

I CORINTHIANS
Chapter 1:18-31

VERSE 18:

Verse 17 serves as a fitting introduction to this section of Paul's argument. In it, he referred to "wisdom of words" which is contrasted now with the "preaching of the cross". The word translated "preaching" is not the ordinary word for announcing or proclaiming, it is the "Logos", that which is used for Christ Himself in the Gospel of John. "In the beginning was the Word (the Logos) and the Word was with God and the Word was God" – John 1:1.

He did not desire people to listen to him with admiration and go away exclaiming, "what a brilliant preacher, what a splendid orator!" Instead he wanted them to leave saying, "what a guilty sinners we are and how amazing is the love of God that sent His Son to die and bear the shame of the cross for our redemption".

It is sadly possible to spoil the message by dependence on that which simply appeals to the human mind and so the apostle says, "I try to preach Christ, not by words of wisdom, that is, this world's wisdom, "lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect". Even the most ungodly man can appreciate eloquent public speaking, whether or not he believes the message being proclaimed. Yet it is not the will of God that His servants should tickle the ears of their hearers but that they should rebuke, challenge and deal with the conscience of those to whom they are speaking. How foolish and even wicked it would be if we should simply entertain knowing the next step could be into eternity without God or hope. How guilty before God we should be if we sought the admiration and praise of our hearers instead of endeavoring to bring them face to face with their sins before God and seeking to get them to flee to the cross for refuge.

It was this that gripped the apostle Paul. He knew that men were lost without Christ, that there was no hope of them other than through the cross, therefore he said, "I do not want anything that will hide the cross. I do not want to decorate the cross with flowers, ribbons and tinsel to make people lose sight of what it really is". The cross is the declaration of man's utter depravity and the manifestation of God's infinite love. It is the preaching of the cross, the word of the cross, in opposition to the word of wisdom. "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness".

What do we mean when we speak of the cross? I wonder sometimes if we have any idea in our day of what the cross meant when Paul wrote these words? Cicero says, "The cross speaks of that which is so shameful, so horrible, it should never be mentioned in polite society," and yet you find Paul exclaiming, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" – Galatians 6:14. The cross meant far worse than the gallows or electric chair means today, because it declared that the one who was hanging there was guilty of the vilest, the most awful crimes and was utterly unfit to live, that he was rejected of man and accursed of God. Yet, this cross bore our Lord Jesus Christ!

WHAT DOES THE CROSS MEAN? It means that man's heart was so wicked, so sinful, that there was no other way by which he could be saved other than through the Eternal Son of God becoming Man and suffering the most shameful, dishonorable, disgraceful, degrading and humiliating death for his redemption. But it means also that in the most complete way man's heart has been fully exposed, for when God sent His Son, man cried, "Away with Him! Crucify Him!" There at the cross man showed the very worst of his nature, but God showed the infinite love of His heart. Take note of what Peter said to the men of his day, Acts 2:23. If you want to know how wicked you are by nature, to get an understanding of the awfulness of the sins of which your heart is capable, stand in faith before that cross and contemplate again God's holy spotless

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Son hanging on that tree suffering unspeakable anguish, the true expression of man's attitude to God. The Word of the Cross.

It is not merely the physical suffering that men heaped upon Jesus that made the atonement for sin, Isaiah 53:10. God made Him to be the great sin-offering. And so the word of the cross is the story of God's infinite love to guilty men. Righteousness demanded that sin be punished and there upon the cross it was punished to the fullest in the person of our blessed Substitute. And now the word of the cross goes out to the entire world and man is going to be judged by his attitude toward that cross, "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness".

I do not like the way they translated the word "perish", for it may throw us off the track. Some may think that some day if you neglect the cross and the One who died there, you are in danger of perishing, but that is not what he is saying. It is something far more solemn, something that ought to affect you very much more, if you are unsaved that he really says is, the Word of the cross is to them that are lost foolishness, "Them that are lost". Do you not get the seriousness of that statement? Not in danger of being lost by- and-by, not that you will be lost if you finally persist in neglecting Christ and die in your sins. That is terribly true, but this is more solemn than that. They are Lost! If the Christ of the cross is not your Saviour, you are lost! If you are suddenly taken from life into eternity, you go into eternity lost, and to be lost forever. Men do not like to think of these things, they do not face these things as they are. If the cross means nothing to you, you are lost. "The preaching of the cross to them that are lost is foolishness."

On the other hand, "But unto us which are saved it is the power of God". "Us which are saved", of whom is he speaking? He is speaking of a people who once were lost but are now saved. The Bible only presents two classes; people already lost and people already saved. "By grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourself, it is a gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast" - Ephesians 2:8-9.

Unto us who are saved the word of the cross, "is the power of God". That is, there is no human energy that converts people; we cannot convert them by an ability of our own. We cannot save people, we cannot give men peace with God; it is the word of the cross that is the "power of God".

VERSE 19:

For support of the preceding statement, Paul referred to an event from Israel's past (1:9; Cf. Isaiah 29:14). When the Assyrians threatened Judah, the counselors of the Jewish King advised an allegiance with Egypt. The prophet Isaiah opposed this idea and appealed to Judah to put their trust only in God. Isaiah's counsel was mocked by the scribes of Jerusalem. Egypt never came to the aid or rescue of Judah, but God did in a miraculous fashion. In one night, His angel killed 186,000 Assyrians and in the morning the pagan army retreated, - Isaiah 37:36-37. The principle taught by that historical event is also true of attitudes toward God and the cross today. Men have devised their own programs of personal and social redemption in which they trust themselves and not God. Such plans only lead to death - Proverbs 14:12.

VERSE 20:

After the Old Testament quotation came four questions: 1:20; Cf. Isaiah 19:12; 33:18. The "wise" refers to Gentiles philosophers like those that mocked Paul for preaching the resurrection of Christ, Acts 17:22-32. The word "scribe" is the common designation of the learned class among the Jews. It was originally applied to the secretaries who's business was to prepare and issue decrees in the name of the King, II Samuel 8:17, 20:25; II Kings 12:10. Afterwards and especially in the New Testament it was used as the designation of those learned in the law because they transcribed, expounded and administered it. The "disputer of this world" (age), involves both Jews and Gentiles, Acts 6:9; 17:18; 28:29. One age passes into the next with the

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former age forgotten; the same is true of its disputers, Ecclesiastes 1:4-11. Mere wisdom would never have dug into the mystery of the cross.

How true it is that salvation is in and through Jesus Christ. By knowledge of the world it cannot be understood. Yet the simple and unlearned, who by faith believe, "it is the power of God unto salvation" – Romans 1:16.

The whole trend of this age is against the word of the cross. The wisdom of this age would never have thought that only by the death of the Son of God on the cross could salvation could be wrought. As far as this ordered universe is concerned, the things that men pride themselves in are only foolishness in the sight of God. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision", - Psalm 2:4.

"God made foolish the wisdom of men". The wisest of men unaided by the Spirit of God, become spiritual dunces when they try to understand why Christ died.

VERSE 21:

The last verse ended in a question: this section begins with the answer introduced by the explanatory connective "for". In His sovereign wisdom, God planned that exalted human wisdom would never be the instrument for knowing God and being saved. Even though God's wisdom and power are displayed in creation, men have misunderstood, ignored, perverted, and rejected those truths, Romans 1:18-32. Only a divinely enlightened person can perceive God's glory in His handiwork, Psalm 19:1. In His free sovereign choice, God was also pleased to save men by the message which men thought to be foolish: "the cross".

What is preaching? It is a simple proclamation and it has pleased God by what looks like foolishness to man, the simplicity of making an announcement to save them that believe. I stand up in the name of the God of heaven, and declare that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture, and that He was buried and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures", II Corinthians 13:3-4. The world says, "foolishness!" You could not prove that if you had to." No, I could not; but I report the announcements, and whenever a man, by the amazing grace of God, humbles himself to where he by faith believes the announcement, he is saved.

VERSE 22:

Paul argued that with limited wisdom and knowledge and being a sinful man, man cannot dictate to an infinite, holy God what they want from God before they will believe. The Jews had always requested a sign before they would believe. Moses had to perform signs before the enslaved Jews would accept his divinely appointed leadership, Exodus 4:29-31. During Christ's earthly ministry, Israel did not discern the signs of the times, Matthew 16:3-4. When they in a roundabout way asked for another sign, Christ pointed out that the next sign for Israel would be that of Jonah and the fish, an event which typified His death and resurrection, Matthew 12:38-40; 16:4. In their willful rebellion, they even tempted to explain the empty tomb claiming the theft of His body by the disciples, Matthew 28:11-15.

On the other hand, the Gentiles wanted rational proof before they would accept this. The Greek philosophers mocked Paul when he preached the resurrection, Acts 17:32. After hearing Paul's defense of the faith, the Roman governor, Festus declared, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doeth make the mad." - Acts 26:24. The Jews said, "Show me". The Gentiles reacted, "Let me investigate".

VERSE 23:

In response, Paul did not honor their request. The connective "but" shows the contrast. He preached; he did not perform miracles for the Jews in the synagogue, nor did he discuss

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rational proofs with the Greeks. His message contained what men needed, not what they wanted. He preached, "Christ crucified." The double reaction to the message was similar, yet different. The Jews regarded it as a "stumbling block" because they thought that the Messiah would bring political victory and live forever, Matthew 27:42; John 12:34. The gentiles regarded the message as, "foolishness". They viewed a crucified criminal, which Christ was under the Roman law, as morally offensive and as an evidence of physical weakness. How could the blood of such a person remove sin, give righteousness, and guarantee hope beyond the grave? To them it was foolish.

Paul was not a pleaser of men. Paul sought only to please God; therefore, it didn't make any difference what the Jews, Greeks or any one else wanted. He preached Christ crucified. He preached the simplicity of the crucified Christ and salvation was in Him and was no where else to be found.

VERSE 24:

The verses we just finished looked at the divine program of salvation from a lost man's viewpoint: now Paul looked at it through the understanding of those who were called to salvation.

The Jews desired a showing of power; the Greeks sought wisdom; both are found in Christ and in the highest degree. He is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The saved Jew who wanted a sign before now see the real power of God displayed in Christ's triumph over sin and death in His death and resurrection. The saved Gentile, who once sought rational arguments now marvel at God's sophisticated solution for the problem of evil, Romans 11:33.

VERSE 25:

"Because the foolishness of God" - Those things which God appoints, requires, commands and does, which appears to men to be foolish. The passage is not to be understood as affirming it is really foolish or unwise: but that it appears so to men.

"Is wiser than men," - It is better adapted to accomplish important ends and more certainly effectual than the schemes of human wisdom. This is especially true of the plan of salvation; a plan apparently foolish to the mass of men, yet without a doubt accomplishing more for the renewing of men and for the purity and happiness than all the schemes of the human mind. They have accomplished nothing towards man's salvation; this accomplishes everything.

"The weakness of God" - There is really no weakness in God any more than there is folly. This must mean, therefore, the things that He has appointed appear weak and insufficient to accomplish the end. Notice the facts, that God should seek to save lost sinners by Jesus of Nazareth, who was supposedly unable to save himself, Matthew 27:40-43; and that he should expect to save men by the gospel, by it's being preached by men who were without learning, eloquence, wealth, fame or power. The instruments were feeble and men judged that this was because of the weakness or lack of power in the God who appointed them.

"Is stronger than men" - is able to accomplish more than the utmost might of men.

VERSE 26:

God is no respecter of persons, James 2:1-9. He does not favor the rich over the poor, nor does He favor the poor over the rich. Man's status in this life neither attracts nor repels God.

In the Corinthian membership, there were not many wise, mighty or noble persons, as the world uses those terms. The purpose of this statement was to show that the gospel did not depend on human wisdom for its success. The "wise" refers to the intellect of men, or what they have learned. The "mighty" points to the influence of men, that which they have gained through

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political or military conquests. The “noble” denotes the inheritance of men, the status of birth into well-known families. Notice that Paul used “many” rather than “any”. Some wise, mighty and noble people are called to salvation by God. The Corinthian church possessed some who might be described this way, including: “Crispus”, the chief ruler of the synagogue, Acts 18:8; “Gaius”, Paul’s host, Romans 16:23; “Erastus”, the chamberlain of Corinth, Romans 16:23; and possibly the wealthy “Chloe” – I Corinthians 1:11.

VERSE 27:

The verb, “hath chosen” occurs twice in this verse and once in the next. It translates the Greek word “exelaxato”, which implies that God has chosen men in His own interest. Salvation, therefore, is not man-centered, but God centered. Note also, Ephesians 1:3-4, “hath chosen” the same word is used again. God chose to save, love and bless as a demonstration of His gracious will, not because men deserved to be chosen. There was nothing in the nature or actions of men that merited God’s favor.

VERSES 27-28

God’s choices are just the opposite of what men would do if they were given the divine prerogative to choose. They are also just the opposite of what men would expect God to do. This is why God, “confound” and “brings to nought” the logic of men through His redemptive program of the cross and through those who are saved by His grace through faith in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been said by one commentator, “that God wanted to convince the world of the little value of the things on which they prided themselves, and by exalting over them those whom they despised.”

The contrasts are apparent. The wise are confounded by the choice of the unlearned (“the foolish”). The strong (“mighty”) marvel at the choice of the physically disabled (“the weak”). The well-born aristocrats are baffled by the selection of the low-born (“base”).

The earlier followers of the Lord Jesus Christ were, with few exceptions, men from the lower walks of life: fishermen, tax collectors, Galilean peasants! Yet, these men who were from the common walks of life were saved by the marvelous grace of God and empowered by His Holy Spirit and through them won thousands to the saving knowledge of His Son. Acts 4:13-21 – v:21 – “Glorified God”.

VERSE 29:

God chose, “that no flesh should glory in His presence.” Had God taken up the wealthy and the powerful it would have given the flesh a large place in the eyes of men, but by choosing the weak things He had the greater opportunity to manifest His own power. In themselves they could accomplish nothing; through Him they did great things. Therefore all the glory belongs NOT to them BUT to Him.

In describing God’s plan of salvation, three times Paul inserted, “to the praise of His glory”, Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14. No man, regardless of achievements either before or after salvation, should dare brag about himself in the presence of God on earth or in heaven, II Corinthians 4:7. Paul wrote, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us.” The Corinthians and all saved people need to realize that they are what they are by the grace of God, I Corinthians 15:10.

VERSES 30-31:

The connective “but” shows the contrast between those who glory in the flesh and those who glory in God. Christians should glorify God because the source of their spiritual blessings is

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the Father (“of Him”) and the way of those blessings are the Son (“in Christ Jesus”). Therefore, it is because of their position in Christ that God can impute to them wisdom concerning His ways (“made unto us”).

The four words describing the believer’s possessions are not equal or coordinate. Rather, the imputed wisdom is defined by the other three words. Those who are called recognize wisdom in the crucified Christ, 1:24, because they have received total salvation: “righteousness”, which guarantees an acceptable position before God and deliverance from the penalty of sin: “sanctification”, which provides victory over the practice of sin; and “redemption”, which assures the believer of being released from the presence of the sinful effects in His body. God’s wisdom deals with the past, present, and future of each Christian. In response to such gracious imputation, men are to, “glory in the Lord”. The Old Testament quotation, Jeremiah 9:24, referred to glorying in Jehovah; thus Paul equated Jehovah with the Lord Jesus Christ, a proof of His deity, cf. 1:2, 3, 8, 9, 10.

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WORKSHEET

1. In verse 17, what was Paul's main concern when he preached?
2. How can the gospel message be spoiled, according to Paul?
3. On the cross Jesus suffered physical pain, what else did He suffer according to - Isaiah 53:10?
4. The "the preaching of the cross is to them that perish _____"? What does the, "preaching of the cross" mean?
5. In verse 18, what does "But unto us which are saved it is the power of God". What does the phrase – "power of God", mean?
6. Who are the "wise", the "scribes", the "disputer of this world" in verse 20?
7. What does Paul mean when he says the gospel is "the power of God unto Salvation"? – Romans 1:16.
8. In verse 21, what is the definition of preaching?
9. In verse 22, what were the hindrances for the Jews and Gentiles by simply preaching "the cross"?
10. In verse 23, Paul was not a _____ of men. Why? What would have been the outcome if he has sought to please men rather than God?
11. In verse 26 we see God is not a respecter of persons. Read verse 26 and James 2:1-9, and explain how God's treatment of persons often differs from the way we see and treat others. Example: If a millionaire and a very poor man came to Richland would they be treated equally? Explain!
12. In verse 27, we see salvation is not _____ - _____ but _____ - _____.
13. In verse 27-28, we see God's choices are just the _____ of what men would do if they were given the divine prerogative to choose. Use these verses to explain this statement.
14. In verse 29 what does the phrase "that no flesh should glory in His presence"?
15. In verse 30, the connective "but" shows what?
16. In verses 31-32, we see that God's wisdom deals with the _____, _____, and _____ of each Christian.