

## **Résumé of Those Called**

### **Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light Unit 3: God's Call**

#### **Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 5, 2023 By Jay Harris**

#### **Lesson Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

#### **Key Verse**

*God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:28-29)*

#### **Lesson Aims**

- To prepare for this unit's focus on God's call
- To learn about the Corinthian church context for Paul's message about the cross
- To explore the ways Paul connected the message of the cross to the situation in Corinth
- To examine how the cross communicates wisdom and power in an unconventional way
- To imagine a love ethic that is based on the cross

#### **Introduction to Unit 3: God's Call**

We are entering the third and final unit of this Winter Quarter series. The theme for the quarter has been "From Darkness to Light." In the December unit, entitled "God's Preparation," we explored scriptures preparing us spiritually for the advent, or arrival, of Jesus the Christ, the true light that was coming into the world. In the January unit, we explored God's promises that reveal some of the ways we can count on God to bring us on our life's journey from darkness to light.

The February unit is entitled, "God's call." To give you a preview of the journey ahead, we are exploring how God calls us into full participation in this journey from darkness to light. We are not to remain on the sidelines in this journey. We are called to *active* participation. This is our calling. We will see how the active participation to which we are called involves God using us to bring others along in this journey. We will look at the:

- Résumé of Those Called
- Reminder of the Call
- Responsibility of Those Called
- Results of the Call

Each of the four lessons connects with the other. In the last lesson of both this unit and the winter quarter as a whole, you will come full circle and claim your place among "*a chosen people, a*

*royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* ” (1 Peter 2:9)

As we explore today's lesson, "Résumé of Those Called," we will discover that this résumé is quite unique, and yet absolutely essential to understanding our calling as Christians. Living this résumé forms us into a people that calls us out of darkness and also allows us to lead others out of darkness. We will learn that the light we are entering is informed by the cross of Jesus.

## **The Context**

The scripture passage that we are studying is part of a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. Corinth was located about 40 miles south of Athens, Greece, and was a noted commercial city. The people in Corinth were very much a part of the Greco-Roman culture. There was also a Jewish contingent in the population. The church that Paul wrote to was a church that he formed earlier in 50 A.D. from the new converts to Christ who responded to his preaching. In other words, Paul was their father in the faith. Some of the converts were Greek and some were Jewish. Paul had stayed in Corinth for a year and a half according to Act 18:11 before moving on to Ephesus across the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor (which is modern day Turkey). It was from Ephesus that Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Corinth.

Paul let us know that a large part of his motivation for his letter was the news of conflict brewing in the church: "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people," Paul wrote, "that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." The congregation had apparently split into competing camps with some saying "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas (Peter)." (1 Corinthians 1:11-12)

The only thing worse than having an unhealthy allegiance to a particular former pastor is when members become divided by choosing different former pastors. You get a picture of members who were intent on trying to one-up each other. Some attached themselves to Paul who was the founding pastor of the congregation. Some attached themselves to Peter who had a central role in the whole church. Some attached themselves to Apollos.

Since we know more about Peter and Paul, it is good to review what we know about Apollos. According to the Book of Acts, Apollos, a Jew and native of Alexandria, "was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures" and spoke with "burning enthusiasm." (Acts 18:24-25) Alexandria was a renowned center of knowledge and the location of a world-famous library. Because Corinth was steeped in the philosophical systems of Greco-Roman thought, you can imagine some church members attaching themselves to Apollos.

It is important to remember that Paul seems to have had no problem with Apollos. He has only affirming words to say about the ministry of Apollos in chapter three of this letter to the Corinthians. Paul characterizes his own ministry in Corinth as that of a seed planter, and the ministry of Apollos as watering the seed he planted. The ministry of each complemented the other. God blessed the ministry of both by making the growth happen.

What Paul was concerned about was the way members were boasting about their knowledge and their own supposed eloquence. The members of the church were vying for status using whatever means they could. Paul understood that his mission for this letter was to tame these egos and bring the members of the church back into unity and fellowship.

Paul reminded the church of what his message had been when he had preached the gospel among them. Paul admitted that his goal was not to proclaim the gospel with eloquent wisdom. For Paul, the message of the gospel is the message of the cross. Paul felt that trying to deliver that message with eloquent wisdom could potentially empty the message of the cross of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:17)

**Have you known people in the Church who seem to compete for status? How might they do this? Would you be willing to share how God revealed to you this tendency in your own life? Have you seen church conflicts arise out of the tendency to compete for status?**

**How is the cross preached and talked about in your church? Have you ever thought about the cross in the way Christians treat one another?**

### **How Paul Used the Message of the Cross**

What we have the opportunity to see in today's lesson is how Paul used the message of the cross to unify believers. The message of the cross however has a greater application. The cross of Jesus provides the church its unique foundation and organizing principle. The cross informs the résumé of those who are called to be Christ's followers who make up the church.

**<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**

Why would Paul say that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing? Christians wear crosses as a sign of their identity in Christ. The crosses we wear are usually fashioned out of precious metals and polished up. Paul reminds us what an outside observer might think of the cross. The cross was obviously an instrument of torture and execution—a particularly cruel method of execution where death came slowly. Crucifixion was not invented by the Romans, but the Romans were the ones who brought it into systematic use. The public display of its victims was meant to serve as a deterrent to others. It presented a picture of abject humiliation and shame.

To first century outsiders who believed the cross merely spelled the end of Jesus, the cross was pure foolishness. Who would call people to follow someone who was the center of such a story? Yet, to people who see their salvation in this story, the cross demonstrates the power of God.

Notice Paul's resistance to watering down the message of the cross. Using the language of today, Paul seems to double-down on the message of the cross. Trying to bring too much eloquence in telling about the cross has the potential to empty the message of the cross of its power. There should be a raw quality to the way that the message of the cross is delivered.

**<sup>19</sup> For it is written,  
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”**

Remember that the Corinthians placed a premium on knowledge, wisdom, and eloquence. Here, Paul contends that the cross destroys the worldly wisdom of those who claim to be wise. Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14. According to Paul, God has done this kind of thing before. When Isaiah spoke to God’s people centuries earlier, he was speaking of the way God’s people were to be sent into exile and then rise from ashes and have shocking and amazingly good things done for them by God. The goal was to disorient God’s people. Previously, they had only known how to give lip-service to God. Previously, they had only offered to God the mechanical response of a people who had learned commands by rote. As God said, their hearts were far from God. By shocking his people with the salvation God was to bring them, God would turn their stale, passionless logic upside-down. (Isaiah 29:13-14)

**<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.**

It is as if God wants us to imagine bringing all the wise, all the scribes, and all the debaters of the present age into an arena to take in the cross of Jesus. The wisdom of the world cannot grasp the logic of the cross. Worldly wisdom cannot grasp the heart of God. According to Paul, the world cannot really know God through the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of God runs counter to the wisdom of the world. Nowhere is this seen better than in the wisdom of the cross. The logic of the cross is designed to turn the logic of the world upside-down. Believers, however, get it—they understand the logic of the cross because the cross is the basis for their salvation.

**<sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

It is a paradox that the cross was a stumbling block both to the Jews and Greeks in Paul’s day, and yet the converts to Christ were originally either Jews or Greeks. In other words, something happened in the thinking of both the Jews and Greeks that enabled them to overcome this stumbling block.

For Jews, it meant overcoming a stigma that Jesus’ death would have had. In the law of Moses, there were some laws where the penalty was death, but there was something even worse than the death penalty for the worst offenses—that was to be executed and the body to be hung naked and exposed on a tree. If Jews demanded signs in order to believe that someone might be the Messiah, the sign of Jesus dying exposed on a rugged wooden cross would be exactly the wrong sign—a sign of shame instead of the sign of a Messiah.

For Greeks, who prized wisdom and the status it brings, the idea of a crucified Savior would be a stumbling block for sure. Someone who ended up crucified would be classified as a loser—yet another failed messiah figure.

**Have you ever thought about the difficulty that the message of the cross might present to people? Have you ever seen people turned off when hearing about Jesus dying on the cross for them? Have you ever tried to explain it to people? How did you do this?**

## **How the Cross Communicates Wisdom and Strength**

We're going to attempt to do a deep dive into the mystery of the cross.

**<sup>25</sup> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.**

The truth is that God made a choice in his strategy of redemption that could be mistaken for foolishness. If you lean in closely, however, you realize that God's foolishness in this instance is much wiser and deeper than human wisdom. Likewise, allowing his Son to die on a cross left an opening for critics to call God weak. God's weakness however is stronger than human strength. God intentionally chose a course that could be misunderstood as foolishness and weakness.

The cross is illogical to our conventional way of thinking. The cross was an instrument of torture and execution. It was designed to make a public example of its victims and serve as a deterrent to those who looked on. The message was – if you follow this path, this is what happens. According to conventional logic, you wouldn't want to have anything to do with a cross. Under normal circumstances, the cross would have represented a colossal failure.

But that's not what happened. The cross was not a failure. It was foreseen. It was chosen. You could say that the cross is illogical on purpose. The cross has a wisdom that runs counter to the wisdom of the world. At the center of this wisdom is an innocent person who was exposed to unimaginable public humiliation and died a most inhumane death.

Recall the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane on the evening Jesus was arrested in order to be tried and crucified. Jesus considered whether or not to hand himself over to the authorities. He prayed. He wept. He struggled with the decision because self-preservation is hardwired in us. He struggled because he was innocent. He prayed that the cup might be passed from him. In the end, he prayed, "not my will but your will be done." He handed himself over to the authorities.

He, who was the Son of God, willingly offered his life as a sacrifice to pay the cost of all the sins of humankind. The injustice committed against him would hold a mirror up to the human family of their own inhumanity and sin. There must be this kind of accounting for sin. We cannot simply sweep sin under the rug, because sin brings untold harm to those who were created in God's image. Sin has always brought this mutual human destruction and self-destruction. If God overlooked sin, God would be less than loving.

Since Jesus on the cross was the one who was on the receiving end of these sinful actions, Jesus could be the one who offered forgiveness. While he was being crucified, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Who was forgiven when Jesus said these words? Was it just those who played an active role in his execution? Was it the thief being crucified next to him who had hurled insults at him? Was it Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who had consented to his execution? Was it the religious leaders who in their insane jealousy were most responsible for stirring up the crowd against Jesus? Was it the crowd who shouted “crucify Jesus” when they could have called for the murdering revolutionary, Barabbas, to be crucified and Jesus go free? Was it Judas who betrayed Jesus? Was it the disciples who abandoned Jesus?

Jesus not only forgave all these people, but also all of humanity, for we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We say that Jesus’ sacrifice was and is a vicarious sacrifice. In other words, the redemptive ripple effects continue to spread out through the ages to all who call Jesus their Lord and Savior. What gives Jesus’ action on the cross its vicarious nature? In short, it is the power of suffering, self-giving love. This is how Jesus’ death on the cross atones for our sins.

When Jesus died on the cross, Matthew reports that there was an earthquake. The rocky foundation underneath the cross fractured. The holy Son of God who was completely innocent experienced death on the cross. The earthquake was just a small sign of the enormous power that was unleashed as the result of that self-giving love. The power of the self-giving love of Jesus broke the spell of death itself. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead as the result of that love.

This kind of selflessness defies human logic, does it not? The logic of the cross was very real to the Corinthians who saw their salvation in the context of God’s mercy. Only one who has been enveloped by this mercy and whose life has changed as a result can understand the logic of the cross. The cross speaks of love – love that makes itself vulnerable. The one giving the love has made himself vulnerable.

**Does anything about the cross fill you with a sense of awe? How would you put it into words? Are there parts of this story that you have a hard time getting your mind around?**

### **A Love Ethic that is Based on the Cross**

You cannot truly consider this without also being made vulnerable. So, those who are to truly receive this love must be willing to make themselves vulnerable by giving their lives to Jesus Christ. Love that makes itself vulnerable may appear foolish, but this love knows a kind of wisdom that is wiser than conventional wisdom. This love may appear weak, but this love has a power that is stronger than worldly power.

The claim to worldly or other-worldly wisdom often causes people to boast, but when we embrace the wisdom of the cross it is because we recognize our need for the mercy that only the

cross of Christ offers. The ground at the foot of the cross is level ground. The cross unifies all those who are brought to it by their need for divine mercy.

**<sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”**

The wisdom of the cross naturally crucifies our egos. While others see wisdom and power as the means to a better life, God chose something altogether different precisely because it calls into question the way we usually think. The cross presents a different kind of logic for living.

Paul was writing to a bunch of people who would know what he was talking about. Not many of them were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. They came from all walks of life. For many, a better life had never been within their reach. But the message of the cross talked about something to which they finally had access. In fact, the message of the cross puts everyone on the same level. Everyone who seriously considers the cross is humbled.

For some reason, Paul came to Corinth in weakness. In his state of weakness, it seems that he didn't even try to be eloquent. But it was okay, because when he preached it was in the Spirit's power, because he focused on the cross. The message of the cross is powerful, if we don't sanitize the cross, sterilize the cross, domesticate the cross, water it down, or sentimentalize it. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

We need to reclaim the message of the cross. If we reclaim the message of the cross, we are going to lay aside our ego. We are going to lay aside our ego when it comes to talking about our faith. We need to learn to use the language of grace unashamedly. We need to put an end to boasting. Why do Christians feel the need to one-up one another? Why do Christians sit in judgment over those who have yet to find Christ? When will we realize that the only thing we can boast about is that Jesus won our salvation by dying on the cross for us? Our salvation was not something we won for ourselves. To be a Christ-centered church that reaches people, we must be a cross-centered church.

It is laughable, pitiful, and tragic that we live in a time when more and more people are being caught and exposed for lying on their résumés.

**Reflect on what it means to have a résumé that is cross-centered. What does that look like? How do we become living résumés to the people we meet? How do we avoid hiding our light under a bushel and letting our light shine in a way that conveys humility? How do we do this to bring glory to God and not ourselves?**

**Prayer**

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who sent his Son to die on the cross for our redemption. Teach us the wisdom of the cross and how to be truly humble and love in a way that makes us vulnerable, so that people may come to know Jesus through our witness, through Him who lived, and died, and rose again for our sakes to be our salvation, Amen.