

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

18 For the message of 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; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' *Isaiah 29:14*

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,

23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

## The power and wisdom of God 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

The intention of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, which was probably only about 5 years old at this point, was to address the problems of disunity. 1 Corinthians has been described by some as an extended call for unity in a church which was unusual in its diversity. Its membership ranged from wealthy believers in whose houses the church met, all the way down to slaves. If you read the first part of the chapter, Paul mentions by name some of the people who have emerged as leaders who have their own supporters - Apollos and Cephas. And Paul includes himself in the list. So at this point he's concentrating on the fact that any wisdom on the subject must come from God and not the various quarrelling factions within the church.

This is a remarkable and very helpful passage because it helps us understand that when we talk about God our human understanding of ideas like power and wisdom can't apply in the same way. And so Paul starts here by quoting Isaiah's prophetic judgement against Judah, where the political and religious leaders were trusting their own wisdom in forming a military alliance with Egypt rather than listening to the prophet.

*Is 29:13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught."*

*14 Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”*

When we talk about the *power* of God we have in our minds the power of governments or armies, organisations who control and dictate to us, because that's what we've come to understand by power. Similarly when we talk about wisdom, we're often thinking of what the world considers wise. We want religion because we can construct systems of belief that we think are wise and don't make too many demands on us. Paul however makes the very blunt assertion that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. And so the wisdom and power of God is diametrically opposed to those who like to think that they have it all worked out. Notice that he refers to 'us who are *being* saved'. None of us have arrived at a point where we have it all done and dusted. It's an ongoing journey, we are *being saved*, we have not arrived. And I think Paul is being a bit mischievous, and heavily ironic in contrasting the imagined wisdom of the different factions in the church with the "foolishness" of the message. Suggesting that even the least of God's wisdom is better than anything they can come up with! Paul was very aware of the hotbed of debate in Corinth at the time. A writer called Dio Chrysostom described the mood in the city:

*'crowds ...around Poseidon's temple shouting and reviling one another...fighting with one another...many writers reading aloud their stupid works... fortune tellers interpreting fortunes, lawyers innumerable perverting judgement.'*

And so Paul did not participate in what sounds to me very much like the internet, but in his preaching, concentrated on the facts of the gospel and Jesus' life. Kenneth Bailey in his commentary says this:

*The preacher does not create the meaning in his or her mind but **reports God's acts in history.***

The bible is seen as irrelevant today largely because it makes scientifically unprovable assertions. And it is true, that *faith is confidence in what we **hope** for and assurance about what we **don't** see*. Faith and science are not incompatible, there are many scientists who believe in God, but science is used as an excuse to reject faith. Paul sees the opposite, that God **honours** belief in Him, based on the historical facts of Jesus life and ministry, death and resurrection, attested by reliable witnesses. *v21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who **believe.***

To save those who **believe**, not those who have it proved to them. Our own wisdom and understanding will never save us. When you look at a world which truly has progressed in many incredible ways, wisdom is not one of them.

It remains true that we need to be saved from ourselves.  
And Paul calls Jesus a stumbling block to the whole world,  
because ultimately, we will never truly know God unless we can  
bring ourselves to accept the “foolish” idea that Jesus was who  
he claimed to be, God incarnate, God made man,  
And so in verse 24 Paul then makes his central point, that **Jesus  
himself** is the power and wisdom of God. If we have grasped  
this amazing fact then we will have to look at the life and  
ministry of Jesus, at how he lived.  
And to follow his example, with the help of the person of the  
Holy Spirit. The power and wisdom of God is found in service, in  
love, in humility, in submission to one another, in compassion  
for each other, in vulnerability and honesty. The willingness to  
die for what you believe.  
Sin and death was defeated at the cross of Jesus, not by any  
attempts to overcome it with force, but by his act of self  
sacrifice which went against all worldly wisdom. Everyone  
expected the Messiah to be a political and military hero, and  
they still do, and still today they look in vain for a Messiah who  
suits their expectations. That Messiah does not exist.  
The gospel is not a watertight system of religious knowledge  
which we have to assent to with the correct words and actions  
and rituals, especially on Sundays.  
It’s not a scheme for living a better life or a formula for  
happiness.

The gospel is a declaration that God created the world and  
everything in it and has intervened *in* the world for the *sake* of  
the world. The gospel says that the crucifixion of Jesus is the  
central event in human history, and that death itself was done  
away with at the cross, and that all who believe this to be true,  
and who believe in Jesus, will be given a quality of life which is  
beyond anything we can imagine.

*25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and  
the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

Amen