

## PREFACE

*R. B. Gaffin:* Believers and unbelievers belong to two different worlds; they exist in not only separate but antithetical [exactly opposite] “universes of discourse.”

*David Garland:* Consequently, unbelievers will continue to grope in their own darkness and yet think that they see and understand.

What King Solomon wrote almost 3,000 years ago remains true today: “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). What is, has been before; what will be tried has *already* been tried; anything new is already old.

Even so, in my lifetime I cannot recall a time in which Gaffin’s and Garland’s sentiments were more true than now. The church is surrounded by those who live in darkness yet are absolutely sure—aggressively so, combatively so—that they are in possession of the true light. As Solomon wrote in Proverbs 4,

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,  
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.  
The way of the wicked is like darkness;  
They do not know over what they stumble.  
(Proverbs 4:18-19)

The apostle Paul paints the picture of these two different worlds in our text:

- there is this age, and there is the age to come;
- there is the wisdom of this age, and there is the wisdom of God;
- there are those who are mature, and those who are infantile;
- there are those who understand the wisdom of this age, and those who understand the timeless wisdom of God;
- and in an implicit sub-text, there are those seeking God’s glory (and the glory He will dispense in the age to come), and those seeking their own glory in *this* age.

## Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-9.

v7

After spending some time detailing what he did *not* bring to the Corinthians, in v6 Paul begins his treatise on what he *did* bring them: “a wisdom...not of this age.” Because it is not of this age, this wisdom is a “mystery.”

*but [“No,” (strong adversative)] we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery*  
**mystery** = *mysterion* = from a derivative of *muo* (to shut the mouth); a secret or “mystery” (through the idea of silence imposed by initiation into religious rites) :- mystery.

Understanding how Paul uses this word is critical to understanding the passage. There is not one mystery; that is, as Paul develops his use of this ancient concept from secular Greek, through OT theology, into life in Christ, he employs it to illustrate various aspects of God’s wisdom, His incomparable truth—but always realized through Jesus Christ.

For example, in Colossians Paul writes that “Christ in you” is a mystery.

### **Read Colossians 1:25-28.**

What is this mystery? “Christ in you.”

In his letter to the Ephesians the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s salvation—their inclusion in the church, and their direct access to the Father ([Ephesians 3](#)) is a mystery.

And now in our text Paul, using “mystery” for the first time in his letters, writes that “Christ crucified”—that is, as he emphasizes in v8, a “crucified...Lord of Glory”—is a “mystery.” Although in various letters he associates mystery with different aspects of God’s salvation economy in Christ, in general “the term ‘mystery’ ordinarily refers to something formerly hidden in God from all human eyes but now revealed in history through Christ and made understandable to His people through the Spirit” (Fee).

This passage is not just the first time Paul has mentioned a “mystery,” but really it is the root of it all. There is surely nothing more mysterious, more unknowable to the unregenerate of *any* age than the Son of God—i.e., God Himself—dying an ignominious, shameful death for the salvation of any who would believe.

The subject of v7 is not “mystery,” however, but “God’s wisdom,” in contrast to the wisdom of this age.

*the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages..*

And understand, Paul is not speaking or delivering God’s wisdom in a mysterious manner. If he were he would be doing precisely what he accused the Hellenistic mystery cults of doing. The context does not permit such an interpretation. No, what he is saying is that God’s wisdom is, shall we say enveloped in, contained in a mystery.

Paul is couching his argument in the vernacular of the mystery cults with which the Corinthians are enamored. And, if we are honest, there *are* some similarities—with one really big difference. In the mystery cults there existed a set of “mysteries,” or secrets known only to those who had proved themselves sufficiently “mature”—or “perfect”—to receive them. One would have to pass through a series of initiation rites to prove oneself worthy of learning the secrets.

If we are honest God’s wisdom is sort of like that. Before time began (“predestined before the ages”) God decided that He would wrap His wisdom in a mystery—knowable not through human effort or human perfection, *but by the Spirit*. “For to us God revealed them through the Spirit” (v10a). There is indeed a requirement to learn and comprehend the wisdom of God; that requirement is found in Christ. Through Christ we receive the Holy Spirit, who unlocks the wisdom. The literal *words* of God’s wisdom are not secret, but there for all to see. Absent the Spirit of God, however, the words are meaningless—it is the difference between “foolishness” and “the power of God.”

### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:18.**

That is the difference the Spirit makes in a life: He unlocks what is knowable about God.

*to our glory;*

And here is the other really big difference. There is a “why” to all this, and it bears no similarities to the wisdom cults. The why is “to our glory.” Again Paul references the end-times, and the believer’s resurrection. But this is also another “now—not yet” situation. Each believer, to varying degrees, has already begun the transformation process, already experiencing the glory to come, and will do so in ever increasing ways until he or she comes to the final glory (Garland). This is not an exalted, earthly glory in which we consider ourselves better than others because we’ve cracked the mystery. No, this is the gradual (at first) apprehension of God’s glory through Christ, culminating in the totality of our glorification at the resurrection. It is never really *our* glory, but the acquisition by grace of *God’s* glory.

At the risk of being redundant, I don’t want you to miss the difference between the “mysteries” that have been corrupting the gospel in Corinth and the mystery of which Paul speaks. They have a few similarities, but there is one critical difference. Human effort was required to acquire the “wisdom” of the mystery cults, but the “hidden wisdom of God” which is wrapped in a mystery is acquired only in Christ, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Thus any “glory” that results is not our own, but God’s.

v8

*the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood;*

Of course not; how could they without the Spirit of God.

*for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;*

The “rulers of this age”—specifically here, the Jewish and Roman rulers in Jerusalem—were using *human* wisdom, human logic to ascertain God’s wisdom. This is like coming up to a locked door and brushing aside someone’s offer of the appropriate key in favor of a splinter of wood. “I think this will work, I think I can get it,” while all you are doing is mangling the piece of wood. The other person stands there, offering the key, but you prefer to jam chunks of wood into the hole. So, of course, the door never gets opened.

The wisdom of God—and here Paul returns to the specific: Christ crucified—is not ascertained by earthly means, but by supernatural means. It is true that once the Spirit has unlocked the door, human knowledge and wisdom of Spirit-enabled pastors, teachers, interpreters, and commentators can assist us in understanding God’s revealed wisdom, but they will never unlock the door in the first place. The door must be opened first by the Spirit before they can be of any help.

By earthly wisdom the “rulers of this age” determined, for political reasons, that Jesus of Nazareth was a fraud, a messianic pretender. The Jewish rulers said He couldn’t be the *true* Messiah; He wasn’t behaving or speaking as they thought He should. And the apostle Peter pointed out one aspect of the irony in his remarks at the temple.

### **Read Acts 3:14-15**

**Note:** *archegos* can be translated either Prince or Author.

Gordon Fee points out the epochal irony of the rulers' decision.

*Fee:* The very ones who were trying to do away with Jesus by crucifying Him were in fact carrying out God's prior will. Instead of crucifying a messianic pretender, they killed the "Lord of glory" Himself.

And the words of Joseph to his brothers presaged this moment:

**"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." (Genesis 50:20)**

The "rulers of this age" meant the crucifixion of Christ Jesus for evil: their motives were evil, their intent was evil. But God meant it for good: "to preserve many people alive."

v9

For now let us just take this verse at face value. I reserve the right to supplement with additional information in our next session. Most commentators agree that Paul is *probably* quoting—loosely, in part—Isaiah 64:4. Both seem to be making the same point.

### **Read Isaiah 64:4.**

Now Paul's loose adaptation—or, quite possibly, his quotation of a familiar loose adaptation:

### **Read 1 Corinthians 2:9.**

Joseph's brothers did not know that their evil intent would turn out for good. They had no way of knowing that God was orchestrating the whole thing.

The "rulers of this age" did not know that their evil intent would turn out for good. They had no way of knowing—that is, unless they had been better students of OT prophecy—that God was orchestrating the whole thing.

Earthly, human senses—eye, ear, the heart—cannot perceive or even imagine all that God has preordained to be worked out for the good of those who love Him.

This earth is home to two different—and opposing—worlds: one natural, earthly, human; and the other supernatural, spiritual, other-worldly. The first does not, indeed *cannot*, comprehend God's wisdom and His purposes; it rejects such foolishness. The second has had God's wisdom and His purposes unlocked by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. Its citizens, remaining in flesh, may not always understand the fullness of the Lord's purposes, but their faith in Him bridges that gap.

Key to this is the essential Spirit.