



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

PAUL

Proclaiming Christ Crucified

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event** or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume explores a key theme in Paul's writings and is one of several volumes dedicated to the **Cloud of Witnesses** theme. The pages of our Bibles are filled with the stories of women and men who have played a unique role in salvation history. By entering into a few key biblical passages written by or describing these people, we begin to see how our own story continues God's great work of salvation in the world. Their witness, handed on to us from centuries ago, continues to speak to us and challenge us to stand as faithful witnesses in today's world.

The Wisdom of the Cross



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 slowly, a passage on the special wisdom of the cross.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

¹⁹For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside.”

²⁰Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is

wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

After a few minutes of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the information provided in “Setting the Scene.”

Setting the Scene

Unlike the four Gospels, the apostle Paul did not tell stories about Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, he wrote letters to multiple faith communities throughout the ancient Mediterranean basin to explain to them the significance of Jesus Christ, that is, Jesus Messiah, the Anointed One of God. Yet behind these letters, indeed, stands a powerful narrative, especially about the cross, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what all these mean for the salvation of the world.

Paul of Tarsus, who became known as “the Apostle to the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15; Gal 2:7-9), was a missionary, evangelizer, and founder of Christian communities. He is also Christianity’s foremost letter-writer, with thirteen letters of the New Testament bearing his name. Although he never knew Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh, and indeed had persecuted the Church (see Gal 1:13), the risen Lord Jesus called him to become an “apostle,” one sent on a mission (see Acts 9:1-19 and Gal 1:15-16).

The present passage concerns the wisdom of the cross. It occurs in the first chapter of the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians where Paul strongly reminds them that the cross is central to the faith. Paul had founded the Corinthian

Have you ever experienced divisions or factions in your parish or community? What effect did they have? Were there ways to overcome them?

community, where he spent considerable time in ministry and earning money as a tentmaker (see Acts 18:1-4). He wrote this letter to them around AD 53–54 from Ephesus (in modern-day western Turkey), after getting reports “from Chloe’s people” of difficulties in the community (1:11). A primary problem among the Corinthians—one that has sadly been repeated many times throughout Christian history—was the existence of factions (1:10-17). Members, we might say, had “fan clubs.” Some favored one minister over another, with the result that fractious divisions were developing contrary to the ideal unity of Christian fellowship.

Paul also used the occasion of his letter to answer a number of questions that the Corinthians had asked him about in an earlier letter (7:1). These matters were largely ethical questions, which Paul addresses by citing Christian tradition that he himself had received, such as the traditions of the Last Supper (11:23-26) and the resurrection of the dead (15:1-8), or some of his own teaching (7:12).

This remarkable “pastoral” letter, then, is Paul’s attempt to deal in a straightforward manner with multiple kinds of community problems in the church. Yet the way in which he chooses to address them is highly theological, rooted in his understanding of the unique wisdom of the cross of Christ.

What ways do you think can promote better community life?

How do you participate in evangelization? In what ways do you take the opportunity to share the “good news” of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Understanding the Scene

We will consider the entire passage a few verses at a time. The occasional questions in the margin (as above) may be used for discussion with others or for your own reflection or as a guide to journaling.

¹⁸The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside.”

Recall the context as you begin this passage. Divisions have marked the Corinthian community. People have gravitated to different leaders, especially those who baptized them (Paul himself; Apollos, a respected figure in Corinth; Kephas [Simon Peter, Jesus’ foremost apostle]; and even Christ, as if he were a separate leader). Paul reminds the Corinthians that baptism was not his primary ministry; rather, he was “to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning” (1 Cor 1:17).

So the setup for our passage is Paul calling the Corinthians back to a foundational insight. In light of their petty squabbles over whom to follow, Paul sends them to the cross. In essence, Paul is reminding the Corinthians to return to a foremost essential of the Christian faith.

The challenge, however, is that the cross was an offensive symbol in the dual cultural worlds in which Paul lived. The entire passage is

How do you feel about making the sign of the cross in public? Is it indeed a sign of your own faith?