

*1 Corinthians 1:22-25***PREFACE**

Let's back off a bit to reestablish our perspective on the extended passage before us. The passage from v1:18 to v2:5 deals a lot with foolishness and wisdom, and can be subdivided neatly into three sections.

- Verses 1:18 to 1:25 – The “Foolishness” of the Cross
- Verses 1:26 to 1:31 – The “Foolishness” of the Corinthian Church
- Verses 2:1 to 2:5 – The “Foolishness” of Paul’s Preaching

We are still in the first section, in which Paul contrasts the apparent “foolishness” of the cross, in the eyes of this world—that is, “Christ crucified”—to what this world considers wisdom. By God’s grace we will complete this section today.

*Impress Me*

Approximately forty-six years ago, Linda and I bought our first car after we were married. *Before* we were wed we had purchased a sturdy, used, Chevy pickup which served to get us and all our belongings cross-country from Marshalltown to San Diego. But it wasn’t long before that practical old pickup seemed *impractical* for the streets of sunny Southern California. So we visited a local dealership, located on the “Mile of Cars” in Mission Valley, where they gave us oh, such a deal on a zippy, red, Mustang convertible. It was still used, but boy was it a flashy little thing, and with the top down we could really enjoy the warm, Mediterranean climate of the region.

Now, it’s true we did not discover sawdust in the crankcase, but one day we were driving through one of the worst areas downtown; when the light changed and I shifted to first gear, the stick shift dropped straight down to the floorboards. That, along with other mechanical problems and the sheer impracticality of a convertible taught us some valuable lessons. We had been dazzled; we had been impressed by something that was pretty much all flash and little substance.

Which is a pretty good description of much of society in the first century, as well as today. Paul refers to them as “Jews and Greeks,” which, since “Greeks” can also refer to Gentiles, covers pretty much everyone. They were saying, “Impress me with flash,” and Paul was answering with substance: “Christ crucified.”

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25****v22**

*For indeed Jews ask for signs...*

The Jews became so persistent in requiring signs and miracles of Jesus that even the Son of Man got fed up with it.

**Read Mark 8:11-12.**

In the gospel of John a royal official comes to Jesus requesting healing for his son. Jesus loses patience and says, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe” (John 4:48)

There is a dark arrogance implicit in the Jewish demand for supernatural “signs.” Think about it: This has the relationship backwards. Instead of meeting with God on the level of faith and trust in Him, they expect Him to “present His credentials in the form of visible and identifiable acts” (Barrett). Thus they set themselves up as the authority passing judgment upon God. “They expect God to submit Himself to their criteria” (Conzelmann). And this remains even today the predominant manner in which “those who are perishing” approach God: expecting *Him* to kowtow to *them*. In their confused “wisdom” it is the pot that tells the potter how to make the pot! (Isaiah 29: 16)

*and Greeks search for wisdom;*

As we have seen in this study, the Greeks sought after and honored worldly wisdom (*sofia*). Paul could be using the Greek word *Hellen* (hel'-ane) to refer to all non-Jews (i.e., Gentiles), but I think he uses *Hellen* instead of *ethnos* (the standard word for Gentiles) because in his arguments he is emphasizing the Hellenistic search and love for wisdom.

Both of these cultures, each in their own way, wanted to be impressed. Whether by miraculous demonstrations of the power of God, or by nuanced rhetoric, they were looking for something with flash, something impressive—as was, apparently, some in the Corinthian church.

Oh, let us learn from these twin idolatries that still pervade not just “those who are perishing,” but often “us who are being saved” (v18) as well. The Lord God is sovereign over all. He alone has the power; He alone has the wisdom and truth.

v23

But Paul was offering them a Chevy pickup rather than a red, Mustang convertible.

*but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,*

**Note:** “Christ crucified” = “a crucified Messiah” or even “a crucified messiah” (i.e., no definite article)

*to Jews a stumbling block*

The very idea of a crucified Messiah was utterly unacceptable to the Jews. The Greek translated “stumbling block” is *skandalon*, from which we get our words scandal and scandalous. And, from their perspective, we can’t really blame them. The law was clear about anyone “[hung] on a tree.”

**Read Deuteronomy 21:22-23.**

Literally, he has the curse of God upon him.

To the Jews this—crucified Messiah—would be a ridiculous contradiction of terms. “*Messiah* meant power, splendor, triumph; *crucifixion* meant weakness, humiliation, defeat” (Fee).

Although all of our popular versions translate this “stumbling block,” Fee points out that “scandal” would be closer to the sense. “The word does not so much mean something that one is tripped up by, as something that offends to the point of arousing opposition.”

*and to Gentiles foolishness,*

Even non-Jews of the time—just as so many people from different cultures today—consider the notion that God died on a cross (then on the third day after was resurrected) to be utterly ridiculous. This raises the question then, Why do we believe? What makes the difference in us?

v24

Paul answers the cry of “foolishness!”—and note this—not by softening his message, not by backing down or giving in, but by declaring with unblinking clarity,

*but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

We live in a time in which the “wisdom” of the world is becoming, by the day, increasingly bizarre. Every morning one can read headlines that announce with a straight face the utter lunacy of our times. Just this last week I saw this one: “City Removes Gorilla Statue From Playground Over Complaints It’s ‘Racially Insensitive’.”

I recall several years back when someone in Washington used the word “niggardly” in a discussion of economics and was immediately denounced for being a racist! (niggardly, from the Scandinavian *hnæggr*, has nothing to do with race, but simply means stingy, miserly)

And these people are the wise ones? In contrast to what happens so often today, Paul doesn’t back down. He, essentially, says, *No, you are the crazy ones.*

Paul says that what to you, Jew, is a scandal, and to you, Greek, is foolishness, to us—those called by God—the same thing is the power and wisdom of God. To those who think the scandal of the cross sucks away the power of Jesus, and to those who think the idea of very God being hung from a tree is stupid, Paul says, *You’re both wrong; the cross declares power, and declares the eternal wisdom of a sovereign God.*

Note Paul’s synonyms in this larger passage:

v18: us who are being saved

v21: those who believe

v24: those who are the called

In the context of God’s salvation economy, Paul employs these in reverse order. In actuality, one is called, then he believes, then he is saved. Because someone is “called” (chosen by God) he or she is able to *hear* God’s call, and be open to it.

Because of this calling, the believer’s circuits are reversed. It is very much like getting glasses for the first time. After a lifetime of 20/20 vision, I remember getting angry at the TV because the text on the screen was not clear, and sometimes double. But when I got my first pair of glasses, I suddenly realized the problem was not with the TV, but with *me*.

Those “who are perishing” look at the gospel, look at the cross, and see foolishness. They think there is something wrong with *that*. But if they subsequently become someone “being saved,” and now in possession of that great Translator, the Holy Spirit, they suddenly realize the problem was not with the gospel; the problem was with *them*.

And when we become someone “being saved,” and the wisdom we follow is not that of the world, but of eternal God—the power and wisdom of God in Christ—then we can understand and embrace the “foolishness” of a bloody, slaughtered Lamb as the “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

### **Read Revelation 5.**

There, in the apostle John’s vision, is the visible reality to prove the truth of Paul’s statements in our text. Jesus *is* the Lion of Judah, but He is also the Lamb that was slain, and as both He is due—and already has—all majesty and wisdom and power. And, at the same time, the slain Lamb represents the inherent wisdom and power of Almighty God.

### **v25**

Paul is still employing irony and sarcasm as he closes this passage in v25.

*Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men,  
and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

I am reminded of how things have been playing out for the last year with our current president. Love him or hate him, one has to admit that Donald J. Trump can be clever. His foes will repeatedly think they have him on the ropes, perhaps even beaten into whimpering submission, then he will spring on them something unexpected and bizarre, which all the talking heads will declare utter “foolishness”—yet, in the end, it works. Listen to how Gordon Fee describes not President Trump’s actions, but God’s.

*Fee:* In the cross God “outsmarted” his human creatures and thereby nullified their wisdom. In the same cross God also “overpowered” his enemies, with lavish grace and forgiveness, and thereby divested them of their strength.

If we had been consulted on that decision, we would have said, *That won’t work!* But we weren’t consulted. And it *did* work. Perfectly.

### **Read Psalm 119:46-47.**

### **Read Romans 1:16-17.**

As believers we are left with a choice: Will we make apologies for, or wholeheartedly embrace that which the world considers foolishness? Will we mumble and stutter before the world’s wisdom and try to shave off the sharp edges of the gospel, or will we unabashedly stand for God’s way of doing things?

The choice is ours.