

*1 Corinthians 1:19-21***PREFACE**

Most of us are familiar with the story by H. G. Wells in which a man invents a machine capable of transporting him either backward or forward in time. In our study two sessions back I tried to describe the indescribable: the supernatural, epochal moment of Christ's death on the cross.

This moment in time was like no other: the immediate effect was so powerful it split rocks and emptied graves, and the after-shocks of that moment reverberate still. This world and its people were and remain irrevocably changed by "the cross."

What the cross—that is, not the instrument, but the death of the Son of God upon it—what the cross fully is and was, what it accomplished and represented, is beyond the imagining of mere flesh. But God in His word supplies for us step-stones we might take at least *toward* that understanding.

Last week we looked at v19, where Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19.

Note the future tense of the verbs in that:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." (emphasis added)

The prophecy says this will happen in the future—the future from Isaiah's time. Now, note the verb tense in our passage today, especially in the rhetorical question that ends v20.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:20-21.

Note first Paul's inclusion of "this age" in "Where is the debater of this age?" Behind that choice of words is Paul's perennial eschatological emphasis; it is woven throughout this extended passage. A portion of Paul's mind is always looking toward the culmination of all things in Christ's return. Now note the past tense verb in v20.

"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (emphasis added)

Paul says that God has already accomplished this. It's done.

Question: When did He do this? When did it happen? (Answer: at the cross)

The cross is the believer's time machine! And David Garland puts it together for us:

Garland: Paul assumes that this age is tottering on its last legs and passing away. It is "beyond mere reform or correction by 'wisdom' or prophetic word but calls for a new creation" (Thiselton). *The wisdom of the cross, by contrast, is the wisdom of the world-to-come.* (emphasis added)

Christians very often get ridiculed for being old fashioned, behind the times, etc. But in fact we are the ones already living in the future, for we have a time machine, and it is called "the cross."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

One gets the impression that after the apostle quoted from Isaiah 29 to back up his point in v19, he kept reading from the scroll. Because he picks up not the theme, but the *rhythm* of Isaiah 33:18 for v20.

Your heart will meditate on terror:
 "Where is he who counts?
 Where is he who weighs?
 Where is he who counts the towers?" (Isaiah 33:18)

Thus in v20 he mimics the rhythm:

Where is the wise man?
 Where is the scribe?
 Where is the debater of this age?
 Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:20)

Paul is not opening up a new discussion here, but using sarcasm to reinforce what Isaiah wrote in the future tense, and what he (Paul) will write in the past tense. God said He would destroy the clever, self-serving wisdom of this world and its societies. So Paul rhetorically looks around and says, *Well then, tell me: Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater?*

Who is he referring to? He would seem to be listing the prominent "wise men" of his age.

wise (man) = *sophos* (sof-os') = probably referring to Greek philosophers. We get the word "sophistry" from this: [Webster's](#): "unsound or misleading but clever, plausible and subtle argument or reasoning" (and today we are literally *surrounded* by sophistry.)

scribe = *grammateus* (grahm-ah-tooce') = writer or secretary, but more to the point, among the Jews their rabbis and teachers, interpreters of the law. [The "scholar" in the earlier NIV is not good.](#)

debater^{nasb, esv}, **disputer**^{kjvs}, **philosopher**^{niv} = *syzetetes* (sood-zat-tay-tace') = a disputant, i.e., sophist; used only here (in all of Greek literature only here and once in Ignatius). [Again, the "philosopher" in the NIV doesn't quite capture the combative aspect of this word.](#) "The man who wanted to dispute every issue and solve it by human reason" (W. Harold Mare).

See if David Garland's summary of these three categories doesn't ring true—not just in the first century, but today.

Garland: ...those who refract their search for truth through the lens of human wisdom and derive their status from their expertise. These who have made it their goal to search for "truth" greet with skepticism anything that does not match their own prejudgment of what truth is.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

To my ears, Paul answers the rhetorical question at the end of v20 with v21.

v21

Read 1 Corinthians 1:21.

He closes his list of the worldly wise with, *Hasn't God already made foolish the wisdom that is of this world? How, you ask? Well, just think about it: God, in His wisdom, decided that fallen man could not come to know Him through their own brand of wisdom. Instead, He decided that the only way to truly know Him would be through the gospel of Christ—that is, the cross—through a message the wise of this world would consider utter foolishness!* (a Lampel paraphrase)

Here's how *The Message* paraphrases vv20-21.

So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—preaching, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.

Every morning when I read even a tiny subset of the world's news, I am reminded of this. There really are two separate worlds simultaneously in play:

- First, there is the old, rotten world of fallen man and his earthen dwelling place, a world populated by individuals who think they are oh, so smart, but who are, in fact, only irretrievably ignorant.
- Then there is the future world of God's kingdom—some of it already here, but most of it still waiting in the wings—a futuristic, other-worldly place populated by cherubim, angels, saints and, most of all, God Almighty and His Son, who created the universe and created the rules for salvation. It is a spiritual place, yet more real than anything we know on this earth. *And we know it only because of God's Time Machine.*

Verse 21 is one of those passages that is a bit confusing—on the surface it sounds circular, as if chasing its own tail. But when one digs in, it presents a fascinating picture of the way things are. So let's take it a piece at a time.

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God,

Mere creatures haven't the capacity within themselves to discover the living God. Why not? Because this is according to God's design. The citizens of this world that do not know Him can deny it all they like, but God's wisdom always wins over theirs. And, once again, we are left with a timeless truth—true in the first century, and true today. Here is how Gordon Fee explains it.

Fee: A "God" discovered by human wisdom will be both a projection of human fallenness and a source of human pride, and this constitutes the worship of the creature, not the Creator.

Fee is referring to the passage in Romans, a letter written after 1 Corinthians, in which Paul really cuts loose on this topic.

Read Romans 1:21-25.

God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Most of our popular versions properly translate the Greek behind the word “preaching.”

NASB: the foolishness of the message preached

NIV: the foolishness of what was preached

NKJV: the foolishness of the message preached

ESV: the folly of what we preach

Because the Greek *kerygma* (kay'-roog-mah) refers not to the *act* of preaching, but the *content* of that proclamation—here, the message of a crucified Messiah, as Paul details in the following verses—the KJV, with “foolishness of preaching” is misleading.

God was well-pleased...

This is not passive, but active. Saying that God was “well-pleased” does not mean He simply gave His assent to something that occurred. This verse says that “God was well-pleased... *to save those who believe*” (emphasis added). God was not just pleased by what happened; He was pleased to ensure that it would happen.

...through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Don't miss the importance of what Paul is declaring here. If 1 Corinthians was written before Galatians and Romans, which seems to be the case, this would be the earliest expression of something not just central to Paul's theology, but something of foundational importance to our understanding of God's salvation plan.

Read Galatians 1:15-16.

Because we are surrounded by elements that preach foolishness instead of God's wisdom, and because we carry around in our flesh the proclivity to *believe* foolishness, we must keep reminding ourselves of the point Paul makes here. The society in which we dwell, and our own flesh are persistent in convincing us that we are somehow responsible for our own salvation. Many of us heard it first at our high school or college graduation, those loathsome lines from the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley.

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.

Our salvation is all of God! *He* initiates it; *He* makes it possible; *He* does it all. And, once again, this was not something invented under the New Covenant. Listen to what Yahweh said to the prophet Jeremiah.

Read Jeremiah 1:4-5.

It is not wisdom that saves us—it is the gospel. It is not the preacher who saves us—it is the gospel. And the only way to know God is through believing the “foolishness” of the message preached—the gospel.