

TO FOLLOW THE LIGHT — THREE IMAGES OF JESUS

Images of Jesus: Savior

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:4

May 3, 2026

We are tired of performing. We are exhausted by the effort of holding it all together. You know what I mean. The curated profile. The highlight reel that never ends. The face you put on at work, at school, at church to avoid the messiness that lies behind the mask. The three in the morning whisper: *if only you would work harder... If only you would plan better... If only you would hold on a little tighter, you could manage it all.*

We are exhausted because we are white knuckling our way through life.

How are you? Oh, I'm fine. I'm busy, but I'm good.

The church in Corinth was fractured. Debates over who had the most impressive teacher, the most sophisticated theology, the most spiritual credibility. Some claimed Paul. Some Apollos. Some Cephas or Peter. Pick your camp. Pledge your allegiance. Parade your loyalty. Status competition dressed up in religious language was tearing them apart. Everyone clinging to their own saviors. And Paul is determined to demolish them all. *We proclaim Christ crucified.*

To the sophisticated Ancient Greeks in Corinth, it was foolishness. Who worships a God who suffers? A Messiah who loses? Absolutely absurd. To those who were waiting for the God who would come in might and in glory, it was a scandal. A crucified God cannot be God—unless everything we assumed about God was all wrong.

Paul will not soften the edges of his offense. The foolishness of God is wiser than your human wisdom. The weakness of God is stronger than your human strength. If Jesus Christ is your Savior, every other candidate for the role will fall far short. Not the media that tells you what you want to hear. Not the leader who claims God's blessing on conquest. Not the platform

built to confirm your instincts. Not the version of Jesus you have optimized to be useful, or palatable, or safe. *Only Christ crucified.*

Paul insists the Corinthians stop clinging to their wisdom. Stop clinging to their strength. Stop clinging to the self they've built to prove that they're worthy. And instead, cling to the cross.

Which means that the cross is either the truth about the world, or it is a decorative distraction. A piece of jewelry. A logo for a religion that has moved on to more practical measures. This ancient tool of Roman crucifixion—this electric chair of the Roman world—is either the way of salvation, or we are wasting our time and our lives.

Because if the cross is just another prop for our agenda or perhaps a tragic turn in the life of an otherwise inspiring teacher, then Christianity is a naive ethical program with a sentimental attachment to a first-century victim of state violence. But nothing more than that.

But if the cross is the word of God, if this is how God saves, if this is who God is, if this is what God looks like, then the cross is not just one truth among many. It is the ground beneath all truth. It is the truth that rearranges every other truth. The truth that changes our lives and our world.

It changes our script too. You know the one. The script you were handed, the one you're passing on. The one that says you earn your meaning, your worth. That it is your responsibility to build your significance. That you can save yourself. The cross says, "You are never going to save yourself because you were never supposed to."

The cross is not the triumph of the strong. It is the power of God.

And so, like people of every generation, we cling to more convenient gospels. We prefer a God who rewards our hustle, secures our future, justifies our side. We want faith that feels a little bit like an investment strategy. We want to be a people chosen and armed by heaven. We want a Jesus who lines up with our politics and blesses our enemies list. But the gospel says your worth is not your productivity or your possessions or your perspective. Your security is not your savings account. Your righteousness does not come from being right.

Paul was writing to a church that had made precisely this mistake. You see, like us, the Corinthians were not godless people. They were religious people who had conscripted God for their own purposes—their wisdom, their status, their camp, their team. Two thousand years later, the Baptist theologian Russell Moore has a name for this impulse. He calls it means-to-an-end cultural Christianity. The end is power. The cross is still there. It's hanging on the wall. It's on the necklace. It's on the tattoo. The bumper sticker. But the meaning has evaporated. The scandal has receded. The cross is nothing more than a cipher for our ego. A Jesus conscripted for the cause. A cross that costs nothing. A gospel that leaves us exactly as we want to be.

Listen to this: you can say the name of Jesus and still be clinging to Caesar. Perhaps the problem was never that our leaders can't tell the difference between themselves and Jesus. It's that too many of *us* can't.

Paul, writing to these sophisticated Corinthians, these faithful Christians, is insistent. *I refuse to play that game. I have a one-track mind. Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*

The crucified Christ cannot be controlled. Only that Christ is worthy of your worship.

Ben Sasse is dying. He was diagnosed in December with stage four pancreatic cancer. He was given four to five months to live, which means he is in that window now. The cancer is inoperable. Already metastasized all over his body.

Ben Sasse spent his entire adult life holding things together. He was a senator from the state of Nebraska.

A university president. Success and power. He was good at it. Dying does not flatten the reality of a person, but suffering certainly strips away the performance.

Cancer has called him back to the limits of his humanity, and he has chosen to die publicly, to share his journey and express his faith. He's doing that for his three kids and for anyone else willing to listen. In a recent interview, he quoted Tim Keller who died of the same disease and said, "I hate pancreatic cancer. I would never wish it on anyone. But I would never want to go back to a time in my life when I didn't know the prayer of pancreatic cancer."

Reflecting on that prayer, Sasse speaks to the power of the Gospel, saying, "My soul thinks Ben should be God, and I want that to die. Cancer sucks. But I'm pretty grateful that cancer is a stake against my delusional self-idolatry. I don't feel ready to die. But to whom would I go?"

When the diagnosis comes, the plan collapses. When you finally run out of ways to hold it all together, when the performance is over and there is only what is true, what remains? *Christ, and him crucified.*

Paul plants his flag in the most offensive moment, the moment when all the world could only see failure. The moment of deepest weakness, and Paul says that moment is the moment of salvation.

Eight years ago this month, I came to be your pastor. Like Paul, I came in weakness and in fear and in trembling and feet far too small for the shoes I was filling. In eight years, I've learned a lot about you. Some of you arrive a little late. Some of you get grumpy about scooting over. You have complicated and firmly held opinions about applause in worship, except for the prayer clap with the children, which is beyond dispute.

Coffee cups in the pews? A subject on which reasonable people disagree. I could go on and on and on. The printed words for the Doxology are only a suggestion for you people. And the announcements at the beginning of worship are always too long, unless I leave out the thing you wanted me to announce. Then they're a little too short.

In other words, you are exactly like every other church in the history of church. You are human. You are quirky. You are occasionally obstinate. And you are so deeply loved.

Eight years is long enough to know what you're made of. I have sat with you in hospital waiting rooms and stood with you at gravesides. I have watched you show up for people when it was inconvenient for you. I've watched you ask hard questions and not be satisfied with easy answers. I've watched you open your hearts and your minds and your hands in ways you may have thought were not possible. I have seen your courage. I have heard it in your voice. I have watched you give in ways that you will never mention and will forbid me from mentioning. I have watched you love God. I have watched you love each other. I have watched you love this city.

In the spring of 2020, when the world shut down and our doors closed, I had been here a little over eighteen months. I felt lost in the chaos, and so I did what comes most naturally for me. I tried to put it all on my shoulders as if I could carry you. I planned and organized and pressed and clenched. I barely slept for weeks. I ran myself into the ground. I frayed the closest relationships in my life. And all I produced was exhaustion and anxiety.

Like many pastors across the country in those days, I considered walking away. I never told you that. I did not need a better strategy for holding on; what I needed was to be held. In my moment of undeniable weakness, what I needed was a Savior. *Jesus Christ, and him crucified.* The weakest moment is the moment of salvation.

Paul says that God chose the foolish things of the world. Not the impressive. Not the powerful. Not the ones who have it all together. The ones who know they need a Savior. Whatever you have built, whatever you have earned, whatever you have held with human strength, it will never be enough because it was never what defined you. And the community of faith that trusts this truth to its core is dangerous.

Here's why. It does not fear the world's rejection. It is unashamed and unshaken. It is dangerous because

it cannot be frightened into silence, or flattered into complicity. It cannot be bought off with comfort, or status, or power. It is dangerous because it stopped clinging to everything the world told us to hold and clung to a crucified Lord instead. And found him alive.

David Foster Wallace once wrote that everything he ever let go of had claw marks in it. Me too. The thing you are trying to hold together. The version of yourself you are working so hard to maintain. The grief you are managing all by yourself. The performance you have to keep up day after day, week on week. The three in the morning whisper that has not let you rest. What if you could set it all down at the foot of the cross—your fear and your failure—and open your hands?

My friends, whatever anyone else might say, the Gospel is not the triumph of the brutal. It is not the victory of the vicious. It is not the conquest of the cruel. God wins by giving everything away.

So stop clinging to the things that will not save you. Cling to the cross. You are not defined by what you could never hold. You are held. You always have been. Amen.