



CENTENNIAL VOLUME

OF THE

First Presbyterian Church

OF PITTSBURGH, PA.

1784 — 1884.

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1884.

SABBATH EVENING.

Other Presbyterian Churches adjourned their services, and the people came in throngs to the old centre.

The *Commercial Gazette* of the next morning said: So great was the crowd that attended the evening service, that hundreds of people were turned away unable even to get within the doors. Pews were uncomfortably crowded. Two rows of chairs were placed in every aisle, and hundreds of people stood all evening in the passage ways and in the gallery. Two thousand people is a reasonable estimate for the size of the congregation. In the pulpit were the Rev. Messrs. Kellogg, Scovel, Paxton, Allison, Cowan and McKibbin. At 7.30 the exercises were opened by an organ voluntary. Mrs. Chas. C. Mellor sang Gounod's beautiful solo, "There is a Green Hill Far Away," and the choir rendered the anthem, "O, Saving Victim." The sermon of the evening was delivered by Rev. Wm. M. Paxton, D. D., of New York, formerly pastor of the First Church of Pittsburgh. As the well-remembered pastor advanced to the sacred desk to begin his discourse a respectful silence gathered over the auditorium. For fully a minute he stood surveying the upturned faces. The quiet deepened into impressiveness. Then, before announcing his text he said, slowly and solemnly:

DR. PAXTON'S SERMON.

This church is one hundred years old. This simple fact is significant. It shows the enduring power of God's word, and the perpetual youth of the gospel. You listen to it with as much freshness this day as when it was first uttered upon this spot one hundred years ago. Truly, "the word of the Lord endureth forever."

Under these circumstances it seems to me that the message which comes to us this night reverberating along the echoes of the century is that contained in the first chapter of First Corinthians and eighteenth verse:

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

You have doubtless often observed the different impressions which men get of an object from the different standpoints from which it is viewed. Looking at the rising moon, for example, from our position upon the northern side of the equator, the outside curve of its orb, before it is full, is towards the right. But when it is seen from a position south of the equator, the outside curve is towards the left. And yet it is the same moon.

Such are also the different aspects which moral objects present, owing to the different points of observation from which they are regarded. The Apostle presents us such a contrast in the text—the same object looking so differently and producing such opposite effects upon different classes of persons. The one object which they both contemplate is the cross of Christ as held up in the preaching of the gospel. To the one class it appears as foolishness, to the other it is the power of God; and the differ-

ence of impression indicates the different points of observation from which they form their opinions. The one sees the cross from the standpoint of a lost, perishing man, the other from the standpoint of a saved believer.

"The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness ; but to us who are saved it is the power of God."

Hence in this text we have :

I. The object presented to our view—the cross of Christ.

II. The estimate which we form of it—to some it is foolishness, to some it is the power of God.

III. The standpoint which this estimate indicates—that of the lost or the saved.

I. *The object presented to our view in the gospel—the cross.* Literally, the cross was the wooden instrument of torture and death upon which our Lord was crucified. To the Jew and the heathen it conveyed the idea of shame and infamy ; but in our minds it is associated with everything that is beautiful in virtue, attractive in benevolence, sacred in religion, and sublime in self-sacrifice. It is the token of heaven's love, the emblem of the loftiest heroism, the symbol of our faith, the sign of our Passover rescue from sin and death, and the pledge of eternal salvation. The character of Him who died upon the cross surrounds it with a halo of glory. The principles which it embodied and expressed live in the heart of the world and destine the cross to a perpetual renown. The blessings which it brings us are so precious, and its results in the world's history so great, as to embalm it in our dearest memories and encircle it with the chaplet of immortality. He who hung upon it was for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor. The cross was the stepping-stone to the throne. It converted the malefactor into the monarch, and the crown of thorns into a diadem of glory. Hence the cross has a wondrous meaning that it will take the history of all time to tell, and the sweep of all eternity to celebrate. Constantine inscribed it upon his banners, and the Roman legions followed it as the sign of victory. Art adopts it as its most sacred symbol. Science exhibits its image and superscription. Piety consecrates it as the symbol of its devotion. Taste imitates its form in gold and precious stones, and makes it the adornment of beauty and grace. Progress adopts it as the watchword of its advance. Poetry gilds with it

its highest inspirations, and in all the visions of the future it is the cross we see triumphing over the wrecks of time.

The cross, then, means the *doctrine* of the cross, the great truth which the cross embodies and expresses.

Hence it follows that the preaching of the cross is the utterance, the proclamation of this truth in the ears of men. It is not simply the telling of the story of the death of Jesus of Nazareth upon the cross, for that alone would simply be the preaching of the crucifix.

To preach the cross is to tell *who He was* who died upon it—that He was the Son of God.

It is to *explain the meaning* of His death—that it was the expression of God's great love to men.

It is to *show the purpose* of His death—that it was to make an atonement for the sins of men.

It is to *exhibit the results* of His death—that it secures pardon and reconciliation with God.

It is to make a free offer of pardon and salvation through the death of Christ to all who believe.

The preaching of the cross is then the gladdest tidings that the tongue of man ever uttered or the ears of men ever heard. It tells us that all that conscience ever foreboded in reference to our guilt is true, that we are sinners more wretched and guilty than we ever properly understood—but that God, the great God with whom we have to do, loves us. He so loved us that He could not permit us to perish in our wretchedness, nay, that He so loved us as to give His own Son to die for us, that if we would know how much He loved us we must measure God's love to His only begotten Son, and then think that He delivered Him up for us, and that will be the measure of His love to us. It tells us that this death was the expiation of our guilt, and that now He invites us with open arms to come back to His love and embrace.

Now what impression does this make upon you? *This is the preaching of the cross.* As it holds up salvation through the atoning death of Jesus Christ to the eyes of men—what estimate do you form of this preaching of the cross?

II. This is the *second point of the text.* *To some the preaching of the cross is foolishness.*

Is not this strange? If you were to carry the promise of a pardon to a condemned culprit in his cell, it would not be fool-

ishness to him. Or if you take a message of a life-boat coming to the rescue to a company of passengers despairing in the hold of a sinking vessel, it would not be foolishness to them, but the gladdest sound their ears had ever heard. Yet strange to say, the preaching of the cross, the message of God's pardon to the condemned, the tidings of God's rescue to the perishing, is heard, turned aside, and scorned as foolishness. Why is this? The key to the answer we have already suggested. The standpoint which we occupy determines the impression which we receive. If the culprit should listen to our promise of pardon in a spirit of unbelief, he would reject it as foolishness. Or if you announce the coming of a life-boat to passengers who are not aware of any danger, it will bring no joy to them. In both these cases the subjective mental state of the person determines the impression which your message will make. In the same way the estimate which each one forms of the preaching of the cross depends upon his own moral state. A man whose heart is deeply corrupt will not believe in virtue, and one whose heart is at enmity toward God will reject the gospel as folly. There is nothing in him to which this blessed truth gives answer. With this principle as our guide, we are able to particularize.

First. *The gospel is foolishness to those who look at it from the standpoint of their own wisdom.* There has always been a generation of men who have made their own reason the standard of judgment, and who prefer their own wisdom to the wisdom of God. This was the case with the Jews. In one of the following verses the Apostle tells us that the preaching of the cross was to the Jews a stumbling block, and he gives the reason. "The Jews seek after a sign." Their constant demand was, "What sign showest thou?" That is, they "demanded external, supernatural evidence as the ground of their faith." They fixed arbitrarily upon certain signs which their own wisdom dictated as the authentication of a divine messenger, and would not accept any others. They settled it in their own minds that the "Messiah was to be a glorious temporal Prince who was to deliver and exalt their nation." "Hence to present to them one who had been crucified as a malefactor as their Messiah, was the greatest possible insult." He was to them "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense."

These Jews represent a permanent class of thinkers as common in this age as in that of the Apostle. They demand, first of all, as the very condition of their listening to the gospel, a certain species of evidence which they choose and designate. If such a demand were to be insisted upon in other departments of knowledge, it would destroy the foundation of all reasoning. Science, for example, is based upon facts. The theory which explains the most facts, and is directly contradicted by none, is accepted. But suppose some one should say, I demand the explanation of causes. I will not listen to anything until you show me the exact nature of the law by which a cause produces its effects, or the reason why such and such sequences exist. This would put an end to all reasoning, because science in its most exact form is based upon intuitions which cannot be demonstrated. Why then permit the application of a principle to religion which would not be tolerated in science? And if such arbitrary reasoning would be scouted by scientists as foolishness, why permit the same unreasonable principle to reject the preaching of the cross as foolishness?

Of this same class, though somewhat different, were the Greeks. In the twenty-third verse the Apostle says that the preaching of the cross was to the Greeks foolishness, and again he gives the reason. It was because they sought after wisdom. They sought rational evidence. They would receive nothing as true which they could not understand upon the ground of human reason. They were seeking to comprehend the "first principles and elements of things." Hence nothing could be more irritating to these refined speculatists in Grecian wisdom than to be told that they must renounce their own vaunted wisdom, and become, as they considered, fools, that they might be wise.

These Greeks also are a type of a permanent class of reasoners still existing. They say, "I do not ask for signs. I put no confidence in miracles and inspiration, but I want to see the depth and mysteries of things for myself. I want to employ faculty and power in finding out truth and in forming a system which will commend itself to my reason and be constructed by the power which God has given me." Like the Greeks, they seek after wisdom. But here again is a principle which would be utterly destructive in science and philosophy. Who has ever grasped the depth and mystery of things? If we are not willing to believe until this point is reached, we shall never believe any-

thing. In chemistry, for example, we see certain combinations. These are facts: but what is the connection of these facts, why these combinations take place, is a mystery beyond the region of reason. All that the chemist knows is a backward guess from facts to principle. In astronomy the laws of Kepler express facts, but the principle of gravitation by which we strive to explain these facts, lies outside of demonstration. "We know nothing" (says a philosopher) "of that quality of matter, if their be such a quality, which enables matter to attract matter."

If, then, both science and philosophy work upon principles which lie outside the domain of demonstration—why apply to religion the principle that we cannot believe until we have grasped the depth and mystery of things? Is not this foolishness, and shall we permit folly to pronounce the preaching of the cross foolishness?

Secondly. *The preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who look at it from the standpoint of their conscious wants.* If you propose to bring a physician to a man who feels himself to be in perfect health, he treats your offer as foolishness because he has no felt need of the physician's skill. If a business man receives a letter from a friend telling him to be of good cheer, that he has plenty of means at command, and that he will not permit him to sink into bankruptcy, that man of business, aware of no financial embarrassment, will hurl the letter into the fire and laugh at his friend's foolishness. In both these cases the offer is treated as foolishness because the recipient has no felt need of such assistance.

For this same reason the preaching of the cross is often regarded as foolishness. It offers a man healing for his moral malady, but he does not feel that he is sick. It offers him help in his moral bankruptcy, but he is not aware that he owes to justice ten thousand talents and has nothing to pay. Shall then this ignorance of his, this want of a felt sense of his need, be accepted as a proper standard of judgment? Here is a young man pursuing reckless courses. You approach him tenderly and give him advice. But no, he wants no advice. He is too wise to need counsel. Shall this want of a felt consciousness of his own need be a reason for letting him alone? Nay, is not this very want the pitiable feature in the case? And is not the same thing true of the sinner? The fact that he regards the gospel as

foolishness is the pitiable feature in the case. Shall then the gospel be called foolishness because a man ignorant of his own wants esteems it so? Suppose the business man to whom I have referred to be one who is careless or afraid to investigate the question of his own solvency, and that the friend who proffered him assistance had means of knowing his business standing better than he did—should not the fact of his making such a proffer startle the man to think? Instead of treating it as foolishness, should not the fact of such an offer coming from one who had the means of knowing, be taken as a proof that such assistance was needed? In like manner when God, who knows our true moral state, sends us the gospel offer, should it not rouse men to think? If we are not perishing, why this offer of rescue? The strongest proof of our peril and ruin in sin, is that God has provided such a remedy. That business man may burn the letter containing his friend's offer of help to-day, but to-morrow he may awake to find ruin staring him in the face, and then he turns to find that the offer which he accounted as foolishness is his only hope. Just so is it that sinners are ever and anon waking up to find this preaching of the cross which they accounted foolishness is the only refuge set before them.

III. This leads us to the *third* point of our text. *There is another estimate which men form of the preaching of the cross. To them it is the power of God.*

If there is any one thing in this world which we universally recognize as the power of God, it is the lightning. But lightning neglected is God's power to smite, to scatter, to destroy. If, however, it is appropriated, accepted, and used as God's gift, it becomes our slave, to do our work, to light our streets, to heal our diseases, to write our letters, to send our messages of love and business to the ends of the earth.

In like manner the gospel is the power of God. If it is neglected, it becomes God's power to smite, to curse, to destroy; but if it is accepted and appropriated, it is the power of God to bless, to save, to glorify. "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God."

There is one way, above all others, in which the gospel is the power of God. It is the instrument which God has appointed for the salvation of men. By it He designs to effect in man that

whole moral change which is included in the salvation of the soul. To this end He promises that He will accompany its preaching with the influence of the Holy Ghost, thereby making it "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." God works by many agencies in this world, but there is no one instrument by which He has promised to work as He does by the preaching of the cross. It is the one solitary agency to which the power of God is bound by promise. It is a power because it is God's means of communicating divine influence to the souls of men. Hence the text tells us that to those "which are saved, it is the power of God." This is the estimate that they form of it. They are conscious in their experience of a power producing effects on them which nothing short of divine power can accomplish.

The power is felt in many ways.

It has a power to arrest. How many will tell you that they were wandering away from God like lost sheep, but the gospel call followed them, arrested them, and brought them back to the cross of Christ.

It has a power to awaken. The preaching of the cross finds us slumbering in carnal self-security, and awakens us like men roused out of a deep sleep, and seeing at a single glance our danger, we fly for safety.

It has a power to convict. Some men have such a low, dull, imperfect moral consciousness that they have little sense of sin. Others are filled with doubts. Their unbelief serves as a shield against conviction, but the preaching of the cross sends a sharp arrow into their conscience, or a flood of light into their minds, and then sin starts into view, guilt and condemnation hang over them, doubt and unbelief take their flight, and the gospel which they had thought foolishness becomes tidings of great joy.

So, too, this preaching of the cross has a power *to comfort, to quicken, to consecrate, to sanctify*, in a word, it is the power of God unto salvation. The believer feels this in his experience. Against nature, against sin, against temptation, against the world, it has drawn him to Christ, and wrought in him such peace, such hope, such strength, such comfort, that he knows that nothing but a divine power could effect such blessed results. Hence while others call the preaching of the cross foolishness, he says it is the power of God.

IV. This brings us to the *fourth point of the text, the standpoint which this estimate indicates*. In other words, the estimate which every one forms of the preaching of the cross determines the position in which he stands, either as a *perishing* or a *saved* soul. "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness ; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

First, those who esteem the preaching of the cross foolishness, *perish*. The word translated *perish* does not express a completed act, but one in the course of completion. It does not mean that they have perished, but that they are perishing ; the process of perishing has begun and is daily going on. The evil forces are already at work which, unless arrested by God, will inevitably bring them to eternal death. They are now beyond human help, but are still within the reach of Christ's salvation, and yet they are daily going further from it.

In common conversation we sometimes say of a man, "he is gone." When a young man has reached a point at which he will not listen to advice, regards the counsels of father and mother and friends as foolishness, you look on and say, that young man is ruined, that is, he is on the way to ruin, the forces which will end in ruin are already at work in him. Just so when a sinner reaches the point at which he esteems the preaching of the cross as foolishness, he is perishing.

Let us take another illustration. Our recent experiences of bitter cold has added interest to an account given in one of the papers of a man who was resuscitated after well nigh perishing from the cold. Riding alone in his sleigh he felt himself becoming chilled, then followed such severe pain and discomfort from the cold that he resolved to drive rapidly and stop at the first house ; but before he reached a stopping place the pain ceased and he began to feel such a warm glow that he did not think it necessary to stop. This was followed by an exhilaration of spirits, the horses seemed to go with great speed, and every object flew past him with great rapidity ; but soon he sank into drowsiness and fell in unconsciousness in the bottom of the sleigh. Now these experiences were the signs that he was in a perishing condition. He was not aware of it. The glow and the sense of comfort he took as evidence that he needed no warmth, but in fact they were symptoms and evidences that he was perishing. This is just the Apostle's

idea. When a man reaches the point of esteeming the preaching of the cross as foolishness, it is a sign of a perishing soul. He may not be aware of it. He may take it as the sign of a more healthful state of mind ; but like the warmth and drowsiness of the freezing man, it is the symptom and sign that the process of death is going on. "The preaching of the cross is to them that *perish* foolishness."

Secondly, let us cast a single glance at the other side. But to them that "are *saved* it is the power of God." That is, they who, as the result of experience, esteem the preaching of the cross as the power of God, are *saved*. The meaning is not that the work is finished, but they are being saved, the work is in the process of completion. Spiritual forces are operating in their souls which eventuate in salvation. The fact that they feel this power at work in their hearts, and that it causes them to attest that the gospel is a divine power, shows that the Holy Ghost is moving upon their souls, and we know that He who hath begun a good work in us will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

In the one case the man is turning his back to the cross and is going from it. He is perishing. In the other case the man has his face turned to the cross and is going towards it. He is being saved.

Now, my dear friends, the application of this subject needs but a word.

You see how everything depends upon the standpoint which we occupy. Our thoughts about the cross will tell us precisely the position which we hold, and to which class we belong. They who regard the cross as foolishness, or who neglect the cross, or turn away from the preaching of the cross with indifference, as if it were the utterance of empty folly, are perishing. They have the signs of death already on them.

But those who, as a matter of conscious experience, regard the preaching of the cross as the power of God, are being saved.

Where do you stand? Are you, to-day, a perishing or a saved soul?