

MESSAGE FOR THE YEAR 2022

THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

“For 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

IN the city in which I live in my retirement I have heard a number of clergy rejecting the message of the cross. Perhaps they would not admit this in public but in direct conversation or when talking together, they have said that they find the message of the cross has difficulties for them, or they have directly told me they cannot accept the message. They may well say that the cross of Jesus has a meaning for them, but a message different to the one concerning the cross which Paul plainly taught and which is taught throughout the Bible. The mark of such an attitude to the cross of Jesus is revealed in the way that the cross of Jesus and his sufferings feature very little in their preaching, and is relegated to an occasional reference almost in passing. In contrast Paul determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified when he came to Corinth, and his epistles are marked by being full of the cross in being the means of salvation for sinners, where God is able to be just when he justifies, that is counts a sinner righteous in his sight, those who put their trust in Jesus as their sin-bearer and Saviour.

When I came to this verse in my daily reading and meditation on God's holy and infallible word, it shed a

bright light of understanding on the problem of this rejection of the message of the cross, exposing the tragedy of such rejection, and revealing the saving love and grace of God expressed in the message of the cross as mentioned in this verse. It is plain that Paul saw the message of the cross as central and crucial to the gospel, and the defining message concerning Christ in God's revelation given us in the Bible. So as a message for this new year (2022) I felt compelled to focus our attention on the message of the cross in this verse, which on the one hand gives a warning of rejecting the message, and on the other hand encouragement for us who embrace it by faith.

MESSAGE OF THE CROSS.

The first thing of most importance is to know and understand the message of the cross as it is revealed in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. This message commences in the Old Testament declaration that without the shedding of blood there is no salvation. In Scripture the blood is shown to be the essence of life, so that when blood is shed or drained out of the body, then death is inevitable. The message of the Bible begins with the word of God to Adam and Eve which warned them in the Garden of Eden that they must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and if they did the penalty would be death. Adam and Eve, tempted by Satan, believed his lie that they would not die if they ate of this tree, but would be like gods, and the word of God was carried out, and death descended on them, and in them on all the rest of humanity. This is taught by Paul in Romans 5: 12 where we read "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all

sinned". We sinned in Adam and were born, like all human beings, spiritually dead, with a corrupt disposition, awaiting eternal death in hell when this life is over.

In his supreme holiness and purity God cannot deny is character, so the penalty of sin must be executed. If God were to simply overlook our sin and sinfulness, and forgive us, as many seem to suppose God can easily do, then God would cease to be holy and by this action he would be denying his holy character. The bottom line is that sin must suffer the just penalty of death if the problem of our sinfulness and disobedience to God is to be solved. Thus we must suffer eternal death because all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3: 23), and for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6: 23).

This was God's problem which human wisdom can provide no answer. Though God had no obligation to overcome this problem so that we sinners could be saved from eternal death in Hell, God's love abounded and in divine wisdom God produced the one and only way his just sentence of eternal death could be rescinded for sinners. Amazing this way most surely is. It is declared so gloriously in the message text for 2021. It is the message of John 3: 16 where we are told "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

What wisdom of God is found in this gift. By this gift God upholds his pure righteousness in the full, and provides free forgiveness to us sentenced justly to die.

God in his holiness can do no other than execute the penalty of everlasting death on all who fall short of his

holy glory. This just sentence had to be applied to sinners unless another way could be found that God could uphold his holy and pure majesty in his sentence of death upon those who transgress his holy law and purpose. Human wisdom can find no way this is able to be achieved. All human wisdom is able to conceive is for human beings to seek to assuage God's just wrath against their sin by seeking to carry out all the demands of his holy law. This is the way of achieving God's favour and forgiveness by human merit, but it is weak and failing before it is engaged in. Human wisdom may conceive of a passmark to be somewhere less than a 100%, but God's holiness and justice demands 100%.

In his wisdom and amazing love and mercy, God took responsibility upon himself to provide a substitute to stand before him in the place of us who have sinned, and who would take responsibility for all our sin and sinfulness, and then accept in the place of the sinner all that his broken law demands, which is eternal death. For such a substitute to be found, that substitute had to be a human being; and living in this sinful world, assaulted by the devil, to live a completely holy and sinless life. Such a substitute was absolutely necessary for the substitute to be a holy sinless sacrifice, with no sin of his own to atone for. Then the substitute had to accept the just sentence of death in our place for our sin, and so fulfil all righteousness in the place of the sinner. In this way all the holiness of God would be upheld, and God would be able to be just in his complete forgiveness of our sin.

So God sent his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, into the world to be born as a human being; then to live a completely holy life; and then give himself to God's just sentence of death for our sin in the place of us who have

sinned. The proof that Jesus fulfilled this completely is found in the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus and his exaltation to sit at the right hand of God, proves that the sentence of eternal death has been fully met in and by Jesus when he died on the cross, for all who believe on him as their sin-bearer and Saviour.

The hymn "There is a green hill far away" expresses this in the verse which says -

"There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin;
He (Jesus) only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in."

O what blessed gospel this is for poor sinners weighed down with the guilt and power of their disobedience to God, for the gift is without cost to those who respond in faith and trust to Christ's invitation in Matthew 11: 28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The rest is the gift of full forgiveness and new life, and to be raised to be Christ's brothers and sisters, guided and kept in this life until he brings us wonderfully saved into the mansions he is preparing for us in his heavenly glory.

THE RESPONSE TO THIS MESSAGE.

The message for the year 2022 given in our message text is shown to have a twofold application. For one group of humanity this message is foolishness. These are the people who approach this message from the point of view of their own wisdom and what their wisdom will accept. The message of the cross goes against all their human wisdom. The problem here is that their human wisdom is set over and above the testimony and

revelation of God given in the Bible. The Bible for them is not the infallible and inerrant declaration of God. In human wisdom these people look on the Bible as a collection of writings made up of the spiritual quest of different people which therefore holds divine wisdom but also human error. In view of this they are only able to accept in the Bible what suits the perceptions and preferences of their human wisdom. By this they create an image of God that suits the way they perceive or prefer God to be like. In fact they have created a mental idol which they then worship. In this belief the message of the cross has all sorts of difficulty for them, and the way forward for them is to construct an understanding of the historical record of Christ's life and death which is more in accord with what, with their human wisdom, they can accept.

So the apostle Paul's words are true of their thinking. The message of the cross is foolishness to them. But the dismal and horrific reason for this the apostle also tells us. They think in this way because they are perishing. What is this word perishing expressing? The answer is the fact that they are still as they were born into this world. They are dead spiritually, and do not know God, and this is true even if they claim to know God and serve God. They are still on the broad road that leads to destruction (Matthew 7: 13). They are without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2: 12b). They are still under the wrath of God for their sinfulness and sins (Ephesians 2: 3b). Perishing describes their condition of being under the just sentence of eternal death in Hell. What a desperate condition this is, and it is desperate because most often these people feel that they are accepted by God as the Pharisees did in the time that Jesus lived on this earth, by their own acts of goodness.

It is tragic because they are proud in trust in their human wisdom which in fact has become their god.

For the other group the message of the cross is the power of God because they are being saved. It is the power of God because they have been given light of understanding to appreciate and hold fast to the truth revealed to them, that in Jesus God has provided the answer to their need, which is to be right with God, forgiven all their sins, past, present and future, and to be reconciled to God and know him as their Father in heaven. This is realised only in the cross, and what Jesus was achieving and has achieved according to the wisdom and purpose of God in love. Paul so concisely express this wonderful blessing in Romans 1: 16,17 where we read "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of every one who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live (i.e. will obtain and receive life, eternal life) by faith'".

This is our need. It is the need of righteousness, perfect righteousness, which meets all the demands of God in his holy law and commandment. By our own effort to be righteous as God demands that we should be righteous, we fail before we commence. The reason for this is that our own effort is unable to cancel the failure and sins of the past, and also because no deed which we do is ever totally righteous as God requires righteousness. The wonderful Gospel is that God has provided this righteousness in and by his only begotten Son, who in his life and death worked all righteousness in the place of all who believe.

This gift of righteousness is a gift of grace, offered without cost to all who come to God weary and burden with their sins, and believe the promise of God and believe the promise of the gospel, the message of the cross.

It is all of God's grace. We who are given the grace to see our need and come with sincere repentance, and are given the gift of faith to believe in Jesus, our precious all-sufficient Saviour, are blessed in this way by the love, mercy and grace of God alone. Notice what our message verse declares. It says that it is those who are being saved that the message of the cross is the power of God. God has chosen us for this supreme blessing, and is working in us to work his will and good pleasure. He is saving us in this way to bring us by his power to the blessing of everlasting life in glory.

CONCLUSION.

Where are you in this twofold separation declared by the apostle in this message verse? Praise and bless God if you find yourself 'being saved', but for you who pride yourself in your own wisdom, blessing is still offered if only you are given the grace of repentance and embrace the message of the cross for your eternal salvation.

Let us sing
joyfully to
the Lord

The text is written in a casual, handwritten style. To the right of the text are several black musical notes of varying sizes and stems. Below the text is a horizontal line that serves as a musical staff, with the notes appearing to be placed on it.