

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Powerful Foolishness of the Gospel

by Dan Trygg

“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.¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘but the righteous person shall live by faith.’”

Romans 1:16,17

“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.¹⁹ For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.’²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”

I Corinthians 1:18-21

Paul was not in the least bit ashamed of his stand for Christ, or of the message of the cross. Once he met Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-30), **he was totally sold out to Him**. He immediately saw that his duty was to proclaim Jesus as the promised Messiah, the King. He also understood that **the death of Jesus on the cross, and the resurrection, secured the forgiveness of sins for all who would trust in Him** as their Savior (Acts 11:23-38). Furthermore, in Jesus was to be found a freedom from sin which the Law of Moses could never provide (Acts 11:39-41). **In Him could be found freedom from sin, freedom from the Law, and freedom to live according to a completely new inner nature, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit** (Rom. 6-8). To those who believe, receive and walk in the reality of *that* message, the doorway to a power-filled life was opened. Change and growth were expected (Acts 26:20; II Tim. 2:24-26; I Pet. 2:2; 3:18; Eph. 4:11-16; Matt. 28:18-20; Col. 1:28,29; Heb. 5:11-14).

The shame which Paul referred to is an uncomfortable, crippling feeling of embarrassment, self-consciousness, or fear in the face of others. We cannot control what we feel, but we *can* control what we *decide to do* with what we feel. To **“be ashamed” of Christ would be to allow those feelings of fear or embarrassment to silence us**, so that we do not testify to the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Jesus had spoken of this to His followers, saying, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. ...For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mk. 8:34-38). Obviously, **this is not an absolute, “unforgivable-sin” issue**, because Peter was fearful to admit that he was a follower of Christ, and Jesus restored him (Jn. 18:15-18,25-27; 21:15-23; cf. II Tim. 2:8-13). **It is clear, however, that Jesus expects us to put aside our fear and discomfort and bear testimony to Him.** As Peter says, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and respect” (I Pet. 3:15). The word, “ready”, also can mean “prepared”. **We must be emotionally and mentally prepared to give a testimony and defense for Christ.** If we are *expecting* to be a spokesperson for Christ, then we will be more likely to overcome the feelings of fear when the opportunity arises. The more comfortable we are with knowing *why* we believe in Christ, the easier it will be to pull our thoughts together when we are on the spot.

What is the gospel? Paul wrote, “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...” (I Cor. 15:1-4). **It is the good news that God has reached down to us through Jesus to bring about the forgiveness of sins through His death on the cross, and to offer us a new life in Him.** God loved us enough to send Jesus to die in our place, so that if we simply would accept the free gift of His provision to remove sin, He will restore us to relationship with Him, and cause us to be born from above by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit then enables us to live life in a manner that can fulfill God’s purposes in the world.

Paul said that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”. Other renderings of the Greek might be, “it is God’s ability unto salvation” or “God’s enabling power toward a way of safety”. The similar statement in the context of I Corinthians 1:18-21, “the word of the cross is ...the power of God to us, the ones being saved”, helps us understand what Paul means. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (I Cor. 1:20b,21). You see, **God set things up so that He provided a way of salvation for us by His grace**, ...that is, by *His* work on our behalf even when we had done

nothing, and *could* do nothing, to deserve it. **He wanted our salvation to be clearly and plainly grounded in His working, not on the basis of anything we had done, so that we could not boast toward Him, or compare ourselves with others.** We all are saved by God's grace. We all live by His grace, and we all can walk in the power of His Spirit by His grace. **It is His gift to us, to be humbly and gratefully received.** Not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the relationship with Him that is real and personal, and the empowering provision of the Holy Spirit. **It all comes to us as a word of promise, which we can then receive or reject. If we choose to accept it, it becomes as real to us as we will allow it to be.**

The grace is the provision of God which He made for us in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. The good news is the proclamation of the opportunity which God has made available to us in Jesus. By faith, when we trust in this declaration of good news, and accept it to ourselves, God's provision is activated toward us. In that way, the message of the cross, the gospel, brings to us the power of God.

To those who are perishing, this is nothing but foolishness. They do not believe the good news, and therefore they do not claim the gracious provision of God for themselves, and it is *not* activated or applied to them. **Our faith means nothing, if there is no reality to the promise or hope in which we trust.** What would be the benefit of believing something that wasn't true? Paul discusses that scenario in I Cor. 15:13-19. **If Christ never really died and rose again, then the entire Christian message is worthless. But, he adds in vs. 20, "Christ has been raised from the dead..." The provision is real.** Jesus *did* die and rose again, as the 525 eyewitness experiences catalogued in the early part of that chapter clearly establish (vss. 4-8). Of course, even if the provision *was* made by God, **unless we hear of it, we cannot take advantage of what God offers.** The news must come to us, if we are to hear and believe. **We need all three parts: the provision, the declaration, and the application.** As Paul writes, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). **God made the provision. Someone now has to bring the message to inform other people about God's provision (Rom. 10:14). Once they hear, then they can choose to trust.** The message of the good news is powerful, because through it people can begin to lay hold of the provision which God has for them. To us who are being saved, because we *have* trusted, *the good news brings the effective power of God into our experience* as we live out that faith in practical circumstances.

Once we believe, God's righteousness is revealed to us further, as we live by that faith. The faith which responds to the promise leads us to spiritual rebirth (Jn. 1:12,13). **Having been quickened or made alive by the Spirit** (Jn. 6:63; II Cor. 3:5,6; Tit. 3:5-7), **we then begin to perceive more of how God desires to work in our lives** (II Cor. 3:15-18). It is important to understand that **this comes by revelation, not by mere study alone.** We can learn a great deal by studying the scriptures, but God has given us the Holy Spirit to be our Teacher, to open our minds to perceive and understand things that we could not otherwise grasp on our own (Jn. 14:26; 15:26,27; 16:7-15). There are also insights and aspects to the Spirit-led Christian life which God must uncover to us. **The word for "reveal" means to "uncover". God must "uncover" truths to us that are not readily recognizable with just the mind alone** (cf. Eph. 1:15-22). The Bible expressly tells us that the Spirit is given to us *so that we might know* the things freely given to us by God (I Cor. 2:12). On the other hand, **the insights which God will reveal to us are not removed from the teachings of the scriptures.** It is not like there is some special secret knowledge which only can be subjectively known apart from the objective teaching of the word of God. **Rather, God gives us the ability to grasp and perceive what is there.** An important part of this revelation process, then, comes through study, prayer, meditation and application. We are exhorted to be diligent to present ourselves as people who can rightly and accurately interpret the word of the truth (II Tim. 2:15). **More is revealed, however, as we implement and respond to the truth which we understand.**

Finally, faith is not something simply to think about. Faith is for living. The last part of Rom. 1:17 is a quote from Habbakuk 2:4. The prophet there says that the soul of the proud person is not right within him, but the righteous person will live by his or her faith. **The soul of the proud person is not healthy. It is not dealing with life in a straight and forthright manner. It is crooked, distorted, deceitful and sick** (Jer. 17:9). What this means becomes more clear as you follow the context. **The righteous person trusts God, and lives out their faith by obedience to His will. He or she trusts that God will supply needs, open opportunities, and satisfy the longings of the heart** (e.g., Phil. 4:19; Psa. 23). **The proud person however, does not look to God for these things. Instead, he or she takes matters into their own hands.** They try to satisfy the longings of their heart by material goods and sensual experiences. **They are willing to disregard God's will in order to get what they want. In the end, it comes back to bite them.**

Living by faith, however, means that we must no longer utilize those unhealthy, self-seeking methods. We must look to God first, receive His counsel and walk in His ways. Often, this will mean some delay in gratification, because God does not always give us what we want when we want it. But **His ways are best. They are healthy, and His blessings are right on time** (Jas. 1:17).