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1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
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## Why?

This morning we continue in our Lenten series where we look at the different lenses various biblical authors used to view Jesus.

And today we move from the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) to the last lens of the series, the lens of the apostle Paul.

In each of the Gospels, the writers seemed to be concerned with the who, the what, the where, and the how.

Paul, on the other hand, wants his readers to know the why. Paul's lens, first and foremost, as we will find out, is the cross, which is appropriate for us today, as we begin the journey into Holy Week.

No person, apart from Jesus himself, shaped the history of Christianity like the apostle Paul.

From a very young age, Paul was extremely religious. He studied under some of the most respected rabbis.

Scholars think Saul (Paul's pre-Christian name) was born around 10 C.E. in Tarsus, in modern-day Turkey, and grew up a very faithful Jew.

As a matter-of-fact, as an adult he became a Pharisee, and sincerely believed that the Christian movement was dangerous to Judaism.

Saul so hated the Christian faith, that he became one of its most fierce opponents and persecuted Christians without mercy.

On one trip to Damascus to capture Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem to be jailed or worse, Saul saw a bright light and heard Jesus' voice saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Saul immediately fell from his horse (I think I might have too, if I heard the voice of God), blinded.

Dumbfounded, Saul was at a loss for words (probably the last time in his life that that happened!).

Jesus told him to get up and go into Damascus where he would be told what to do.

Some time later, Jesus appeared to Ananias, a faithful Christian disciple, and told him to go find a man named Saul of Tarsus, who had been made blind, lay hands on him, and restore his vision.

Saul's reputation had preceded him and Ananias was more than a little afraid to aid Saul in any way, but Jesus assured him that this would be a good move and that Saul would be Jesus' instrument in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people.

And so Ananias obeyed Jesus, restored Saul's vision, and the rest, they say, is history.

Unlike Jesus' other early followers, who were mostly Palestinians, Saul, was a Roman citizen, which implies he was at least moderately well-off, and which granted him a certain respect wherever he went in the empire. We learn also that Paul was also a tentmaker by trade.

After his conversion, he became known as Paul, and as a Christian missionary traveled extensively through most of the Mediterranean world.

Tradition holds that Paul was beheaded (he couldn't be crucified, as Roman citizens were not allowed to die in that way) sometime between 62 and 67 CE.

The entirety of the work of the apostle Paul comes to us in the form of his letters.

If you think about it, it is actually someone else's mail we're reading, and since it's all we have, it is only from these letters that we can determine what Paul is teaching about Jesus.

And since Paul is writing occasional letters to the Gentile churches he established in urban centers around the Mediterranean, we are really overhearing just one side of a conversation, as Paul addresses the particular concerns of particular churches in particular places.

Of the 13 epistles originally attributed to him, biblical scholars believe that only seven were written by Paul: Romans, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Philemon.

Others, like 1 & 2 Timothy, Ephesians, and Titus, scholars believe may be from the "School of Paul"-- written by people who came after him and shared his theology. FYI – this was not unusual at the time.

Did you know that all of Paul's epistles were written at least 10-20 years before the Gospels were written?

Since Paul was the earliest writer, it would seem logical to turn to his writings first to get the clearest, closest look at who Jesus is.

It may, however, surprise you to realize that even if we do read all Paul's letters, we don't learn much about Jesus of Nazareth or his ministry.

There are no parables of the sheep and the goats, or the prodigal son, or the rich man and Lazarus, or the lost sheep, or the good Samaritan. In fact, we don't learn anything of Jesus as teacher at all.

There's no mention of Jesus driving out evil spirits, or healing, or of raising Lazarus from the dead. As far as Paul tells us, Jesus performed no miracles at all.

No virgin birth, no Sermon on the Mount, no feeding the 5000, no public ministry, no cleansing the temple, no final words, and no Great Commission.

Paul doesn't even place Jesus within history — there's nothing to connect Jesus with historical figures like Caesar Augustus, King Herod, or Pontius Pilate — like in the gospels.

And although Paul gives us very little historical information about Jesus, Paul has shaped our modern picture of Jesus through his letters.

Paul is the first biblical author to really interpret what Jesus means. And those interpretations have stuck.

Like I said, Paul doesn't appear to be concerned about the "what" (other than Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection). What he wants us to know about is the "why."

Now, if you are going to be concerned about a few fundamental things, the cross and the resurrection aren't a bad place to start.

If you think about it, the cross is the most fundamental symbol of the Christian faith. It has been so from the very beginnings of Christianity.

It might come as a surprise to know, that the earliest Christian depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus in art, was not until the fourth century, after the emperor Constantine made Christianity not only legal, but also the preferred religion of the Roman Empire.

It took an imperial endorsement of the Christian faith before Christians started displaying the cross as a symbol of faith, even though all Christians knew that the cross of Jesus was at the heart of Christianity.

When we imagine the cross, we have to imagine what it would have communicated to a first century audience.

First and foremost, it showed that Jesus could not be the messiah, for the messiah certainly was not supposed to die.

Second, it showed that, far from defeating the Romans and ushering in God's Kingdom, the Romans had defeated Jesus in a rather definitive manner - crucifixion.

And third, crucifixion was reserved only for criminals and the worst offenders.

Thus, Jesus died a shameful and scandalous death, especially considering what his followers had been hoping for during his public ministry.

Still, that never deterred Paul. Our second scripture passage that I read a few minutes ago gets at the heart of Paul's understanding of Jesus and the significance of his crucifixion.

From Paul's perspective, the cross reveals a God who so identifies with human suffering and the pain caused by humanity's own inhumanity that, in Jesus, this God takes on the power of sin and the power of death, and transforms it all into life everlasting.

Paul goes on to contend that the cross is utterly counterintuitive for humanity.

It should make no sense that anyone, let alone God, would embrace our sin, our inhumanity, and offer to redeem us in the process.

For Paul, this is the beauty and the scandal of the Gospel. As he states in Romans 5:6-8:

"For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

"Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

In Philippians, Paul asks, who can understand a God who suffers for the ungodly? And yet, who but God can redeem us?

What kind of God is our God? One who suffers utter humiliation at the hands of his own creation, only to bring life from death, and reconciliation from alienation.

For Paul, Jesus's death and resurrection are the defining parts of his life. Sure, they reveal his incredible love for the world and his obedience to God.

But, Jesus's death also frees us to have a relationship with God.

How exactly does that work according to Paul?

Basically, before Jesus, human beings had to try to get in good with God by following the laws he had given us in the Old Testament.

However, this system wasn't working out so well because there was a ton of sinning.

So, God went to Plan B: he sent Jesus, whose death freed us from having to worry about checking boxes on some holy list of things to do.

Now everyone is able to have a direct relationship with God.

And although that is true, we need to remember that for Paul, freedom from the law doesn't mean freedom to do whatever you want.

Now, instead of following the law, we need to be following Jesus. In other words, break out your WWJD (what would Jesus do) bracelets, and get ready.

Basically, Jesus first started out lowly and meek. So, Paul says, if you go against the grain and humble yourself (in society's eyes), that's how you become great (in God's eyes). It's easy to say, but not so easy to do. Right?

For Paul, this means that Christians are totally transformed by their faith in Jesus.

Now we're not supposed to be looking to society to tell us what to do. We're supposed to be looking toward Jesus as an example.

And, according to Paul, that starts and end with love!

Of course, the flip side of Jesus's death, is his resurrection. The whole thing would be pretty useless without the whole happy ending that God tacked on.

Paul believes that the resurrection of Jesus reveals the way God works in the world.

He says that Jesus "was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God" (2 Corinthians 13.4).

Translation: yeah, it might seem not-great to live your whole life as a peasant and then be abandoned, humiliated, and publicly executed for crimes against the Roman Empire, but that's just how God works.

We need to realize our normal way of thinking about things (weakness is bad, power is good) is wrong.

So what do all these things that Jesus did mean?

Well, Paul is pretty sure that the death and resurrection of Jesus have transformed the world. And anyone who believes that should be changed, too.

Christians are supposed to be living completely new lives as risen people.

It's not enough to just know that Jesus died because he loved us. You've got to participate in his death, too.

In 2 Corinthians it says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

That's why Paul doesn't say that Christians are just people who believe in Christ, they are "in Christ." This is actually one of his favorite sayings. You find it in all of his letters.

Paul says over and over again that Christians have died to their old way of life and are reborn in Christ Jesus.

For Paul, living a life "in Christ" means being radically transformed. Everything you do is now oriented towards what God and Jesus want for you.

What's the bottom line?

According to Paul: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom. 12:2)

For Paul, Jesus is the crucified and risen Messiah, whose death and resurrection break all the rules of messiahship.

For through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's self is made known to humanity.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our eyes can be opened to the amazing depth of God's mercy and to the radical inclusion of God's grace.

And that is the invitation we have this Holy Week. To be transformed by the amazing love and sacrifice of God who came to earth to live among us and die for us and be raised for us.

Again, I want you to embrace this gift by joining us for our special services on Thursday and Friday. I promise you they will make your Easter celebration all that more special.

Join us!

*Amen...*