

'BUT WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

Last week I got a message from our receptionist here at the church that a woman had telephoned asking to talk to a pastor. She was interested in learning how our church functions because she wanted to become part of this fellowship, I was told. I noticed that this was the second time this woman had telephoned me. When I got the first note about her call, I asked a secretary to direct her to talk to one of our elders on a Sunday morning and he would answer her questions on church government. But she persisted and called back, asking to see me. Again, I told the secretary that I did not want to give up my counseling slot to talk about church government. "But she wants to talk to a pastor," the secretary said. So I agreed to talk to her.

This woman turned out to be a delightful person. She was married, with two young children, and she told me that she had left the church at a young age. Now that she had settled down she was anxious to once again become involved and join a church. I asked if she was a Christian. She said that she was. I then asked her to define what she thought Christianity was. She said she believed in God and the Bible. I replied, "Hold on to your seat. Do you not know that the demons believe that? If that is all you believe, you're in a dangerous place. If you were to appear before God this afternoon, what would you say to him you had brought with you that would entitle you to remain with him for eternity?" She replied, "I would say that I believe in him and in the Bible." "Based on that statement," I said, "you would be eternally separated from the God you say you believe in. You have bypassed Jesus and the cross, and thus established your own criteria for having a relationship with God."

I then shared with her the gospel as it is revealed in the Scriptures. God so loved her, I said, that he did not just send the Bible, he sent his own Son. He died on the cross, taking upon himself all of our sins; and if she placed her faith in his Person and in his action on the cross, she would then come into a personal relationship with him. Jesus would then become the Mediator between her and God the Father. That is what being a Christian is all about, I told her. "I think I missed a step," she said with a chuckle in her voice, "although I got two out of three." She had devised a theology she hoped would be acceptable to God, but it had been found wanting. At 2:36 on Wednesday afternoon, Joy was born again. The Lord filled her heart with true joy, peace and hope.

Christianity without the cross is not true Christianity. The message of the apostle Paul, whose life we have been studying in this series from the book of Acts, could be summed up in his own words, "We preach Christ and him crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, the power of God." This morning we have come to Acts chapter 18 where we find the apostle in the city of Corinth. Paul, we discovered in our first study, was to become, in the words of Jesus, "a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name to the Gentiles, kings and children of Israel." We have followed the apostle's travels on his second missionary journey. Last week we looked at his ministry in Athens, where he shared the gospel in three different locations. After ministering to a few new converts, he moved on to Corinth, some sixty miles away, where he again planned on sharing the good news.

Corinth was a seaport city on the southern tip of Greece, a thriving metropolis with a population of half a million. The city was known as the cradle of pleasure. It was an architectural showplace, the hub of the social and economic world. Its residents were known for their lack of aristocracy, tradition and loyalty to the city fathers. Because of the city's cosmopolitan and corrupt makeup, Corinthians were known for their competitive spirit and immorality. The very word "Corinthian" in fact was synonymous with drunkenness and immorality. In that first century day when Paul visited the city, there was one source of evil prevalent in Corinth of which the whole Western world took note. Above the city towered the Acropolis, on which stood the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. One thousand religious prostitutes were housed in that temple, and every

evening they came down to walk the streets of the city. As they walked in the dust of the streets, the hobnails embedded in their sandals spelled out the words, "Follow me." It became a Greek proverb, especially among visitors to the city, to say, "It is not every man who can afford to journey to Corinth."

It is to this city of Corinth then that the apostle next takes the gospel of Jesus Christ. As usual, he begins his ministry in a synagogue. Once more, the Jews found the good news unacceptable.

I. To the Jews: A Stumbling Block, Acts 18:1-6

After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working: for by trade they were tentmakers. And he was reasoning in the synagogues every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. And when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles."

Paul, who has arrived alone in Athens, quickly finds fellowship with Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple who apparently came to faith on the day of Pentecost, eighteen years earlier (Acts 2:9). This couple, who were natives of Pontus in Asia Minor, had arrived in Corinth some months earlier. Paul met them and all three began working at making tents, which was their trade. They joined Paul in his custom of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath where he reasoned with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, as he had done in the other cities where he had ministered, "...explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'" (Acts 17:2, 3).

Next, Timothy and Silas arrived in Corinth from Thessalonica and Berea respectively. It was at the point of their arrival to join the apostle that Paul "began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ." Writing from Ephesus a few years later to the Corinthian church, Paul shared about his message and his attitude when he arrived in the city. First, his message,

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...for indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor.1:18; 22-24).

And now his attitude,

...when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Cor.2:1-5).

"...Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block..." Paul presented Jesus Christ as a propitiary sacrifice, one which justifies sinners through faith, transforming them by the inward work of the Holy Spirit and creating a new community into which Gentiles and Jews are admitted on the same terms. The apostle saw the atoning death of Christ as a demonstration of God's justice and God's wisdom. God had devised a costly plan of salvation which both meets our needs yet which also satisfies his demand for justice.

In his latest book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott writes on the subject of the cross,

The cross was not a commercial bargain with the devil, let alone one which tricked and trapped him; nor an exact equivalent, a quid pro quo to satisfy a code of honor or technical point of law; nor a compulsory submission by God to some moral authority above him from which he could not otherwise escape; nor a punishment of a meek Christ by a harsh and punitive Father; nor an action of the Father which bypassed the Son as Mediator. Instead, the righteous, loving Father humbled himself to become in and through his only Son flesh, sin and a curse for us, in order to redeem us without compromising his own character...The biblical gospel of atonement is of God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us.

Man, Paul would say, had fallen short of the glory of God. He had become separated from God and there was no way back except through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thus, man could not approach God and be accepted on his own merits. No one can stand before God and claim that his good works on earth outweighed the bad he had done. No, Paul's message was "Jesus Christ and him crucified." The cross shatters man's pride and eliminates his self-righteousness.

But the Jews and the Greeks of Paul's day had laid down terms on which the gospel would be acceptable to them. The Jews demanded miraculous signs, while the Greeks looked for wisdom. Paul, however, preached Christ crucified, an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.

The Jews had two main objections to the word that Jesus was the Messiah. First, although they might agree that the Messiah would be the "suffering Servant" identified in Isaiah's prophecy, they had nothing but scorn for the statement that he would be crucified. Furthermore, they were looking for a deliverer, one who would free them from the power of the Roman Empire. If the Messiah had been crucified, as Paul was teaching, how could he possibly deliver them? they asked. Christians, of course, would hold that in the crucifixion, Jesus disarmed the "principalities and powers of the air"; and proof that he did so was his resurrection from the dead.

Secondly, the Jews found the cross to be offensive because of the statement in Deuteronomy which said, "...anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse." They reasoned that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah because when he was crucified he fell under God's curse. The claim that he was the Messiah therefore was blasphemous. Furthermore, those who chose to follow Christ would also be blasphemers, and as such they deserved to suffer the fate of revilers. Christians, the Jews said, were deluded fools, deceivers and imposters who went about deceiving others. Paul would answer this objection in his letter to the Galatians, in these words,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,' in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal.3:13, 14)

Jesus was cursed, not for his sin, for he was without sin, but for our sin. He died on our behalf, for it is we who should have been on the cross. Through his sacrifice therefore we have forgiveness for our sins. We should not allow Satan to keep bringing them up again and again. Resist the temptation to believe that you will be held responsible for your sin. Instead, rejoice that in his sacrifice you have perfect forgiveness. Do not review your sin, but instead review your forgiveness. Be amazed and humbled by what God in Christ has done for you.

As he looked at the cross Paul would say that it was the ground of his justification, the means of his sanctification, the subject of his witness, and the object of his boasting. In the cross, we as believers can see the justice, love, wisdom and power of God. We can see the justice of God in judging sin, the love of God in bearing the judgment in our place, the wisdom of God in perfectly combining the two, and the power of God in saving all who believe.

The Jews in the synagogue in Corinth "resisted and blasphemed" Paul's message of the gospel. They dug in their heels, resisting everything he had to say. And then they blasphemed Paul and the others, speaking evil of

them and, of course, the Lord Jesus also. Why did they react so strongly? Paul gives us the answer in his letter to the Romans:

...Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." (Rom.9:31-33)

Paul responded to the resistance and blasphemy of the Jews by shaking out his garment, which symbolized that he would have nothing more to do with those in the synagogue. He would not even allow the dust from the floor to remain on his clothes, in an action reminiscent of Nehemiah, who said, "May God deal with you" (Neh.5:13). "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean," Paul declared. This was not a curse but a solemn disclaimer of responsibility for their salvation. When Paul stood before the Lord, God would not hold their resistant stand against him. The issue was very serious. It was a life and death affair, a choice between heaven and hell, then and for eternity.

"From now on I will go to the Gentiles," said Paul. The apostle had already said this to the Jews living in Pisidian Antioch on his first missionary journey: "it was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). I myself have many Jewish friends with whom I have shared the message, "Jesus Christ and him crucified." But many of them have resisted it time and time again. They have not blasphemed me to my face, but they have resisted my message. They will not accept a Messiah who was crucified on a tree.

"But," says Paul, "we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block,

II. To Those Called, the Power of God, Acts 18:7-11

And he departed from there and went to the house of a certain man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Whenever I read this passage I cannot help but think of the words of Jesus,

"The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the ground; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows--how, he himself does not know. The earth produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

While Paul and his team were faithfully teaching week in and week out that Jesus was the Messiah, it seemed on the surface that nothing was happening spiritually. The Jews, as we have seen, both resisted and blasphemed. In response, Paul planned on taking his message to the Gentiles in the market places. But the seed of the gospel which had been planted by the apostle in the synagogue was already germinating. And Paul did not have to go far to find evidence that God had been working in the hearts of those who were in the process of being saved. He had to go no farther than next door to the synagogue, to the home of Titius Justus, "a worshiper of God." No wonder Paul would later write to the Corinthian church and say with great confidence,

But thanks be to God who always leads us in His triumph in Christ and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. (2 Cor.2:14, 15)

Christians are seed-spreaders. We are not called to save anybody. One plants, another waters, but "God gives the increase." Paul discovered that another seed also had sprouted. This time it was Crispus, the leader of the synagogue himself, who "believed in the Lord with all his household." And thirdly, a whole group of seeds had germinated since Paul and the team had been kicked out of the synagogue: "...many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized." By being baptized these new believers were making outward demonstration that an inward spiritual change had taken place in their lives. As Paul wrote in Romans,

...all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death, therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom.6:3, 4)

But in the midst of this harvest of new life which had come about through Paul and his team's ministry, the enemy was not asleep. Paul, it seems, was undergoing a spiritual attack which resulted in his becoming fearful. He had vivid memories of what had happened him on several other occasions when he had preached Jesus as Messiah and people had come to faith in Christ: stonings and beatings were his reward on those occasions as the mobs gathered to lay political charges on him and have him run out of the city. As he sat in the home of Titius therefore he was coming to the conclusion that it was time to hit the road again before the Jews did it for him. In the midst of his fear, however, the Lord appeared to him in a vision which both comforted and reassured him. The Lord said to Paul in this third recorded vision which he had, "Do not be afraid any longer but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

Jesus was very much aware of the fears which were haunting his own chosen instrument. And he was faithful to keep the word which he had promised to his own disciples, "Lo, I am with you always..." God's people, prompted by the Holy Spirit, had planted the word in the hearts of the Corinthians and those seeds had borne fruit. But there was more to come. In the vision, Paul was told to go on preaching the word because Jesus had many people in the city of Corinth. Right in the middle of Paul's fear and trepidation the Lord was working in the hearts of many Corinthians, providing a body of new believers for Paul and his ministry team, a work which would occupy them for eighteen months. And that is what the team did, remaining on in Corinth for a year and a half, "teaching the word of God among them." They had experienced much joy, and much suffering, too, during their evangelistic efforts, but once the initial penetration by the gospel had been made then it was time to teach the new converts "the whole counsel of God."

"But we preach Christ crucified," declared Paul, "to the Jews a stumbling block, to those called the power of God, and,

III. To the Rulers: Not Understood, Acts 18:12-18

But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters." And he drove them away from the judgment seat. And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. And Gallio was not concerned about any of these things. And Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow.

Here we go again. Paul may have gotten a break from the Jews for a time, but sooner or later the mob would form again and drag him before the Roman authorities. And this is what happened finally in Corinth. The Jews brought the apostle before Gallio, the proconsul, and charged, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." But they chose the wrong man to judge their case. The Greek philosopher Seneca, the brother of Gallio, described his brother in these words, "he is a man of considerable personal charm...no mortal is so pleasant to any one person as Gallio is to everybody." After hearing the Jews charge that Paul was teaching a religion that was not authorized by the Roman government, Gallio told the Jews that he would have no part in their squabbling over "words and names and your own law." "Look after it yourselves," he told them, "I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters." Then he drove them away from the judgment seat.

Gallio's action so frustrated the Jews that they turned on the new leader of the synagogue, Sosthenes--and not on Paul, as we would expect--and began beating him in front of the proconsul. Gallio remained unmoved by their actions: he "was not concerned about any of these things," according to the text. Sosthenes may have become a Christian later. Paul makes mention of a Sosthenes in his first letter to the Corinthians.

This decision by Gallio to not become involved in the charges trumped up by the Jews against Paul was a major break for the spreading of the gospel. As a direct result of this incident, for the next dozen years or so, Rome regarded Christianity as just another form of Judaism and thus not a threat to Roman law, which held that Judaism in all its forms was a legal and registered religion. From 51 A.D. until the great fire of Rome in 64 A.D. (for which Nero blamed the Christians), followers of Christ did not undergo political persecution. Gallio's decision to not put up with the Jews, therefore, was responsible for the gospel being freely spread throughout the Empire for a number of years until the persecution of Christians began in earnest.

Thus, Paul, the chosen instrument of the Lord to "bear His name before the Gentiles, the kings and the children of Israel," continued to minister in his generation in the Age of the Spirit. The apostle's message, which is best stated in his first letter to the Corinthians, is our message too in our generation,

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...for indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor.1:18; 22-24)

Paul's ground for confidence, likewise, is our ground for confidence. He writes in Romans,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "But the righteous shall live by faith." (Rom.1:16,17)

The message which Paul received from the Lord is the vision we also should hold in our hearts and minds during all of our days on this earth. We should not be fearful to speak the message of the good news, for Jesus says, "I have many people in this city." I sometimes wonder how many people are waiting to enter the kingdom of God but Christians are fearful of rejection by their families, friends, or co-workers if they were to share it. God is in charge of both those who are in the process of being saved and those who are in the process of perishing. The Christian's responsibility is to show up, ready to be used by God, to share his message of redemption. There are many, many people who want to come to a knowledge of God but he will not bypass the process of using his own Spirit, together with his word, in and through his people, to reach the unsaved with the gospel.

Our is a redemptive God. He wants to redeem, save, and give people newness of life, through us, in our generation. And if we do not want to go out and do this, the Lord will send them to us. I did not want to talk to Joy--she had asked the wrong question--but because the Spirit was already working in her heart she would not

give up. I had no choice but to introduce her to the Savior. Now she knows that Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and man. I want to tell you that this woman lives two blocks from this church! "I have many people in this city," the Lord told Paul. They are as close as two blocks away. If we don't go and talk with them, God will send them to talk to us. We have to become serious about why we are here, serious about the Spirit of God who is in us, serious about the message of the gospel--to know it and to be willing to share it as the Lord opens up doors of opportunity.

Catalog No. 4057
Acts 18:1-18
Fourteenth Message
Ron R. Ritchie
September 13, 1987

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.