



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

“The Supreme Knowledge”

TRANSCRIPT

[Audio Begins] was able to come in excellence of speech because I'm a southerner. [Laughter] But not everybody has that advantage. The Greeks loved excellence of speech and wisdom. The Apostle says, that is the way that I came. He came with a message concerning the cross of Christ, very unpopular in that day. It's like a murderer except worse. “So I came in such a message.”

Allister McGrath a modern day theologian, Calvinistic theologian, said that “Christ's pulpit is his cross, his fundamental theme.” And so the apostle follows in the same way, his fundamental theme is the cross of Jesus Christ. You think about it for a moment, you realize that when we say Jesus Christ and him crucified, as he says, “I determine not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” A crucified messiah is an oxymoron. Messiah, crucified? You couldn't combine those, but the apostle does. A crucified Messiah, and not only does this function as an oxymoron, the apostle says it's wisdom, “It's the wisdom of God,” a crucified Messiah. Nothing could be more shattering to an ancient person at first for the apostle to speak about a crucified individual as being the wisdom of God. It's very difficult for us today to grasp what that must have meant to wise men when they heard the apostle speak, “The wisdom of God.” Why is it the wisdom of God?

Now we could spend the rest of the day talking about that, and the finest of theologians could spend weeks and months talking about it. But just to sum it up in a few brief words, why is this the wisdom of God? Well first of all, it's a word regarding ourselves, the wisdom of God regarding ourselves. “The cross is not a genial icon,” someone has said, “It's a symbol of the wreckage of our self esteem, of us as persons.” It's God's evaluation of just what we are as fallen sinners, children of Adam. So, it's wisdom, because that's truth. This is what we need to know. This is what you need to know. It's what I need to know. And we never come to the end of that knowledge, over and over again through your life. Live to be an old man like me and over and over again, you'll realize how wise the Scriptures are. We learn though we're in the image of God, of our sin, guilt our lostness, our debt is infinite, our debt is infinite, your debt is infinite. So, this is a word regarding ourselves. Our Lord dies as our substitute, but upon a cross, crucified. He's taking our place, that's what we were and are.

So it's a word regarding ourselves, it's a word regarding the world too. Chapter 1 and verse 23, the apostle wrote, “But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.” I think it's not a stumbling block today as it is foolishness. It's hardly worth discussing. And yet, the wisest of our philosophers and thinking men avoid if they possibly can, avoid a discussion of just exactly the crucifixion of Jesus Christ really means in the light of holy Scripture. Wisdom saw him dying helplessly shabbily as an abandoned criminal. But God by resurrection reversed its judgment. It sees Good Friday only, that's the world about us, even today, even professing Christians, Good Friday. But genuine Christians see Easter Day every day in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the kind of life that has been given to us. The world doesn't get it.

It reminds me of Dan Quayle's favorite statement. I doubt that Dan Quayle will be known for anything other than the fact that he was a poor choice for Vice Presidency. I guess most would think of him that way. He got into a discussion with Hollywood. And

finally he made the statement, “Hollywood just doesn’t get it.” That’s probably his wisest statement that he ever made. Some of us go down into our death without any word for others to quote, but Dan Quayle managed to give us, “Hollywood just doesn’t get it.” That’s a truth too, incidentally, even though Quayle said it. [Laughter]

So it’s a word regarding ourselves, “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” It’s a word regarding the world, and it’s a word regarding our God. Because the cross is God’s word concerning salvation. Divine grace in salvation, chapter 1 and verse 18 the apostle wrote, “For the message of the cross is foolishness for those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it’s the power of God.” In verse 30, “But of him are you in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God and righteousness, sanctification and redemption.” Self esteem securely grounded in the divine love manifested in Jesus Christ, now that’s real self esteem. You can have all of the kinds of self esteem that the world is longing for, but the one good case of self esteem is to realize you belong to the Triune God in Heaven by virtue of what Jesus Christ has done.” So, no matter who you are, you can have the finest case of self esteem if you belong to him. All of the blessings that are bound up in being a Christian are found in Jesus Christ who was crucified for sinners. Self esteem grounded in eternal love, unchangeable, thus invincible. One of the nice things about the Bible is God has revealed himself in it as he wishes us to know him. Revealed to us a way in which we are to understand him, that’s Scripture. We need to be told what God, God, G – O – D what God is by revelation.

Luther said the Scripture is the manger in which Jesus Christ is laid. And so if you want to get a good look at the baby, look in the manger. And you make all kinds of prophecies about what the baby may look like, but if you want to know what Jesus Christ is, you look in the pages of Scripture. From the beginning to the end they speak ultimately of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That’s why it’s so important in your preaching and teaching to emphasize what the Scriptures say about Jesus Christ and him crucified. And there’s wonderful opportunity to spend your life on Jesus Christ and him

crucified from the Scriptures. Start out at Genesis chapter 3, think of Genesis chapter 22 and Abraham’s offering. Go on to the prophecy of Isaiah and particularly chapter 53, by that time you’re a good Calvinist, and then go on keep looking and you will find that the Scriptures are a word regarding our sovereign saving God. The gospels you know really are a kind of passion narratives. Because the thirty-three years is covered in relatively few pages, but then when the passion comes, extensive attention is given to the sufferings of our Lord and the last few days of his ministry. All out of proportion to the thirty years or so of his life, so much of Scripture spent on his death and resurrection, so little on his life in the light of it. That’s a word from God, study the significance of Jesus Christ and him crucified. What do the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ really mean? What do they really mean?

The apostle in verse 3 and 4 discusses something of his method. He says, “For I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling in my speech in my preaching.” I feel very much like him. This week when I picked up a log and something kind of moved in my back, rest of the week I’ve been in trembling. I’ve been walking with a cane up until this morning, thank you for what you’ve done. Just the idea of speaking to you I threw away my cane. [Laughter] Well anyway, it’s at home, but the apostle here says he was with them in weakness and in fear and in much trembling and my speech in my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and in power.” This is the apostle’s method in preaching. That is to give the word of God and in that to give demonstration.

I’ve had a very good week or two reading George Whitefield. Isn’t it striking for a person who believes in Sovereign grace to hear people say, “If you believe in sovereign grace, if you really believe there’s such a doctrine as a certain people elected and certain people who are going to be with the Lord in Heaven, then that destroys evangelism.” Well no it doesn’t, because it’s so hard to find those few and therefore you have to preach everywhere you possible can so that those few may have the opportunity to hear and

respond. But in connection with that, it's so interesting to read the gospels and notice that so much of it is devoted to relatively, proportionately, so much of it is devoted to the sufferings of our Lord on Calvary's cross. The thirty years or so are passed by with relatively little attention, but when we come to the sufferings of Christ, great attention because this is where the atonement is made. And the description of it is so vivid.

Well anyway, I've been reading George Whitefield, two big volumes, the life of Whitefield. Whitefield as you know was an Englishman, but came to the United States in the days of the eighteenth century in which it was rather difficult to make a crossing of the Atlantic. And so when they crossed the Atlantic, took them about six weeks to get here with those sailing vessels. They went to the best places, of course in order to have the right kind of response so of course they came to Charleston, South Carolina. I'm a Charlestoner, and a great deal of Whitefield's ministry took place right in Charleston. Whitefield was a Church of England minister, but he was a Calvinist, a strict Calvinist, a Biblical Calvinist in fact, the kind of Calvinist I would like because it's Biblical, it's the truth of the word of God.

Now they tell us that if you're a Calvinist, you're not going to evangelize. Who was the greatest evangelist that ever came to the United States of America? Many people, many knowledgeable people, in fact, some of the most knowledgeable will say George Whitefield. Calvinism is not a hindrance to evangelism; Calvinism is motivating toward evangelism, because you know you are dealing with the sovereign grace of God who truly saves sinners. And so not only did Whitefield do that, but he went down to Savannah out from Savannah formed Bethesda which was a work which Whitefield did in order to save physical young children, and orphanage. And for a long time, he crossed the Atlantic, he asked for help in order that the Children in the orphanage might be raised and raised in a Christian environment. It's a great story, I've enjoyed two, one of the volumes is about that big, the other is about like that. But Whitefield was a good friend of Wesley. Wesley was an Arminian. Wesley preached his funeral.

Wesley also preached a sermon on free grace which Whitefield didn't particularly like. So he wrote an answer to it. It's good reading, you know you ought to read something like that, you'd enjoy it. But they remained friends, and as I say, Wesley preached Whitefield's funeral sermon. The important thing is that probably the greatest evangelist who has ever come to the United States of America was a strict Calvinist. And so let's forget this kind of criticism if you're a Calvinist you will not evangelize. As a matter of fact, you will evangelize if you are a Calvinist. If you are an Arminian, you may not. That's a sad thing to say, but I have to say it because it's true.

Now the apostle says in verse 5, Howard, how much have I gone overtime? I've got a friend up here. Well anyway, the apostle writes, “I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling and my speech and preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power that.” Now if you read this in the original text, that's the way you ought to read it ultimately, that, introduces a purpose clause. “In order that,” we'll spell it out, “In order that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.” The faith that rests upon philosophical arguments or natural arguments of any kind is at the mercy of other arguments of the same nature. That which depends upon a clever argument is at the mercy of a cleverer argument. That's why it's so important for the truth that you're proclaiming to rest ultimately upon the teaching of the word of God. For the Holy Spirit indicts the word of God with his power, his intentional power, his all wise power. And therefore, the apostle says, “In demonstration of the Spirit and power that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” The individual who has believed in Jesus Christ truly has believed in Jesus Christ by virtue of the power of God given them by the Triune God.

That's why it's so important to preach the word of God and be satisfied with the word of God when we preach it. We don't want to be clever, that which depends upon a clever argument is at the mercy of a cleverer argument. We are interested in the word of

God and the power of the Holy Spirit in preaching. And the Spirit works sovereignly in accordance with his will. Some days preachers preach, preach their hearts out, nothing comes. That’s not necessarily bad; there may be some who are convicted that should be convicted. Ultimately we are dependent upon God, God alone as a fit witness of himself in his word.

The apostle speaks, and Christian theologians speak of the word of God as being itself powerful, powerful with the power of God. The Greek term is *enta piston*. One of the finest of the Southern theologians and a South Carolinian like I am in measure, both Alabama and South Carolina, when Alabama is good, I claim Alabama and otherwise when South Carolina is doing well, I claim South Carolina. But I have both [indistinct]. Anyway, James Henley Thornwell was a great southern Theologian, he was a Presbyterian, he was a Calvinist, a genuine, thoughtful Calvinist. I have his works in my library; they’re well worth reading today. He’s a 19th Century theologian. If you go to South Carolina, there will be a Thornwell orphanage, and the Thornwell orphanage is named after him. It’s attached to the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina. But Thornwell was a wise man, a good Christian man. He said with reference to this,

“But in no case is reason the ultimate rule of faith, no authority can be higher than the direct testimony of God. And no certainty can be greater than that imparted by the Spirit shining on the word. An accredited revelation, (this is accredited by the Holy Spirit of course.) An accredited revelation like an oath among men should put an end to all controversy.”

So that is the source of the final authority for Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the final authority for Christian doctrine, the Holy Spirit’s testimony. That’s what Paul means when he says, “That your faith should not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. In the demonstration of the Spirit and power that in order that,” purpose clause.

The apostle preached in the power of the Holy Spirit in order that their faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Because if your faith is in the power of God, it will survive all of the experiences of life. It will survive disappointment, illness, tragedy, all of the things that the human being is exposed to as a result of what happened in the Garden of Eden. So we do this with confidence and we try to follow the word of God. That's Paul's motive, which your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

John Calvin said, “God alone is a fit witness of himself and his word.” And Thornwell said, I repeat it again, “In no case is reason the ultimate rule of faith. No authority can be higher than the direct testimony of God, no certainty greater than that imparted by the Spirit shining on the word. An accredited revelation like an oath among men should put an end to all controversy.” So, my young Christians and perhaps some non Christians, God wishes to be known in Christ's cross. There he has spoken, demonstrating his redeeming love. The authentic God is truly Immanuel, with us, there and for us there in Christ's cross.

I wonder if I can find something here that I had. Yes, I can. George Whitefield said, “I know this doctrine of our original sin or fallen Adam is esteemed foolishness by the wise disputer of this world who will rely. How does it suit the goodness of God?” That's we should reply, “To impute one man's sin to an innocent posterity.” But has it not been proved to a demonstration that it is so?” In other words, a person objects that Adam's sin has been imputed to everyone? Well that's foolishness that cannot be true. Whitefield says, “Well just think a moment, has it not been demonstrated? How many people have been born and have not died? Well none, they all have died. The very fact that they died is evidence of the truth that Adam's sin was reckoned to all men. Everybody dies. Can't argue and say, “That's unfair, that's wrong, that doesn't happen, that's not true.” It's been proved, over and over again. It's proved every time some person dies and we place him in the casket have a funeral service with reference to them,

we’ve proved the truth of the word of God, that men have fallen in Adam. You can’t argue against that.

Now the apostle here says, and I want you to notice this and I’ll try to close on this, I know you’re waiting, “I determined not to know anything among you.” “I determined not.” That’s a word of reason isn’t it? “I determined not.” In other words, it’s something that the apostle has really sat down and thought about. “I determined not.” And I want to suggest to you young people that is something you should have a thought about. “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” If there is any one thing that you young people in this audience, and this goes for old people who haven’t made the decision either, some of you who are here. How important it is for you to think through the issue of the ministry of Jesus Christ among the created world of which we are a part. The apostle says, “I determined, I thought through this.” And he made a decision. You need to think through and make a decision too. The apostle had to go through decisions just as you and I must go through and so he did.

Now, do we have two or three more minutes? I was going to tell you something that I think is so encouraging in one way. One of my favorite individuals is a Scot. I’ve lived in Scotland. When you go, take your trip to Scotland, you go to a great place in so many ways. A lot of Christian tradition there and you need to do a good bit of reading upon it when you get there because the Christians who are there today are not all of them the kinds of Christians who were there when Christianity was strong in Scotland. But anyway, one of the greatest men was Samuel Rutherford. Rutherford I could talk for a long time about Rutherford but Martha and I who’s sitting in the back, she’s my lovely wife and my strongest critic, rarely makes a mistake in criticizing me. It’s amazing what insight she has. She and I were in Scotland and we were traveling on the road from Edinburgh to Dumfries which is over on the west down towards the end of Scotland. I noticed a little sign by the side of the road. And if you drive that road and it’s a well traveled road, you’ll see it, “Anwoth.” It struck me as something I knew something about

that. Anwoth was where Samuel Rutherford has ministered in a Scottish church. And so we went in, we saw the church, the ruins of the church. The ruins are two or three miles down the road and knocked on the door of some people across the road and they didn't even know what the ruins were about. Shows you how people can be in the midst of things that conjure up such great memories for Christians; they don't even have any idea about them historically. Anyway, we saw Anwoth.

In one of Rutherford's sermons, I recommend you read them all if you can.

“Of all wonders that ever were read in a printed book, this is the first, Christ made an exchange. Christ would coss, (that's the old Scottish word for barter.) Christ would coss to exchange, coss lives with you and make a niffer. (You can startle some of your Scottish friends when you get back and use the word niffer, say maybe you being a modern Scot wouldn't know some of the old words that your ancestor used. Means an exchange make a niffer.) He never, that is Christ, he never beguiled you for he took shame and gave you glory, he took the curse, gave you the blessing, he took death, gave you life. The fairest candle that ever was lighted is blown out. The head of the church is dead and the Lord of life is laid down in the grave no wonder that the sun that did show part of his labors be shut down because the great sun of righteousness was shut down in the grave and a stone laid over him. Good right have ye to Christ except of his niffer and exchange and change with him. And take his best blessings and purchase redemption.”

That of course is what we have when we believe in Jesus Christ. We've made an exchange, we've given our life away, we've received the life of Christ in exchange. Oh, this is so great. I have some other wonderful things to say, but I know it's too late. Thank you for listening to an old man, in fact, an old, injured man. This is a nice looking group; even the old people look good. [Laughter] Just try to look as good as Martha and

then you will be really great. She’s so embarrassed now, look at her. [Laughter] Just the truth Martha, just the truth. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee and praise Thee for this time together and ask Thy blessing upon all of these who are here listening. We pray Lord for all of us that we may truly give ourselves to him who is the sovereign Lord of our souls and who gave himself...

[AUDIO ENDS ABRUPTLY]