (Matt. 16:23). The Jewish culture to which the early Christians preached still had that kingly Messianic expectation. To human eyes, the cross spoke of the seeming powerlessness of Jesus.

Talking about a Christ who had been crucified was a road block, an obstacle for them; it did not make sense to them any more than it had to Peter.

## The Greeks could not relate to Jesus on the cross and then being worshipped

Greeks on the other hand were accustomed to mythological gods, like Zeus or Diana of the Ephesians. These were among the idols of the Greek world. They could not relate to a God who was a real person called Jesus who could be killed by Roman soldiers and then rise from the dead. Such a person did not fit in their pantheon of Greek and Roman gods. So as Paul said, the cross seemed like foolishness to them. Greeks looked to this world’s wisdom. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates were their heroes.

## The cross is underappreciated today also

One of the key facts about the cross is this. It is the cross of Jesus that reveals to us the true horror of sin in the mind of God. Sin, both our attitude of rebelliousness and our wrong actions are offensive to God. The cross is a measure of how offensive sin is to God for it represents the price that had to be paid for our redemption and rescue.

One of the reasons that we do not appreciate the cross of Christ today is that we belittle or sins. We look at ourselves as good little folks who occasionally make mistakes. But the Bible’s picture is not so sanguine. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.   
But your iniquities have separated you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. Isa 59:1-2 NIV

Paul tells us bluntly the truth:

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Rom 3:23 NIV

Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.   
Rom 2:5 NIV

We compare ourselves with others and say, “I’m not so bad.” That’s a little like several friends who have together been sprayed by a skunk comparing their condition and bragging that one doesn’t smell nearly as badly as the other. It doesn’t matter, they will all smell like skunk. Then Bible is clear that we all have sinned (Rom. 3:23).

As one author put it;

“The value of the cross is directly proportionate to my awareness of my own sin.” On a Hill Too Far Away by John Fischer p. 105

# What is the beauty of the cross?

Paul gives us the true assessment of the value of the cross to us.

To us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Cor 1:18

And he repeats his idea of the beauty of the cross again even more strongly.

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Cor 1:23-24 NIV

Henry Blackaby a Canadian pastor in his recent book Experiencing the Cross wrote;

The cross reveals incredible dimensions of the heart and mind of God. In fact, we cannot begin to appreciate God's eternal purposes – or his eternal nature – without a thorough understanding of the cross of Christ. (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross p. 6)

## The cross focuses on our real enemies

We begin to appreciate the beauty of the cross when we remember that Jesus’ death and resurrection help us to focus on our real enemies. In our everyday lives is so easy for us to view all kinds of things as the big problem in our world. Everything from car problems, to addictions, to computer problems to poverty, to relationship problems, to health problems, to political issues, to our own boredom. Usually it is whatever looms large in our eyes just now. Obviously some of those things listed have more legitimacy than others, but none of them are truly the biggest problems that we face.

Until our spiritual eyes are opened we do not see the real enemies. Perhaps it will be when we face the death of a friend or loved that we think again and begin to understand that one of our real enemies is death. The beauty of the cross is that Jesus addressed that enemy.

When we try to do something for God and it seems like everything is against us, then we begin to see another real enemy. When we face repeated temptation and lose again and again and ask, “How did we come to this? Then we realize another real enemy is Satan. Yet the Bible says, of Jesus,

“Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Col 2:15 NIV

The beauty of the cross is that Jesus looked past the cruel devices of humankind and took on the real enemy—Satan himself -- and triumphed over him by his cross. What appeared to be the ultimate defeat was made into the ultimate triumph – Easter Victory!

Another real enemy that we face is our own inner evil, our sins against which we struggle, things like greed, lust, apathy, bitterness, revenge, and self-centeredness. Once again, the beauty of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus is that they deal head-on with this big foe too hand us the solution, the answer, the victory. As Paul wrote:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— Rom 6:6 NIV

The beauty of the cross is that Jesus took on our greatest enemies – death, Satan, and our sinfulness and through his death and resurrection made victory available to us.

## All are humbled there

Another aspect of the beauty of the cross is that all people are equal there. Everyone is humbled there. As I have often heard it said, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Paul writes in our text;

No one may boast before him. 1 Cor 1:29 NIV

It doesn’t matter where you were born. It doesn’t matter what race you are. It doesn’t matter how much money you have or don’t have. It doesn’t matter who your parents were or whether you even have parents. It doesn’t matter whether you dress in designer clothes or rags. Everyone must come to God in the same way, confessing our sins, acknowledging our need, seeking for a Savor. And if we come in that way, no one is turned away, no one. As Jesus promised,

Whoever comes to me I will never drive away. John 6:37 NIV

## Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God paid our penalty

John the Baptist announced Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry as the Lamb of God. What did that mean? It was a reference to the Old Testament sacrificial system. Under the system established by Moses through God’s commands, lambs were sacrificed on the altar of the temple. The worshiper placed his hand on the head of the Lamb and confessed his sins. The Lamb was then sacrificed to pay the penalty of death on behalf of the worshiper. The principal had already been established which Paul repeats,

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

Since the penalty due because of sin is death, all of us deserve to die. But Jesus intervened. He paid our penalty. Henry Blackaby explains using another OT event which involved the sacrifice of a Lamb that others might live, the Passover.

The death of Jesus Christ was what every previous Passover had always pointed to, and what the slaying of every Lamb had foretold. But this time, God himself was providing the Lamb, and that Lamb was his own. His blood would forever cover the life of all who believe in him. (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross P. 32

The beauty of the cross is that Jesus has paid our penalty of death. Now we can receive eternal life, God’s free gift (Eph. 2:3, 4).

## The cross makes possible our renewal

### The cross and resurrection go together.

It is hard to think of one without the other. This is the reason Protestants usually use crosses that are empty, that is, there is no figure of Jesus on them. It reminds us that Jesus died for us and that he rose from the grave. The cross was not the last word.

At the cross, Jesus took on death itself. In the resurrection, he conquered it.

As the writer of Hebrews says,

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-that is, the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Heb 2:14-15 NIV

We are made alive in Jesus.

### The cross looked like defeat, but Jesus won a great victory there

I quote from Henry Blackaby:

The word tells us that Jesus, by his death on the cross, "disarmed principalities and powers" and "made a public spectacle of them" (Colossians 2:14 – 15). The picture Paul gives us in this verse is that of victorious Roman generals returning from battle, as they marched their chained and captured foes through the streets for everyone to see and to mock. That's how radically and thoroughly our Almighty God – in the total event of the cross – has dealt with every principality and power, every demon in hell, every spiritual enemy that could ever come against you. And you glorify God when you live out that truth in your life, revealing in your words and actions the nature, purposes, and ways of God…. When God does something, he does it thoroughly – exceedingly abundantly above and beyond all that we could ask or think. And the victory in the cross that he is one for us over the forces of spiritual evil is an overwhelming and everlasting victory. As a result, we’re not just conquerors… We are "more than conquerors" (verse 37). (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross pages 88 and 89)

Friends, this means that when the enemy comes against you, he is a defeated foe already. You and I can simply live into the victory that Jesus has already won.

### Our renewal begins with our forgiveness

Paul tells us that the renewal of our lives begins with the forgiveness of our sins (Eph. 2:5). Only a dying Savior could atone for our sins! Peter looked back on Jesus’ sacrifice and wrote;

“Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” 1 Peter 3:18 NIV

The cross becomes beautiful when we see what God has done for us in Jesus. My sins can be forgiven because Jesus died for me. My motives can be cleansed as I fix my thoughts on Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit’s presence in my life I receive from the living Christ spiritual, emotional and physical renewal. As Isaiah wrote;

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.   
Isa 53:5 NIV

Instead of the condemnation that we all deserve for our sins, the Servant’s sufferings bring us "peace"; instead of the inescapable corruption of our sinfulness, "we are healed" by the Servant’s lashings (53:5). Most importantly, the Messiah's suffering will not be in vain. God promises that his Servant "shall see the labor of his soul and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous Servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities" (53:11). The obedient servant will succeed in satisfying the demands of God were dealing radically with sin. (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross pages 26 and 27)

### Our lives are renewed, healed, restored in other ways too because of the cross

Because of Jesus’ work, our lives have new purpose and intensity. As we look to Jesus we are daily rescued from selfishness. Our old self is “crucified with Christ” as Paul expressed it (Gal. 2:20). As we cooperate with God’s work in us, our lives become more Christ-like little by little. Paul described it this way;

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ. 2 Cor 5:17, 18 NIV

The God of hope and encouragement (Romans 15:5, 13) brings restoration, healing and renewal where sin and the brokenness of this world have taken a toll on us. God brings comfort to our grieving (2 Cor. 1:4). As Isaiah said,

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, Isa 53:4 NIV

Because of what Jesus has done, our lives can be transformed. That is the beauty of the cross.

What the cross makes available to every believer is everything. as you look carefully throughout the New Testament, you see again and again that everything coming our way from God is ours through Christ by way of the cross. In the opening lines of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul asserts that God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). There it is again! Paul's favorite phrase. In Christ. (Henry Blackaby commenting on Romans 8:32 in Experiencing the Cross p. 75)

Look closely at what Paul is saying. God "has blessed us." In other words, it's already in place. It's operative, online. And it includes "every spiritual blessing." Everything God can possibly do for you, touching every area of your life, has already been made available to you in Christ. (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross p. 76)

No wonder the cross is for us a beautiful sign to be treasured. No wonder it is for us a symbol we display in our churches, on our steeples and in our Christian art.

# Conclusion

I close with a reading taken from The Singer by Calvin Miller p. 140-144

It gives us a poet’s view of the beauty of what Jesus has done for us.

The time in the story is early on Easter morning.

The little girl is a child whom the Singer had healed before he was killed. The World Hater is Satan. The Singer is Jesus. Earth-maker is God the Father

Maybe you are here today and the cross to you is little more than the Christian part of a Co-exist bumper sticker. Friend, God wants to use what Jesus did for you on that ancient cross to transform your life. It will become for you a symbol that is reflecting the glow of heaven itself into your life.

Your sins and mine are part of the reason Jesus went to the cross. The rescue, renewal and transformation of your life and mine are the purposes for which Jesus went to the cross. All Jesus asks is that we come to him and allow him to be the physician of our soul.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matt 11:28-30 NIV