

Romans 1:15-16. The good news is that sinners like you and me can be right with a holy God. How? By trusting in the righteous work of Jesus Christ to save us from the judgment we deserve. It's not exactly a popular message, and even the apostle Paul felt shame in sharing it.

The apostle Paul had such a passion for telling the world about the risen Lord, and he suffered for it. He was imprisoned in Philippi, forced out of Thessalonica, smuggled from Berea, mocked in Athens, scorned in Corinth, rejected in Jerusalem, stoned in Galatia, and beheaded in Rome. Paul had been beaten to the point of death more than once, flogged multiple times, even shipwrecked, and all he ever did was speak (2 Cor 11:24-27).

He gave his life of respect and prestige as a Pharisee. What did he gain? Nothing in this world (Phil 3:7). Loss after loss in this life for telling of a crucified savior. To the world, the gospel is no more than an unintelligent, politically incorrect, culturally offensive message. Let's look at this shameful message in more depth and how we should respond.

A SHAMEFUL MESSAGE

Romans 1:15-16 — "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek"

Paul said he was eager to visit Rome, because he's "not ashamed of the gospel." *Not ashamed?* It indicates many in Rome must have felt shame. As they told their friends and family members about Christ, nothing could escape the cross. It was a vile object of death, final shame, a forced submission to Rome. No faithful Jew in the first century ever would've concocted a religion with its apex being this.

Criminals were publically beaten and flogged at times. Those who received capital punishment were nailed to the wooden crossbeam often unclothed. The Romans didn't set up their crosses where no one could see but kept them as public as possible. The cross was a warning. It was meant to inflict fear in the most graphic way that no one would quickly forget.

The Romans weren't the first to use crosses. History had long sealed the horror of this device. Four-hundred years prior to the Gospels, Alexander the Great stormed across the world in conquest. Yet, he struggled to take the island city of Tyre, because he didn't have a navy. The people felt safe until Alexander ordered his army to build a bridge across the sea at all cost. In his fury for being taunted by the people, he ordered 3,000 men crucified.

Fast forward to the year of 73 B.C. A Roman gladiator named Sparticus used his military prowess to lead an army of slaves against the Roman Republic. Crassus, the Roman general, brought their string of victories came to an abrupt end. Striking down the revolt, he had more than 6,000 of the men crucified and left their bodies on display.

"THIS VERY WORD 'CROSS' SHOULD BE REMOVED NOT ONLY FROM THE PERSON OF A ROMAN CITIZEN, BUT FROM HIS THOUGHTS, HIS EYES, HIS EARS"

~ MARCUS CICERO (106-43 BC).

Men hung on crosses long before the Geneva Convention was ever conceived. Humanitarian laws regarding enemies or prisoners didn't exist. Sadly, one of history's worst atrocities came against the Jewish people in AD 69. The Jews had revolted against Emperor Vespasian, and his general, Titus, besieged Jerusalem in response. When he finally broke through, Titus razed the city. Rome crucified so many Jews it's been said there was hardly enough wood for all the bodies or space for all the crosses.

Honorable men weren't the kind who received a cross. Enemies of the State and conquered peoples were linked with this punishment. Traitors, notorious thieves, murderers, assassins—these were the kinds of people who died on a cross.

Good men didn't die like this, certainly not the incarnate God. It is supremely ironic that this instrument of death would become the divine means of redeeming life.

A Politically Incorrect Gospel

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” — 1 Corinthians 1:22-23.

The idea that messiah came and then died was absurd to the Jewish mind. Faithful Jews thought a wonder-working messiah would come, someone a bit like Moses or Elijah. Manna and quail fed the people daily for 40 years, and fire fell from Heaven during Elijah’s ministry. *Imagine what messiah can do!* Though Jesus did many signs and wonders, His own people didn’t like His message and said His power must have come from the devil (Lk 11:15; John 8:47).

Worse than anything Jesus said—He was crucified. If you were sharing the gospel with a first-century Jewish man, the cross would have been the major sticking point. *You mean to say that our God died on a Gentile cross?* Not only this, but Deuteronomy 21:23 says that any who hang on a tree are cursed by God. *And you expect me to believe that God cursed God?* Christianity was received as a blasphemous message, highly offensive to a faithful Jew.

JEWES WANTED A MIRACULOUS CHRIST AND GREEKS WANTED A PHILOSOPHICAL CHRIST. PAUL PREACHED A CRUCIFIED CHRIST.

The Greeks had different reasons for rejecting Jesus. They loved deep insights, high and lofty thoughts, grand arguments plumbing the depths of philosophy. They were into complexities and chains of reasoning, nothing so simple, lowly, or humble as Jesus. Jesus wasn’t a thought-provoking kind of savior... *and He was crucified.*

It’s hard to overstate the contempt that Christians experienced for worshipping Jesus Christ as God. During the reign of Nero, they felt what Peter called a “fiery trial” (1 Pet 4:12). Believers were rounded up by the State and thrown to wild beasts as entertainment. This would continue on and off for the next 300 years.

It was thought that Christianity was something for the uneducated fool. Many ideas existed about the nature of God, but no one ever suggested that God became a man or that He died upon a cross.

How offensive it was to be told that a crucified king is the only means of being made right with God. In fact, the philosopher Celsus laughed saying, “Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible... if any is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool, let him come boldly [to Christianity].”

PAUL, EAGER TO EVANGELIZE

In light of this background, imagine one day hearing the apostle Paul ... and all he keeps talking about is a man who hung upon a cross! *Has he lost his mind?!* Yet, the apostle said to the church in Rome, “I’m not ashamed.” *I’m not ashamed of the cross.*

How was it even possible not to be ashamed? Paul was bold because he believed the power of God lies in this message (Rom 1:16). As opposed to any other belief system, the good news of the risen Lord actually does something. It transforms sinners into saints (Eph 2:1-10), making them right with God and giving them a new desire to please Him.

Ephesians 2:8-9 — “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Paul’s boldness came from understanding that the gospel message is powerful. It would be like a researcher who discovered the cure for cancer. Rather than cower in fear, he or she would boldly tell the world what’s been discovered. And why? Because the cure can do something quite powerful. Paul knew that in this shameful message about Christ is the cure for sin and death.

Though we live in a different time, the message of the gospel is still offensive. Who wants to hear that his best deeds still aren’t good enough before God (Isa 64:6)? Who would like to be told that he’s a sinner who’s offended a holy God and hasn’t any hope of making things right on his own? There’s nothing easy about telling people these things, especially if you love them.

Though shameful in the eyes of the world, praise God the gospel message is powerful. If it’s transformed your life, you know the kind of power it contains. Reflect on this, be bold, and tell others.