

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Paul nails his colours to the mast when he makes an immensely powerful declaration about the cross of Christ in verse 18. He backs his claims up with a quote culled from Isaiah 29:14. In a handful of words, Paul leaves people in no doubt as to what he thinks is the core issue of the Christian gospel – for him, this is paramount, the cross is supremely important!

For fairly obvious reasons, the gospel impacts different people in different ways. He spells it out in easy-to-understand terms when he says ‘it is foolishness to those who are perishing’ and it is ‘the power of God’ to those who are being saved.

That tells me there are two distinct groups of people mentioned in Paul’s incisive comment. There are those who are perishing and there are those who are saved. That’s the kind of language you hear when a ship is going down! Some people make it and some folks don’t. Those who perish are those who are lost, the ones who are rescued are those who are saved!

So often in today’s PC world, we shy away from using these biblical expressions – at the same time, it doesn’t eliminate the reality of their condition.

Such a message is ‘foolishness’ because men don’t see their need of a Saviour in Jesus. They are oblivious to their lostness, as it were—they bury their heads in the sand and reckon it’ll be all right on the night when they stand before God. Well, it does not work that way! Many folks seem to think they can get by on a wing and a prayer, they live a decent life, they pay their taxes, they don’t do anyone any harm, they’re good neighbours, and all that – according to Paul and Jesus, that’s not enough. In the words of the song: people need the Lord!

Paul also used the expression ‘being saved’ – that reminds us that our salvation is in three tenses or three stages. We have been saved, we are being saved, and one day we will be saved. Saved in the past from the penalty of sin, saved today from the power of sin,

and one day we have the exhilarating prospect of being saved from the presence of sin. The thought is that God doesn't save us and then drop us, he doesn't save us and then leave us to get on with the rest of our lives on our own – no, he is continually working in us, it's an ongoing operation of grace in your heart and life.

Paul highlights the power of the gospel message when he used that term in verse 18. It is explosive. Dynamite. The kind of stuff that blows the mind wide open—spiritual Semtex. Such is the phenomenal ability of God to change people's lives for the better. Nothing is too hard for the Lord.

Paul culls a text from Isaiah 29 to remind us that God has his own way of doing things – God's way is not the way of the man in the street, God isn't overly impressed with a person's IQ or brain power. You don't need to be a member of Mensa to qualify for God's salvation – I'm sure glad we don't! I bet you are too!

In one sense, the wise man will turn to the Lord and, if a person has any intelligence at all, they will do the same ... but that's not the be-all and end-all! Paul develops the theme later in the section when he reminds us that God takes us the way that we are and he makes us into the kind of people that he wants us to be! In other words, you don't have to be clever to trust Jesus! Albeit the man's a fool if he doesn't!

I think we'll pause for a short music break and, when we come back, I want us to pursue this thought a little further by looking at Paul's comment in verse 20.

MUSIC BREAK

They were an arrogant lot these folks in the church at Corinth. Away back at the onset of time God created man in his own image—the competition began when man insisted on returning the compliment. That's the mould of the Corinthians! You see these folks are playing for the wrong side, they're batting for the wrong team. I said before the break that God has his own way of doing things—we need to remember that's the kind of thing you can do when you're God, but

we're not in that class. God does what he does because he is who he is!

When Paul talks to these folks about the cross, it has to be said, they are not hugely impressed. A cross after all was nothing more than a horribly horrendous death – and they don't want to have much to do with that kind of thing. It doesn't appeal to their cultural sensitivity nor does it attract them because of their high-brow attitude to life.

The fact is, this is God's way and there is no other way! He talks about a crucified Saviour and he advocates a dying to self on a daily basis! You see, that's something these folks would never dream up, they would neither expect it or invent it. From their perspective, this is divine logic, and it's incredibly hard to fathom. It's thinking outside the box.

Paul's apt quote from Isaiah 29:14 is a powerful reminder that God always gets the last laugh, he alone can turn the tables on modern man. Back in Isaiah's day, the prophecy was made when Israel had long been divided into two nations through civil war, you can read the background history in 1 Kings 12. The northern half called itself Israel, while the southern half was called Judah.

The context of Isaiah's verse concerns the Israelites prideful actions, which brought down an edict from God. The ferocious Assyrian army was poised on Israel's border like a tiger ready to pounce. Instead of turning to God for protection, Israel took what they thought was the easy way out—they followed human counsel and formed an alliance with Egypt, that's in 2 Kings 17:4.

When she relied on human force, human wisdom, and human power, she compromised her standard of separation from pagan nations. Needless to say, history records for posterity that the results were devastatingly tragic. They blew it big time!

Israel was looking for wisdom in the intellect of man, but the final score revealed that she came up short. That's what always happens when we depend on man instead of relying upon the Lord. Israel chose to play for the wrong team, the opposition, and she lost!

That's the extremely serious message that Paul wants to get across to these folks and to you and me as well—God's way is not the easy way, but it's always the best way! When it comes to doing what God wants us to do, there is no plan B. Let's face it, who wants to go through life as a loser. I'd rather be a winner any day, wouldn't you!

That's why Paul responds in the manner he does in verse 20 with a series of penetrating questions: 'Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?'

Four questions that make the single point that God has all the answers, man has very few! It doesn't matter how clever he is, man is still off beam when it comes the know-how of God. In Paul's rationale in verse 20, the 'wise' man was the unsaved Gentile intellectual, the 'scholar' was the Jewish intellectual, the 'philosopher' was the nothing-else-to-do-with-his-time Greek debater.

The implication behind Paul's triple rhetorical questions is that their bright ideas will get them nowhere! O yes they ask all the questions and they debate all the issues, but they fail miserably when it comes to delivering the goods in the form of answers! They don't have the answers to life's most important question, they're looking in the wrong textbook!

Paul amplifies his thinking in verse 21 by taking it the scenario a stage further. He shows us how relevant his teaching is to postmodern man in the third millennium. In spite of man's fantastic achievements in recent years, in spite of his ability to do all kinds of unbelievable things, he still hasn't cracked the divine code.

Man and God are on two different channels, they operate on two different wavelengths. Man goes for wisdom and will do anything to bolster his own position—God goes for that which appears foolish and uses it to powerfully transform men's lives. God does for man what man can and could never do for himself and that's the mega unbridgeable difference between them! It's a gap so wide that man

can't get over to the other side—unless, that is, he comes by way of the cross of Jesus!

Think about that for a moment, we'll take a music break, and when we come back we'll discover a few of Paul's insights on people of his day.

MUSIC BREAK

The focus here isn't only on the passion of Christ, it's on the power of the cross! Jesus saves is the caption over this section. Paul isn't advocating that we preach a foolish message, far from it. What we declare to sinful man isn't stupid stuff, it's not a load of nonsense or codswallop. No, it makes a lot of very good sense, both in time and eternity. God knows what he's doing and this is his way of getting people to put their trust in him. That's what Paul emphasises at the end of verse 21, the message is to 'save those who believe'.

It's a matter of sinners taking God at face value, taking God at his word, and believing what he says about them and about his Son, the Lord Jesus. When we kneel at the foot of the cross of Jesus, it's not only a meeting of minds, it's a meeting of hearts! God does a deep work of grace in the lives of those who trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

In verse 22, Paul gives us quite a breathtaking insight into the mindset of the Jews and Greeks. Here we see what makes them tick. The Jews 'demand miraculous signs' whilst the Greeks go rummaging around for 'wisdom'.

The Jews want something tangible to verify the claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They want to see it for themselves that it actually works. They're looking for proof. And what they get doesn't convince them that it's worth embracing—after all, they were looking for a victorious leader who would wipe out their enemies and give them a wonderful kingdom, all they saw in Jesus was a forlorn figure hanging on a cross of shame. No white horse, no shining lance. When they looked at Jesus, they didn't see much to get overly excited about!

So far as the Greeks were concerned, they were looking for Mr Wise Guy – someone who could argue and reason with them as to the finer points of law. They wanted a top debater, someone who would spend hours engaged in trivial discussion about the state of the world or whatever. They wanted someone to tickle their fancy and satisfy their curiosity. The Jesus they see in the gospels does absolutely nothing for them, he flies in the face of all logic and sensible thinking. His beginnings were humble and his end wasn't much better for he even had to be buried in a borrowed grave. Who wants to follow someone like that?

You can see where the Jews and Greeks are coming from – that is their position. That's why Paul goes down the road he does in verse 23 with the hugely affirmative phrase: 'but we preach Christ crucified'. Yes, the Jews have their mindset, the Greeks have their thinking, but that doesn't influence what we preach and teach—we stick to the story that God gave us! There's no need to amend it, there's no need to adapt it, there's no need to do anything with it—it's the message of Jesus and his death and resurrection! That's it. Pure and simple.

Such a message presents a huge challenge to both parties – for the Jews it is a big stumbling block and for the Greeks it is just plain stupid. The Jews struggle to shake off the traditions of the past, they can't cope with the demands of the cross of Jesus, they are hung up on the simplicity of the gospel message and can't believe that it can be so good if it's free! The Greeks are in a bit of a quandary when they try to make sense of the cross of Jesus. They reckon it all flies in the face of reason – it's not the kind of thing that intelligent people do. How can you have faith and trust in someone who was subjected to such a brutal and grotesque battering before he died on a cross? From their perspective, it's asking too much. Having said all that, Paul leaves no stone unturned when he reminds them that some Jews and some Greeks have burned their bridges and decided to follow Jesus. Paul refers to them as 'those whom God has called'. Yes, he has, and he did the same for you and me!

He called them to himself when they responded to the evangelical appeal of the gospel message. In that sense, and at that moment, they passed from darkness into marvellous light—they became a brand new community in the love of God. From death to life—that's the power of the cross of Jesus!

Not the Christ of the manger, or the temple, or the marketplace, but the Christ of the cross. You see, it's in the death of Christ that God has revealed the foolishness of man's wisdom and the weakness of man's power. Some people stumble at the cross, others laugh at the cross, while some engage and experience the power and wisdom of the cross.

That's an appropriate moment for us to pause for a final music break. Ponder the question: do I know anything of the power of the cross in my life?

MUSIC BREAK

Paul makes much of the character and ability of Jesus Christ in his closing comment in verse 24. He specifically refers to the 'power of God' and the 'wisdom of God'. Wonder why? Well, those are the two areas that the Jews and Greeks wrestled most with. In spite of man's feelings, God is omnipotent, he is all powerful and all strong. In spite of man's fears, God is all wise and omniscient. There's nothing our God can't do and there's nothing our God doesn't know!

His parting shot in verse 25 is a classic Pauline statement. He has the uncanny knack of drawing all the loose ends together in a brilliant summary. He writes that 'the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.' In other words, even man at his wisest, can't outthink the Lord – God is always one step ahead. And, man at his strongest is still no match for God at his weakest, as it were.

I'll tell you what it does – it highlights the inferiority of human wisdom and it underlines the superiority of divine wisdom. In a sense, man is light years behind the Lord and there's no way he'll ever catch up! It also shows us the permanence of God's wisdom

for it is eternal, it lasts forever. The power of divine wisdom is seen in its transformational impact on the lives of ordinary people. God changes people from the inside out. He gives us a new life and a fresh start.

That's why the Christian can heartily sing when he takes time to focus on the cross of Christ: 'Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.'