

### III. The Folly of Worldly Wisdom

October 2/4, 2012

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

**Aim:** To boast in the Lord, because His wisdom and power, while foolishness to fallen man, are the only means of salvation to those who believe.

This passage is a contrast between the foolishness of men, which they think is wisdom, and the wisdom of God, which they think is foolishness. It is a contrast between God's true wisdom and man's supposed wisdom, between God's supposed foolishness and man's true foolishness.

The ancient Greeks were in love with philosophy, around which their culture was built. They had perhaps as many as fifty identifiable philosophical parties or movements, which vied for acceptance and influence. The Greeks were in love with human wisdom. They believed that philosophy (*philosophia*, 'love of wisdom') was all-important. Philosophy provided a view, invented by man, of the meaning of life, values, relationships, purpose, and destiny. Thus there were as many philosophies as there were philosophers, and people tended to line up behind their favorite. Without an absolute standard for truth, ideas of right and wrong were based entirely on human opinion.

Unfortunately many of the Corinthian converts carried their spirit of philosophical factionalism into the church. Some of them still held onto beliefs of their former pagan philosophy. They were divided not only regarding Christian leaders (1:12) but also regarding philosophical viewpoints. They could not get over their love of human wisdom. At the time Corinth was the greatest of the cities of Greece, so it comes as no surprise that the members of the church there might be interested in Greece's most characteristic intellectual pursuit, 'wisdom.' As used by Paul, 'wisdom' may mean more than an intellectual pursuit. More broadly, that one word may capture what we call a 'world view.' In that world view, 'man' is at the center and God is at the margin.

The grim reality which so grieved Paul was that Christians of the city had carried over into the church the same mentality and spirit that swirled around them. They were clustering around various preachers of the gospel and debating their respective merits and deficiencies as though these men were nothing more than rival heads of various schools of philosophy. They had failed to see that they had been placed in an entirely new and different realm.

Society in our own day still is enamored of various philosophies. The world today, just as in Paul's day, is caught up in the admiration and worship of human opinion, human wisdom, and human desires and aspirations. Although human ideas are constantly changing, appearing and disappearing, being tried and found wanting, conflicting with and contradiction each other, men continue to put faith in them. As long as they reject divine authority, they have no other option.

Paul had begun to attack the problem of worldly philosophy earlier in the chapter. Paul came to preach God's Word, not men's words. In 1:17, Paul contrasted a worldly 'wisdom of *logos*' (i.e., speech/word) with the cross of Christ as proclaimed by him. From 1:18 through the end of chapter 3, he continues to show the superiority of the latter with the former. In our passage for this lesson, the dissimilarity is expounded, the apostle conceding that his teaching gives the impression of being weak and foolish, both in content and in presentation, appropriate for Corinthian believers who stem from the lower strata of society. Outwardly, his mission appears to be a folly: obscure people of little account latch on to a weird story told by Paul, a wandering

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foreigner – a Jew – about an unfortunate fellow-countryman who had suffered His just deserts by being crucified. Yet Paul claims he has no regrets: the Lord planned it this way so that believers might have nothing for which to be glad, apart from the grace of God (1:31). Foolishness is wisdom; weakness, strength. Values are reversed because God's ways are not men's. He therefore urges the Corinthians to reconsider the apostolic Christ, even if in so doing they discover that they have to repudiate traditional values.

### A. The Word of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18-25)

Paul points out that God's scale of values is opposite to man's scale of values. Two words that keep appearing in this passage are 'weakness' and 'foolishness' and their opposites 'power' and 'wisdom.' Essentially Paul poses this question: 'If human wisdom is so great, why couldn't it save you?' His conclusion is obvious: if they were not saved by human wisdom, why should they now be putting so much stock in it and carrying it over into the life of the church? The Corinthians were supposed to be in agreement about the cross; therefore there was no basis for their being divided on anything else. The true division was between them and the world. Ironically, they were acting as if they had more in common with the world and its philosophical reasoning than they had with each other.

#### 1. Worldly Wisdom Is Foolishness (1:18-21)

##### a) *Worldly Wisdom Cannot Save (1:18)*

<sup>18</sup>*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

'For' indicates that the theme introduced by 1:17 is being expanded. Paul begins by drawing a contrast between the 'word of wisdom' (verse 17) and the 'word of the cross' (verse 18). Those who put their mind to Paul's message divide into two groups: those who 'are perishing' and those who 'are being saved.' The cross brings to light the irreconcilable gap between believers and the surrounding world. The 'word of the cross' is 'foolishness' (*moria*, from which we get 'moron'). It is moronic, absolute nonsense, to unbelievers who rely on their own wisdom—'to those who are perishing.' That phrase is a graphic description of Christ rejecters, who are in the process of being destroyed to eternal judgment. They are perishing, because they are blatantly rejecting the only means of salvation that is available to lost human beings.

Take note of how Paul characterizes the unbeliever. He is 'perishing.' That is a present participle; the unbeliever is even now in the process of perishing. With this word 'perishing,' we already have in hand proof of the inadequacy of human wisdom. Man's first problem is that he is utterly blind to his own condition. Those who are 'perishing' in this age will 'perish' absolutely and eternally in the coming age, and those who are 'being saved' in this age will be 'saved' absolutely and eternally in that age.

'Word' is from the same Greek term (*logos*) as 'speech' in verse 17. Paul is contrasting man's word, which reflects man's wisdom, and God's Word, which reflects God's wisdom. Consequently, the 'word of the cross' includes the entire gospel message. When Paul first came to Corinth he continued to face the maelstrom of philosophies with which he had contended in Athens (Acts 17:18-21). But he had 'determined to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). The response of some in Corinth was the same as that of some in Athens: they sneered (Acts 17:32). But Paul did not change his message to suit his

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hearers. The Corinthians, like the Athenians and most other Greeks, had more than enough philosophy; they did not need Paul's opinion added to their own. Instead, Paul gave them nothing but God's profoundly simple, but historical and objective truth.

It is sometimes hard for us to realize just how offensive the cross was within first-century culture. Such a shameful and barbaric form of death was suitable only for the lowest strata of humanity, so that any association with a victim of crucifixion was socially unacceptable. To suggest that such a reject could be a divine person was absurd, and to attempt to found a new religion based on such a belief was utter foolishness. Who could possibly worship a god who becomes man and dies that sort of death on a cross?

The apostolic explanation of Calvary has become nothing less than 'the power of God.' The discerning saint knows that his life has been transformed both by what Christ did for him at Calvary and by what the Lord has effected within him by the Spirit. The problem at Corinth is that not all give evidence of such discernment.

A double contrast begins to play around the meaning of the cross. On the one side there is the rejection of the message as folly and weakness, while on the other hand, that same message, when it is understood and received, is proved to be the wisdom and power of God. Clearly these were key issues, current buzz-words, in the Corinthian congregation, and Paul now takes some time to work through the complexities of the issue raised in verse 18.

### *b) Worldly Wisdom Cannot Last (1:19-20)*

#### (1) Paul Quotes the Old Testament (1:19)

<sup>19</sup>*For it is written,*

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

Paul quotes from the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 29:14 to emphasize that the wisdom of men will be destroyed. However, the 'I shall hide' (*krypsō*) of the Septuagint is replaced by the apostle with the more vivid 'I shall set aside' or 'I shall thwart' (*athetēsō*).

When Isaiah made the prophecy, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, was planning to conquer Judah. The Lord told His prophet not to worry or fear, because the king's plan would fail. But it would not fail because of the strength of Judah's army or because of the strategy of King Hezekiah or his advisors. Judah would be saved solely by God's power, with no human help (see Is. 37:36; 2 Kgs. 17).

The prophet Isaiah denounces the leaders in Jerusalem, claiming that they repeat errors committed during an earlier crisis. In the time of Ahaz, the house of David obtained Assyrian military help when attacked by a Syrian-Edomite-Philistine coalition. Because they did not turn to Yahweh for help, they brought distress upon themselves. Now, when threatened by Assyria, Jerusalem seeks Egyptian assistance. Isaiah insists that because this policy is folly, it must lead to disaster. Although they honored God with their lips, their declarations were empty words and their worship came not from the heart, but was merely an adherence to a set of rules that others had drawn up (Is. 29:13). They were totally committed to this world and its wisdom. God therefore announced that He must punish this worldliness by depriving them of the wisdom and intelligence they thought they had and bringing them into a situation of chaos, with which they

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would be unable to cope. Yet the self-ruination of Judah will induce some to turn to God because they know that the Egyptians cannot ward off the Assyrians.

Paul universalizes the principle: nothing in this world can deliver men from sin and bring them true peace; their every effort must be thrown down by the Lord because they refuse to look to Him.

Some erroneously assume that Paul's quote of Isaiah 29:14 is a declaration of war by God on all human intelligence, opening the way for the dismissal of education and reason, and elevating ignorance and irrationality. A moment's thought will show that this cannot be so, because the very intelligence which marks out humankind from the beast is itself a gift from God. It reflects His own nature and is made in His own image. We are not to suppose that the gospel extinguishes human intelligence and will lead to a retreat to a new Dark Age. Biblically instructed Christians have never retreated from the created order, but have reveled in thinking God's thoughts after Him and discovering the amazing properties of this world, provided by its Creator.

### (2) Paul Asks Rhetorical Questions (1:20)

<sup>20</sup>*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

This verse specifically teaches that human wisdom not only is unreliable but impermanent. To continue that thought, Paul asks several questions, really one question in three parts. In slightly different form they each ask, 'Where are all the smart people that have the answers?' Rhetorical questions introduce more allusions to the Old Testament, probably to Isaiah 19:11-12 and 33:18-19 (and possibly to Isaiah 44:25-26 and Job 12:17-18) in order to demonstrate the folly of human wisdom.

For Paul, the world's wisdom is personified by the typical 'wise man,' by the 'scribe' (*grammateus*), and by the 'debater.' In Isaiah 19:12, the prophet refers to the wise men of Egypt—the soothsayers, mediums, and wizards—who always promised but never produced good counsel. The 'scribe' probably referred to the Assyrians, who sent scribes along with their soldiers to record the booty taken in battle. But God would see to it that they had nothing to record, nothing to count, or nothing to weigh (Is. 33:18). 'Debater' (*syzētētēs*) was a very Greek word and referred to arguing about philosophy, of which the Greeks were so fond. The 'debater' would be a non-serious enquirer, albeit one with some sort of philosophical bent. Had these wisest of men been able to produce anything to rival the peace, joy, and hope of those who cling to the cross? Paul knew they had not and could not.

Paul uses virtually synonymous terms to describe human wisdom apart from revelation: 'the debater of this age' and 'the wisdom of the world.' Human wisdom is rooted in this 'age' (*aeon*) and in this world of time and sense. Paul's use of the term *aeon* implies that the material world is but a passing show, and its wisdom will pass with it. The two 'words' (of wisdom and of the cross) actually lead to two 'worlds' – two totally opposite views of reality.

The Corinthians are expected to reply in the affirmative to the first three questions, agreeing that the wise man, scribe, and debater pass into oblivion. But why are they being overthrown? The fourth question addresses the why. For Paul, the tragedy of Hellenic culture was that it had ignored the one God in favor of idolatry (cp. Acts 17:23). This being so, the Corinthians are mistaken if they downgrade apostolic preaching: traditional wisdom never brought them to God.

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Human wisdom sometimes sees the immediate cause of a problem but it does not see the root, which is always sin. It may see that selfishness is a cause of injustice, but it has no way to remove selfishness. It may see that hatred causes misery and pain and destruction, but does not see that the real cause is that man does not get along with God. Human wisdom *cannot* see because it *will not* see. As long as it looks on God's wisdom as foolishness, its own wisdom will be foolish. In other words, human wisdom itself is a basic part of the problem.

### *c) Worldly Wisdom Cannot Know God (1:21)*

<sup>21</sup>*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.*

God wisely established that man could not come to know Him by the wisdom of the world. Man cannot solve his problems because he will not recognize their source, which is sin, or their solution, which is salvation. Man's own sinful nature is the cause of his problems, and he cannot change his nature. Even if human wisdom could recognize the problem it does not have the power to change it. But God has the power.

The folly of human wisdom is that it thinks that it can come to right judgments about God by its own unaided intellect, with no need of revelation. But God's wisdom, which controls the whole world, has seen to it that human beings can never find their own way to Him. The moment finite human wisdom thinks it has comprehended God, then that 'God' has ceased to be infinite, and therefore ceased to be God. Worldly wisdom will never be able to explain the world, let alone the nature of God and the world to come. If ever we are to know anything about the infinite Creator it must be by His self-revelation, and that is precisely Paul's point in verse 21. Notice how the whole focus changes, from knowing to believing and from wisdom to salvation. Foolish it may appear to human, man-centered wisdom, but because it is God's wisdom, the gospel of Christ crucified is the only power to save.

Paul explains how it is that the apparent folly of his ministry has achieved what is beyond the reach of the world. Whereas the world has resolved not to know God, God has activated an apparently foolish scheme which saves all who believe ('are believing,' *pisteuontas*). The present tense of 'believe' indicates that there *are* those who accept the content of Paul's preaching, and that only those who persevere in their faith can be saved.

The phrase 'message preached' is one word in the Greek (*kērugmatos*) and can also be translated 'proclamation.' It does not refer to the act of declaring a message but to the content of the message. The content of God's message is the gospel. Paul is not talking about foolish preaching, of which there has always been more than enough. He is talking about the preaching of that which is foolish in the world's eyes—the simple, unadorned, uncomplicated truth of the cross of Jesus Christ that allows no place for man's wisdom or man's work or man's glory. The wisdom and work and glory are all God's. But the blessing they give can be man's.

Is Paul attacking 'wisdom' or the mind, *per se*? By no means! Paul frequently urges his readers to think, and his own letters are argued with a lawyer's logic. Paul is not against 'wisdom,' since this is God's gift to understand His world and its workings. A whole body of literature in the Bible is 'wisdom' literature. Rather, Paul is opposed to 'the wisdom of the world,' that is, of this fallen and corrupt age, as it applies to just one subject, man's attempt to find God by that 'wisdom.'

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In sum, the apostle shows that his gospel, his *modus operandi*, and those who believe all challenge the world and its false values – and that the Lord has planned it this way for three reasons. Not only had it been His intention that His word should never resemble any of the traditions esteemed by men, it had also been decreed that the gospel should expose the false values of the world for what they are: unable to save, sanctify, or satisfy. Thirdly, the message of the cross is designed to lead God’s people to trust Christ and experience the power of the Lord in their own lives.

### 2. Godly ‘Foolishness’ Is Wisdom (1:22-25)

#### a) *God’s Wisdom as Viewed by the World (1:22-23)*

<sup>22</sup>*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,* <sup>23</sup>*but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...*

Three constituencies are mentioned: ‘we,’ that is, Paul and his colleagues, ‘Jews,’ and ‘the nations’ (*ethnesin*; cp. ‘ethnic’), equivalent to the ‘Greeks.’ The Jews and the Greeks are representative of all unbelieving mankind. Whether, like the typical Jew, they demand proof by a supernatural sign or, like the typical Greek, they want proof by natural wisdom, unbelievers will find an excuse for rejecting the gospel.

One would think, given man’s catastrophic condition, that the good news of the cross would receive a warm reception. But such wasn’t the case in Paul’s day, nor is it in ours. The message of the cross was greeted with scorn and derision by both segments of Paul’s world – Jews and Greeks.

Most of the Jews of Jesus’ and Paul’s day could not accept the ideal of a crucified Messiah. That was a ‘stumbling block’ to them (cp. Rom. 9:31-33). To them He was to come in earthly power and splendor and establish an earthly throne and kingdom. Their history was replete with God performing mighty acts and various signs, and they expected their Messiah to deal in these same things. They constantly demanded that Jesus show them a sign (Mt. 12:38; Mk. 8:11; Jn. 6:30). For Jews their Messiah was to be *powerful*, a victor, splattered with blood, perhaps, but with the blood of enemies He had vanquished. To contemplate a Messiah who was *powerless*, bloodied with His own blood, humiliated as He hung naked impaled on a stake by the hated Romans, was a ‘stumbling block’ (*skandalon*) to Jews, something utterly unthinkable, a massive barrier to belief.

Such clear messianic teachings as those found in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 were either explained away or ignored. Scripture that did not conform to their preconceived notions was simply reinterpreted or sidestepped. They had their own view of how it should work and so, by imposing their conditions on God, they effectively blinded themselves to Christ when He came to them.

‘Scandal’ means something that, when confronted, induces horror and causes harm. Although it is not necessarily wrong for the Jews of Paul’s time to seek signs, their problem was they usually thought that God should operate in the same way as He had done at the Exodus. What they neither expected nor desired was the ‘sign’ of a crucified and then resurrected Messiah. For the Jews, the proclamation of a crucified and allegedly resurrected Messiah was deemed a blasphemy (Acts 13:45; 18:6; cp. Gal. 3:13; Dt. 21:23). This is how the cross first appeared to Paul, but look how God had turned his life around!

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Greeks cherished the tradition of Socrates of the philosopher king, a ruler who was wise, one who was loftily above human passions and pain. Paul's announcement that God's king, who made claims on their loyalties, had been crucified, was *moria*, 'foolishness.' How could a man branded throughout the empire as the lowest of criminal be the Savior of the world?

The Greeks wanted intellectual proof, something they could mull over and figure out with their own minds. They too were insincere. As Paul had discovered in Athens, the Greek philosophers there were not interested in discovering truth, especially not truth about God. They were interested only in hearing and arguing about exciting new ideas and problems (Acts 17:21). If a new idea was put across with all the logic and rhetorical skills that constituted the epitome of a liberal education, it was worthy of consideration, but if it was not witty, clever and sophisticated then it was nothing. The wisdom they sought was not divine and eternal wisdom, but human and temporary wisdom. The wisdom they sought, as illustrated by the Athenian philosophers, was not divine truth but intellectual novelty.

Greeks generally believed that all matter was evil and that everything spiritual was good. It was therefore inconceivable to them that a god *could* come to earth as a man. It was even more inconceivable that he would *want to*. The idea of the incarnation, not to mention the crucifixion, was utter folly to Greek thinking.

The cross of Christ was in Paul's time a stumbling-block to the religious Jew and a laughing-stock to the rational Greeks, and it is no less offensive and ludicrous to unbelievers today. The descendants of these Jews and Gentiles are still with us, in that so many of our contemporaries reject the Christian message for identical reasons – lack of material evidences or lack of intellectual acceptability. The spiritual marketplace is still very open to miraculous signs and esoteric wisdom and still very closed to a message two millennia old about a crucified Savior. There is so much on offer that seems so much more impressive than the cross, that Christians are constantly tempted to adapt the message to the demands of the culture. In an entertainment culture, Christians can easily start to imagine that if it isn't fun, it won't communicate. This certainly seems to lie at the root of much contemporary Christian youth work, which is strong on excitement and bereft of gospel content. When we are led by culture's demands, we shall quickly become Corinthian.

Contemporary methods, though seemingly exciting, in reality focus the church not on its ministry of proclamation of what God has done in the cross of Christ, but on a ministry of performance. The presentation can be highly professional, clearly attractive, and superbly entertaining, but if it is not the 'word of the cross,' no one will be saved. It will simply be this world's wisdom in a suit of 'Christian' clothing.

### *b) God's Wisdom as Viewed by the Called (1:24-25)*

<sup>24</sup>...but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Everything depends on the content of the message, not on the methods of the messenger. For the content of the message determines whether or not God will own it and use it to call men and women, Jews and Greeks, to believe and be saved. Once again, Paul has shifted the whole argument. The world wants to know; but God wants to save. We are not therefore discussing power encounters or philosophical theory, but witnessing God on a rescue mission.

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Some, both Jews and Greeks, stand apart, attracted to Christ by the message of the gospel and by the internal operation of the Holy Spirit. They recognized that the Lord is powerful because by Him their lives have been transformed – as will be made explicit in 1:30. Christ has become the same Savior for all believers, whether Jews or Greeks.

The cross is ‘the power of God’ to the believer because it is the source of his transformation which results in a new nature (cp. 2 Cor. 5:17). The cross is also to the believer the wisdom of God. Because God is holy, He could not ignore sin. His nature required Him to judge it. But because God is also gracious, He desired to find a way of forgiveness for sinners. How could God judge sin and forgive the sinner? The cross of Christ is the answer. On the cross, God judged the sins of all who believe in His Son, Jesus. There is, therefore, no penalty left for those who believe. It has already been paid by Jesus Christ.

How does God ‘call’ His people? There are two steps in Paul’s sequence of thought. First, there is the preaching of ‘the word of the cross.’ In consequence, second, the hearers, when they believe this word, are saved for the coming age. Thus the ‘called ones’ are those summoned by God to His kingdom, by the preaching of Christ crucified.

In mentioning God’s foolishness and weakness the apostle is, of course, speaking from the unbeliever’s point of view. As the world sees things, God acted ineffectively when He sent Christ. Jews would want to know why their God could not have done something truly impressive, like clearing the Romans out of their land (cp. Acts 1:4-6). For his part, Paul has seen that this weak, insipid thing, the good news of Jesus, is always ‘stronger than men.’ Ironically and tragically, the very part of God’s plan and work that seems most ridiculous and useless from man’s natural standpoint actually exhibits His *greatest* power and *greatest* wisdom.

To the unbeliever, then and now, there *is* a folly about the gospel, and this must never surprise or unnerve us. The paradoxes of God’s self-revelation in Christ are profound; they can even appear unbelievable on first hearing. The more the Corinthians hankered for human wisdom and power in the life of the church, the more they displayed their capitulation to the cultural norms of their city. This is the ‘worldliness’ that Paul will expose in chapter 3. Eventually it kills the life of a church, because its values belong to the world that is in rebellion against God’s right to rule.

### **B. The Choosing of God (1 Cor. 1:26-31)**

When God started putting the church together at Corinth, He called not the elite of society, but the very dregs. Since they had never belonged to the elite group, one would not expect these dregs of society to feel any particular attachment to an elitist lifestyle. Irony of ironies – these Christians were actually seeking to reproduce in the church the characteristics of the elite of their society. Paul, therefore, found it necessary to remind them that their salvation was not due to human wisdom, so they should not be promoting and glorifying such wisdom in the church.

#### **1. What Not to Boast In (1:26-29)**

##### *a) The Corinthians’ Calling (1:26)*

<sup>26</sup>*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.*

Picking up the categories of ‘wisdom’ and ‘power’ from the previous section he asks them to take note of their ‘calling.’ Hypothetically, had the church contained as a majority group those

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esteemed by the world as great and wise, the thesis of the previous section would disintegrate, the perception being that heaven had accommodated to their status. This is why the Corinthians are counseled to look at themselves. Paul always uses the term ‘calling’ to refer to the saving call of God, the effectual call that results in redemption (cp. v. 24).

The ‘wise’ refers not only to those who were highly cultured and learned, but to those who took great pride in their culture and learning. The ‘mighty’ refers to those who possess power and authority and who wielded a great deal of influence in society. The ‘noble’ refers to those who enjoyed high social standing by virtue of their birth. The Christians in Corinth, with only a few exceptions, were not wise, mighty, or noble. They were very ordinary people. They were, in Paul’s words, foolish, weak, and base. They had no position, no power, and no pedigree. It was quite absurd, in view of their low social standing, for these Corinthian Christians to have become so infatuated with human wisdom. What was true in Corinth has remained true down through the ages.

Looking around the congregation seems to have been a pretty depressing experience for many of the Christians at Corinth. How would they ever be able to influence such a contemporary, sophisticated city as theirs with such an unimpressive group of believers? Where were the movers and the shakers, the people with flair and power? Not, apparently, in the church. The large majority of the Christian community would not be admired, or even known, in Corinthian society, and this is regarded as a great defect. In other words, the predominantly ordinary and undistinguished character of the church’s membership was exactly in line with the ‘foolishness’ and ‘weakness’ of the message of Christ crucified, the ‘word of the cross’ by which they had become its members. The inference seems to have been that this was due to the message Paul preached and to his own performance as the messenger (see 2:1-5). His message was ‘weak’ since it centered on that shameful compared to the traveling philosophers and public orators Corinth was used to. Change was therefore urgently needed.

Although all sections of society are represented in this community, the apostle comments that in the main the Corinthian church is composed of those who, according to conventional standards (*kata sarka*, ‘according to the flesh’) are neither ‘wise’ nor ‘powerful’ nor ‘well born.’ Paul’s word ‘flesh’ catches the idea of human effort independent of God. How dismal! Yet the apostle leaps into the next verses with ‘but’ (the strong *alla*, meaning something like ‘on the contrary’); God has intervened.

### *b) God’s Choosing (1:27-28)*

*<sup>27</sup>But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup>God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are...*

These people were not wise, so they didn’t get their salvation by exercising their intellectual powers. They were not powerful, so they didn’t get it by performing some great deed. They were not of noble birth, so they didn’t get it because of birth. How, then, are we to explain such ordinary people being blessed with this greatest of all possible benefits – eternal life – while most of the wise, mighty, and noble remained lost? Paul says it was because God deliberately chose to do His work in people who were, by all outward appearances, the most unlikely and the most unpromising. The words ‘calling’ (1:26) and ‘chosen’ (1:27-28) make it clear that God

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graciously took the initiative in their salvation. And this is true with regard to every person who is saved. No one can take credit for salvation because it is God's work from beginning to end.

In answering the erroneous reasoning of the Corinthians, Paul takes his readers back to a repeated emphasis – the call of God. At the start of the letter he introduced himself in these terms (1:1) and in 1:24 he stressed that it was this factor which turned the foolish, weak message of the cross into divine wisdom and power. It is only because of God's call that they are brothers, or Christians, at all. If then, they are having problems with the unimpressive composition of the congregation, Paul argues, it is no good laying the blame at his door, as the apostolic messenger. They must blame God. Three times he makes the point. God did the choosing, so you are blaming Him.

This is rhetoric, Paul gazing, so to speak, at the church through the spectacles normally worn by 'the world' (*kosmos*) in which these saints have their being. It is interesting to note that 'the despised' means, in the root form, 'to be considered as nothing.' The Greek is in the perfect tense here, indicating that what was once despised will continue to be despised. So people who were thought to be nobodies in society would continue to be thought of as nobodies. The phrase 'things that are not' translates the most contemptible expression in the Greek language. 'Being' was everything to the Greeks, and to be called a nothing was the worst insult.

Thinking sociologically, the apostle acknowledges that for the most part they remain nonentities. But what of it? Firstly, God will 'disgrace' the wise and mighty, because, secondly, He has already purposed to 'bring to nothing things that are.' Their strategy is that all opposition to the good news must collapse. 'Bring to nothing' translates *katargeō*, which occurs also in 2:6; 6:13; 13:8, 10, 11; and 15:24, 26. In each case it points to the outworking of the plan of redemption. Thus 1:27-28 is eschatological: the selection of the lowly at Corinth has contributed to the overthrow of all that is mighty and malignant.

### *c) No One's Boasting (1:29)*

<sup>29</sup>...so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Far from it being any kind of mistake or oversight on God's part, it is central to God's plan to choose to call to Himself those whom worldly wisdom would never select. The reason is not simply that He overturns the self-centered rebellious will of a world at war with Himself and His values, but 'so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.' The glory of the gospel is that God does not need human wisdom, strength, or status to establish His kingdom.

If God had made salvation a matter of learning, power, or birth, men would have reason to boast and salvation would be impossible for ordinary people. But God takes away all these grounds and makes salvation available to all. Through His grace God has shown that He is not only able to save the best among men, but also to save the worst among them!

Verses 27-29 repeat 'so that' (*hina*) three times, the three being followed by 'in order that' (*hopōs*). The three *hina* clauses reveal the divine tactic: as long as 'this age' (1:20) is operative, the worldly wise, the apparently strong, and the well-born – 'things that are' – are progressively shamed and reduced to nothing. Yet this is no more than a preparative, leading to an ultimate resolution of the tension between an evil world and God in Christ.

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Thus ‘all flesh’ – mankind in its fallen state’ must acknowledge the reality of God. In verse 29 the negative attaches to ‘boast,’ so a more literally translation would be ‘so that all flesh may not boast before God’ rather than ‘so that no flesh may boast.’ The apostle’s meaning is that whereas all men are unceasing in their attempts to justify themselves before God, they will never be in a position to display personal merit and thus gain His approval. Foolish, weak, base man can do nothing for himself; God has done everything. Let the world, then, look at these unlikely people whom God has rescued. Let the Corinthians cease to frown on Paul. Eventually, the gospel will be vindicated and a boastful world will cease to be.

### 2. What to Boast In (1:30-31)

#### a) *Benefits of God’s Wisdom (1:30)*

<sup>30</sup>*And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption...*

Because we are in Christ Jesus, we receive God’s wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. First, believers are given God’s ‘wisdom.’ Christ has become wisdom for us, but wisdom other than that to which some immature saints are still addicted. The occasion in which our Lord became wisdom would have been His incarnation, life, death, and glorification, all considered as a single event leading in time to the Spirit’s application of His blessings to the Corinthians. They not only are *saved* by God’s wisdom rather than their own but are *given* God’s wisdom to replace their own. He is making this world’s ‘nothings’ into the likeness of His Son. This is the divine wisdom in which the Corinthians should be rejoicing, rather than seeking out some already bankrupt cultural alternative.

Second, believers receive God’s ‘righteousness.’ By righteousness, Paul means Christ has secured for the believer right standing before God. We have absolutely no righteousness of our own because we have broken the law of God innumerable times. But Christ, by living in perfect obedience to the law of God, has provided the righteousness God demands. Righteousness carries a legal sense: negatively, believers are deemed by God to be without guilt; positively, they are robed with righteousness – that of Christ. Believers are made right with God and they participate in His righteousness, His rightness. Rightness means to be as something or someone *should* be—right as opposed to wrong, good as opposed to evil, sinless as opposed to sinful.

Third, believers receive God’s ‘sanctification.’ In Christ we are set apart, made holy. We are declared righteous in Christ and are made holy in Christ. He causes us to grow and matures us so we are increasingly weaned away from sin and increasingly devoted to Him. ‘Holiness’ tells us that Christ transforms sinners so that they desire to love God. Not a condition of salvation, obedience to divine commands is a fruit of grace. Here the emphasis is not so much on our status, as on the process that God is working in our lives as we become more like the one to whom we are united, in character and in behavior.

Finally, believers receive God’s ‘redemption.’ To redeem means to buy back. God by Christ has purchases us from the power of sin. The chains of our captivity to Satan and sin were broken at the cross and we are no longer enslaved. Because of the final position of the word ‘redemption,’ it probably points to the end of the world: although redemption considered as liberation from the penalty and the dominion of sin is a present experience, believers will finally

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be released from all sin's dire effects. There is coming a day when we shall finally be completely victorious over sin. We shall receive new bodies that will be like His glorious body (Phil. 3:21) and we shall live in a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1-4).

Taken together, these three terms tell us that the believer is justified in the past, sanctified in the present, and that he has been given a firm hope of glorification for the eternal future. This, then, is our wisdom from God. It is to be brought by grace into a right relationship and an accepted standing with God, to have a true knowledge of Him and to share in the life of God as His consecrated, treasured possession. He is the source, and the wisdom that He gives is new, eternal life in His Son, Jesus Christ.

### *b) Boasting in God's Wisdom (1:31)*

<sup>31</sup>...so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

There can be only one adequate response to the kind of wisdom and power provided to us by God, and it certainly isn't the parading and acclaiming of human leaders. God designed His salvation to eliminate this option completely. The only adequate response is, in the words of the apostle Paul, to 'glory in the Lord.'

Paul quotes Jeremiah 9:24 (cp. Gal. 6:14). The context of this quotation is very illuminating. The preceding verse (Jer. 9:23) has been taken up with the very issues Paul is debating here: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches.' The prophet, distraught because of the imminent Babylonian invasion of Judah, stood almost alone in that few believed that the land would be ravaged as a divine judgment (Jer. 9:11-12). His message is that those who consider themselves wise and affluent are not to wallow in complacency, and this because their security is short-term. He insists that the only basis for personal congratulation is if a man has come to know Yahweh; here alone is safety. Whereas the people cannot save themselves from Babylon, they have the promise of God that He will aid them if they turn back to Him.

The single ground for self-congratulation is when a man or a woman has come to know Christ as Lord and Savior; only then will God grant peace and security.

Rather than being the wrong people, therefore, the Christians at Corinth were chosen by God and demonstrate the reality of a relationship with Him. They delight in God for who He is, as well as for what He has done. But it required the wisdom and power of God in the cross of Christ, to see and recognize that reality then, and exactly the same is true today. True Christians delight in Christ. He is the center and focus of their boasting. Perhaps, like the Corinthians, our danger is to talk and think about Christianity rather than about Christ, and about the failings of the church rather than the glories of the King. We need to remember that the people of wisdom and power are those whom God has chosen to be 'in Christ.'

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-16.