

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup>*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.* <sup>19</sup>*For it is written:*

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."*

### Notes

- The content of Paul's preaching is '*the message of the Cross*'. **1:23** calls it '*Christ crucified*' == the Saviour God sends into this world nailed to the Cross! This message comes across as foolishness to many people, both in Paul's days and in our days. Why?

Because the message is about God coming into this world as man, lived as man, and then died on the Cross to save sinners. Such a message just doesn't sit well with the world. To the world, success and victory come when you defeat others, when you subjugate others, when you overcome others, even put them to death. How can there be success when you are slain? How can you talk about victory when your deliverer is a victim? This is madness! You might as well worship a donkey!!

- The Corinthian Christians were dividing themselves up into all sorts of groups and classifications based on human divisions --- following human leaders, rich versus poor, this gift versus that gift. Yet there is only one true dividing line that puts people into two different groups, and that line is the Cross!

Our attitude to the Cross will reveal which group we belong to – *those who are perishing or those who are being saved*. If we deem the Cross as foolishness, then we are those who are perishing! Note the word 'perishing'. Not 'will perish' but 'perishing'. It is already happening. Cf. John 3:18 -- *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God*. Sinners are not at the crossroads, deciding to go on the way of life or path of death. Sinners are already on the path of death!

If we deem the Cross as wisdom, then we are those who are being saved. Again, note that Paul did not say 'saved' or 'will be saved' but 'being saved' --- happening right now. In the New Testament, salvation is described in 3 ways --- saved (forgiven, justified), being saved (sanctified) and will be saved (glorified). Paul is certainly talking about the second here.

- Verse 19 is a quotation from Isaiah 29:14, not from the Hebrew OT but from the Greek Septuagint (LXX) -- *Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden*.

The context is Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. At that time, they were faced with enemy forces determined to conquer them. What should they do? They should turn to God. What did they do? They turned to their wisdom, their reasoning, their resourcefulness, and came up with all sorts of solution. Some said, “Pro-Egypt”, some “Pro-Assyria”, some “Pro-Babylon”, some “Pro-Me”! None turned to God. Result? All failed miserably!!

In quoting from Isaiah, Paul is also showing that God's mode of operation has always been like that --- His ways are not our ways. All through history, we have always taken the position that we are cleverer than God, we know better, and down

through history, God has demonstrated again and again how He will blow our clever plans into nothing!

- Note that Paul did not contrast 'foolishness' with 'wisdom', but with 'power'. *Why, do you think, he did that?*

<sup>20</sup>Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? <sup>21</sup>For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, <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>Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

### Notes

- **Verse 20** smells of **Isaiah 19:11-12, 33:18-19**. The world has always taken the position that they know better than God. The Egyptians were proud of their wisdom, the Babylonians of their might, even the Jews of their privilege. But God has one agenda He will pursue, one goal that He targets --- He will make foolish the wisdom of the world!
- The Jews are very practical people. I am no interested in theory. Just show me the evidence, the signs, that it works, and I will believe you. On the other hand, the Greeks loves eloquence and philosophy and speculations that titillate the mind, never mind if it works or not!

On the horizontal perspective, the Jews and the Greeks appear to be opposites. But from the vertical perspective, they are actually the same. Both operate from the

standpoint of rebellion against God, refusing to submit to God's revelation, believing that they know better than God. God must fit their scheme, else He is out!

- So to the Jews, Christ crucified is a scandal to them! How can He save if He was nailed to the cross and accursed of God? Can it work? And to the Greeks, the Cross is a sign and symbol of weakness and shame. It's so unattractive! Christ and Him crucified just do not fit their idea of how things should be.
- The Jews request a sign. God could give it to them. Why would He not do it? The Greeks seek wisdom. God could have given them a mind-blowing wisdom. Why did He not do it? Because to do so will leave the main issue intact!

They have made themselves the center of the universe, the source of wisdom, god! God will tear down this idol! Because He and He alone is God, and His glory He will not share with another. Hence, He will pursue this relentlessly! Salvation is people bowing their knees in worship, adoration and praise of the true and living God, submissive to His revelation and obedient to His commands. Because both the Jews and the Greeks rejected that, they will go round in circles (or is it circus!) and ultimately end in destruction!

- Some Jews and some Greeks have a very different response to the Gospel. They believed the message of the Cross and were saved. They believed because they have been called! 'Called' conveys the fact that they are passive while God is active! He calls them!
- It is through Christ crucified --- deemed to be so unsophisticated by the world -- that sinners can be right with God and sinners become saints! The Gospel changes lives! Even if we call this God's folly, yet we see that it is certainly wiser than all the

wisdom of men, for men's wisdom cannot achieve this righteousness, and since the Garden of Eden, has failed miserably to change men!

*So what's the message of this section?* The content of the gospel is Christ crucified. This message appears to be so foolish and so weak to the world, yet it is precisely in Christ and Him crucified alone that man can be brought to God and men's lives can be changed, from sinners to saints! This is not only 'wisdom'; it is 'wisdom and power'!! The Corinthian Christians have personally experienced this! If this be so, then why all the obsession with *sophia* (worldly wisdom)?

### **1 Corinthians 1:26-31**

<sup>26</sup>For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. <sup>27</sup>But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; <sup>28</sup>and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, <sup>29</sup>that no flesh should glory in His presence. <sup>30</sup>But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God--and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- <sup>31</sup>that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

### Notes

- In **verse 26**, Paul is calling these Christians to remember their conversion. How were you converted? What were you before conversion?
- "According to the flesh" means going by physical, human, worldly measurements. In other words, by this measurement, most of you were foolish, weak, base/lowly. That's certainly unflattering to their self-image! You are people whom the society

will not take a second look at. Yet God chose you for salvation! He chose the weak, He chose the foolish, He chose the lowly!

- God's choice not only underlines His sovereignty --- He chooses whom He wills, it also underscores His methods - His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). Most of the Corinthian Christians were the most unpromising, insignificant people in Corinth. Yet God sets His love on them and gave them eternal life!!
- The reason for this choice of God is this: *that no flesh should glory in His presence*. God alone should be praised, adored, glorified. No one else should! He is the incomparable One. To even attempt to compare Him with anything or anyone is a huge insult! God is jealous for His glory. He will not share His glory with another. Hence He will do all things that He and He alone be glorified.

[When something is really and truly good, it is right and proper to praise it. Now we are not talking about something, but Some One == God! He alone is truly good and glorious and 100% deserving of adoration. Hence, it is not vanity to glorify Himself, but it is the right and proper thing to do. For God not to pursue this would be evil!]

- 'Of the world' would mean not just deemed foolish and weak by the world, but indeed foolish and weak in this world! How humbling to human pride!!
- Many believers down through the ages are thankful that the word here is 'not many' and not 'not any', for there are believers who wise and might and noble according to the flesh. Yet they are believers solely because of God's grace and mercy.

- True wisdom is a person. He has a name. His name is Jesus! Jesus is God's wisdom, in the sense that it is through Jesus and His work on the Cross that we can come back to God. Hence Jesus is our righteousness (by Him we are forgiven and right with God), our sanctification (by Him we become really holy) and redemption (by Him we will be glorified). Our salvation and hope is not in a system or teaching, but in a Person – Jesus Christ. He is all that we need.
- Verse 31 is a quotation from **Jeremiah 9:23-24**. To glory and boast in the LORD (Jesus) is to think and talk of Him always, delight in Him and so satisfied and contented that you have Him. (Think of a man who is very proud of his Rolex watch or Rolls Royce or 1<sup>st</sup> Class Honours. He will think and talk of it unceasingly, he will be very proud of it, and he will always link everything back to it!)

*So what's the message of this section?* The grace of the gospel is given to unpromising and insignificant people, people the world will never choose. This is God's way, the way of grace. It is so diametrically opposed to the wisdom of the world. And you Corinthian Christians are the immediate, blessed recipients of this grace. If this be so, then why all the obsession with *sophia* (worldly wisdom)?

### **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. <sup>2</sup>For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. <sup>3</sup>I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. <sup>4</sup>And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup>that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

## Notes

- The content of Paul's preaching is 'the testimony of God'. This could mean either testimony about God or testimony from God. Either way, Paul is just a herald. His method of conveying the message is not by acting, not by singing but by declaring. He does not and will not declare it with excellence of speech or wisdom.
- The 'I determined' will tell us that this is a deliberate choice Paul has made. He is determined that they will remember nothing about him, nothing about how well he has spoken. All they will remember is 'Jesus and Him crucified'. He is determined to make that prominent, and that alone.
- This straight-forward, non-flowery manner of preaching (so contrary to the eloquence and oratory of the Greeks --- see **Acts 24:1-9** for an example of flowery, flattering oratory but with no substance) is exactly what you must NOT do, if you want results! That's what the world would say. Yet such simple, and weak (as deemed by the world) preaching of Paul produced stunning results! Corinthians living in sin were converted and a church was planted in this sin city called Corinth! Weakness proclaimed by the weak among the weak but with mighty results!
- This simply demonstrated that the reason for the success is not the intelligence of the hearer or the eloquence of the preacher, but the power of the Redeemer. It is VERY CLEAR that this is a work of God – God is active, He is working!
- We cannot be certain as to the reason(s) why Paul was in weakness, fear and much trembling among them. Was it his physical condition then? Was it because of what happened at Athens, the last stop before Corinth? Whatever the reasons, it appears



to have further strengthened Paul's resolve not to speak in the way of the Greek orators.

- One way of preaching is to preach with persuasive words of human wisdom. The alternative (not really an alternative, it is the only right way to do it) is to do it in the demonstration of the Spirit and power. In other words, instead of relying on his oratory skills, it is to depend on God and His power to convict and convert. Paul chose to preach in this second way, not only because it is right, but also that their faith would clearly rest on God and His power.
- Is Paul saying here that our preaching and teaching must be as dull and boring as possible, done in monotone and in a haphazard way? No, for an analysis of his sermons in Acts and his writings in the epistles will reveal Paul planning his speech, Paul lively and arresting in his preaching and teaching. His point here is “what is our hope, where does our confidence lie?” In our abilities, or in God?

***So what's the message of this section?*** The preaching of the gospel done among them by Paul was so weak and unattractive. Yet it produced stunning results! Once again, this is in direct opposition to the wisdom of the world. You've seen it. You've experienced it. If this be so, then why all the obsession with *sophia* (worldly wisdom)?

Reviewing the message of each section, we see that whether it is about the content of the gospel, the converts of the gospel or the conveyance of the gospel, the world's methods were put to one side because the world's wisdom is utter folly! It is the wisdom of God that shines through! So the overall theme of **1:18-2:5** must have something to do with wisdom, God's wisdom above the world's, God's folly being wiser than men's wisdom, God's weakness being stronger than men's strength!

The connection between **1:18-2:5** (wisdom) and **1:1-0-17** (faction) must be that the deeper reason for their divisions is due to their obsession with worldly wisdom! This is what you see in the Corinthian society, and unfortunately, the Corinthian Christians are doing the same thing in the church! Their contamination led to their contentions and divisions, the root cause being their silly pursuit of worldly wisdom.

So Paul was working systematically to uproot this poison from their hearts!