

The Power of God: The Gospel 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

*Christ the Power and Wisdom of God
(Cp Isa 29.14)*

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ 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? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. ¹

One of the issues that Paul wrote to the church of Corinth about was the matter of division in the church. Division has always been a problem among God’s people, and almost every New Testament epistle deals with this topic or mentions it in one way or another. Even the 12 Apostles did not always get along with each other. The same is true today. We have our favorites and our groups and our beliefs that separate us. Even in this congregation we have the “Centrals” and the “Communities” and we like to do things just a little differently. Apparently the members of the congregation at Corinth had divided themselves into four camps: the people that said Paul was their pastor because he had founded their church; others said they were followers of Apollos the powerful preacher; others were in the Peter camp as he was an original Apostle; and still others claimed loyalty to Jesus alone. So Paul says that the cross is what brought all into the fellowship of God. Paul begins to talk about the power of the Gospel versus the weakness of man’s wisdom. He is still addressing the problem of division in the church. First,

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. 1 Co 1:18-31

he pointed to the unity of Christ: there is one Savior and one body. Then he reminded them of their baptism, their spiritual entrance into Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:13). Then he took them to the cross.

The Christian message as found in four great sermons in the Book of Acts (Acts 2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:36–43). It includes: the great promised time of God has come; a summary of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; a claim that Jesus' life and ministry was the fulfillment of prophecy; the assertion that Jesus will come again; and an urgent invitation to men and women and boys and girls to repent and receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Crucifixion and the Cross of Christ easily come out of our mouths and we wear the cross as a piece of jewelry. But crucifixion was not only a horrible death; it was a shameful death. It was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen. Crucifixion was never mentioned in polite society, any more than we today would discuss over dinner the gas chamber or the electric chair or lethal injection.

The key word in this passage is wisdom. Paul instructs that we dare not mix human wisdom with God's revealed message. He (1 Cor. 1:17–2:16) presents a number of contrasts between the revealed Word of God, the Gospel, and the wisdom of men. God's wisdom is revealed primarily in the cross of Jesus Christ, but not everyone believes or accepts it. Paul pointed out that there are three different attitudes toward the cross.

Some stumble at the cross (v. 23a). This was the attitude of the Jews, because their emphasis is on miraculous signs and the cross appears to be weakness. Jewish history is filled with miraculous events, from the Exodus out of Egypt to the days of Elijah and Elisha. When Jesus was ministering on earth, the Jewish leaders repeatedly asked Him to perform a sign from heaven; but He refused.

Paul illustrated his point by an example of Israel who, following humanly wise counsel, formed an alliance with Egypt as a defense against Assyria, when in fact

only the miraculous intervention of God was able to save them (Isa. 29:14; 2 Kings 18:17-19:37).

The Jewish nation did not understand their own sacred Scriptures. They looked for a Messiah who would come like a mighty conqueror and defeat all their enemies. He would then set up His kingdom and return the glory to Israel. The question of the Apostles in Acts 1:6 shows how strong this hope was among the Jews. They did not understand that their Messiah had to suffer and die before He could enter into His glory (see Luke 24:13–35), and that the messianic kingdom would come in the future.

Because the Jews were looking for power and great glory, they stumbled at the weakness of the cross. How could anybody put faith in an unemployed carpenter from Nazareth who died the shameful death of a common criminal?

To the Jews the Christian message was a stumbling-block. To them it was unbelievable that one who had ended life upon a cross could possibly be God's Chosen One. They pointed to their own law which unmistakably said, "He that is hanged is accursed by God." (Deuteronomy 21:23). To the Jew the fact of the crucifixion, so far from proving that Jesus was the Son of God, disproved it. It may seem extraordinary, but even with Isaiah 53, the Jews had never dreamed of a suffering Messiah. The Cross to the Jew was and is an insurmountable barrier to belief in Jesus.

Secondly, the Jews were looking for signs. The time when Paul was writing produced a crop of false Messiahs, and all of them had beguiled the people into accepting them by the promise of wonders. In A.D. 45 a man called Theudas had emerged. He had persuaded thousands of the people to abandon their homes and follow him out to the Jordan, by promising that, at his word of command, the Jordan would divide and he would lead them dry-shod across. In A.D. 54 a man from Egypt arrived in Jerusalem, claiming to be the Prophet. He persuaded thirty

thousand people to follow him out to the Mount of Olives by promising that at his word of command the walls of Jerusalem would fall down. That was the kind of thing that the Jews were looking for. In Jesus they saw one who was meek and lowly, one who deliberately avoided the spectacular, one who served and who ended on a Cross—and it seemed to them an impossible picture of the Chosen One of God.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Rather than a testimony of weakness, the cross is a tremendous instrument of power! After all, the “weakness of God [in the cross] is stronger than human wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:25).

Some laugh at the cross (v. 23b). This was the response of the Greeks. To them, the cross was foolishness. The Greeks emphasized wisdom; and we still study the writings of the Greek philosophers. But they saw no wisdom in the cross. To the Greek idea the first characteristic of God was God’s total inability to feel. The Greeks argued that God could feel no joy or sorrow or anger or grief. So a God who suffered was to the Greeks a contradiction in terms. Plutarch declared that it was an insult to God to involve God in human affairs. The very idea of God becoming a man, was revolting to the Greek mind. Augustine, who was a very great scholar long before he became a Christian, could say that in the Greek philosophers he found a parallel to almost all the teaching of Christianity; but one thing, he said, he never found, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” To the thinking Greek the incarnation was a total impossibility. To people who thought like that it was incredible that one who had suffered as Jesus had suffered could possibly be the Son of God.

The second reason that the Greek could not accept the Gospel message was that they were looking for wisdom. They were surrounded by wise men with clever

minds and persuasive rhetoric. These were the type of men that Paul met on Mar's Hill. They spend endless hours discussing issues and ideas.

It is impossible to exaggerate the almost fantastic mastery that the silver-tongued rhetorician held in Greece. Plutarch says, "They made their voices sweet with musical cadences and modulations of tone and echoed resonances." It didn't matter what they were saying as long as it sounded good. Philostratus tells us that Adrian, the sophist, had such a reputation in Rome, that when his messenger appeared with a notice that he was to lecture, the senate emptied and even the people at the games abandoned them to flock to hear him.

The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words; and to them the Christian preacher with his blunt message seemed a crude and uncultured figure, to be laughed at and ridiculed rather than to be listened to and respected.

Paul called on three people to bear witness: the wise or the expert; the scribe or the interpreter and writer; and the disputer or the philosopher and debater. He asked them one question: Through your studies into man's wisdom, have you come to know God in a personal way? They all must answer no! Their wisdom did not enable them to find God and experience salvation.

Some believe and experience the power and the wisdom of the cross (v. 24). Paul did not alter his message when he turned from a Jewish audience to a Greek one: he preached Christ crucified. "The foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21) does not mean that the act of preaching is foolish, but rather the content of the message.

Those who have been called by God's grace, and who have responded by faith (see 2 Thes. 2:13–14), realize that Christ is God's power and God's wisdom. Not the Christ of the manger, or the temple, or the marketplace—but the Christ of the cross. It is in the death of Christ that God has revealed the foolishness of human wisdom and the weakness of human power.

Even today, to the cultured Greek (which many of us are) and to the pious Jew the Gospel sounded like folly. We think we will be fine with our knowledge and self-help books. Paul cites the undeniable fact that for all its wisdom the world had never found God and is still blindly and gropingly seeking him. This very search was designed by God to show us our own helplessness and to prepare the way for the acceptance of Christ who is the one true way.

It looked as if the Christian message has little chance of success against the background of Jewish or Greek life; or our Western culture, but as Paul said, “What looks like God’s foolishness is wiser than men’s wisdom; and what looks like God’s weakness is stronger than men’s strength.”²

“The message of the Cross” is the message that stops us from being self-centered and self-righteous. The message of the Cross calls us to obedience to God which may lead as it did in Jesus’ case to humiliation and death, but which ultimately leads not to self-destruction but to preservation (Mark 8:34-35; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 22:5).

The Gospel teaches us that it was not on man’s terms and initiative but on God’s that we find what we needed, the power of God and the wisdom of God. In the preaching of Christ crucified God called people by opening our eyes of faith to believe the Gospel.³ We are called into fellowship because of our union with Jesus Christ: He died for us; we were baptized in His name; we are identified with His cross. What a wonderful basis for spiritual unity!⁴

² Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters to the Corinthians*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 16

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:509

⁴Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 1 Co 1:10