

## 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5

In the verses we're looking at today, Paul touches on some very wonderful truths. He reminds us of the awesome ability of God for God takes us the way that we are and he makes us into the kind of people he wants us to be. The apostle encourages us to look back and reflect on what we once were.

You see, the way God looks at things is different from the way we look at them, the way God handles people is different from the way we do it. God is aware of the mega problems and he's familiar with our past, but that doesn't deter him from working in our lives. He not only sees us as we were, and as we are, he sees what we can become! To me, that's the genius of God's amazing grace!

Paul kick-starts the section with the word 'brothers'. He wants to reassure them that they're part of God's global family, they are members of God's international redeemed community, and that, in spite of what they might think, he's also on their side. In a nice way Paul focuses their thinking on the mercy and love of God. They were getting more and more wrapped up in their own egos, they had the mistaken idea that they had it made, as it were. In no time at all, these guys had forgotten their roots and were feeling rather pompous and proud. Paul wants to get their eyes off themselves and away from each other on to the Lord.

I have a hunch that Paul feels as though the powers that be are not that enthused with his involvement in their church scene—he's the last one they probably wanted to hear from. But that's often the way the Lord works, it's his church! He knows who and what his people need and, you can be sure, he always finds a way for it to happen. He's the God who connects! The God we're talking about here is a can-do God!

These verses are all about perspective—our perspective about our role in the kingdom, our perspective on those around us in the family of God, our perspective on our past and our future, our perspective on time and eternity, our perspective on God and his

sovereign purpose and plan. The challenge is to get it right first time.

You see, if we fall at the first hurdle, we end up with a distorted view of the Christian life and our place in the overall scheme of things.

The man's a wise man who keeps on going even when the odds are stacked against him. The secret is to never forget your past and don't be blinkered about the realities of today, its to keep the main thing as the main thing—in other words, keep your focus on Christ.

We'll pause for a short music break and when we come back I want us to start unpacking some of the potentially life changing truths in this mini section of 1 Corinthians.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

It's so wonderful to see the kind of people that God uses in his church—very ordinary folks! People like you and me! People you could so easily write off as being non-starters, unpromising material.

Paul calls them in verse 26: 'not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth.'

I suppose most of us fit into one of those categories—there will be exceptions and we thank God for them. Generally speaking, though, the people God uses are just plain vanilla ordinary folk. The kind of individuals that, when you meet them down the street, you wouldn't look at them a second time. They don't have an aura about them, there's no halo around them—they're just everyday folk!

Run-of-the-mill people. As they say, common five-eighths! But that's great for it puts the onus on God to do something in us and with us.

In that sense, it takes the pressure off us to prove ourselves—if anything's going to happen, it has to be God that does it!

Most of us are not intellectual giants or geniuses; most of us are not movers and shakers for our sphere of influence is limited; most of us were not born with a silver spoon in our mouths or with the perks and privileges of high society. At the end of the day, it seems to me that most of us are boringly similar. That's the reality!

You see, that's where God steps into the picture—he has his agenda and he's sticking to it. He sees no reason to change tack, why should he? What he does, he does well—as they say, if it ain't broke, don't fix it!

That's where Paul's insights in verse 27 are breathtaking and beautiful. They pay eloquent tribute to the faithfulness of God, they say a lot about God's keen involvement in our lives. God knows precisely what he's doing when he does what he does. I love the way Paul starts the verse, he uses that delightful duo of words: but God!

Here's the God who bucks the trend; the God who seizes the moment to teach man a salutary lesson; the God who flies in the face of human thinking; the God who doesn't stick to the conventional way of doing things. Basically, he does it his way and that's it!

See the kind of people he chooses, the type of people he selects to do his kingdom work, the folks that he handpicks for the job in hand—listen: '[he] chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise [and] he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.'

Isn't that fantastic! Hey, my friend, that's why God chose me. And when you stop and think about it, that's the only reason why God chose you as well! You see, it's not how we start in life that's important, it's how we finish, that's what matters in eternity! If we've had a bad start, that's not the end, for God comes and works in our hearts and shapes us into the image of Jesus. Look, when it comes to your life and mine, nothing is too hard for the Lord.

The great news is that God didn't save us and then leave us high and dry, he didn't rescue us and then leave us to get on with the rest of our lives. No! He drew us to himself for a very real purpose—he wants us to shine like bright lights in a dark world.

Whether we realise it or not, whether we know it or not, God has a unique plan for each of us—he takes us the way that we are and he'll use us to confound those around us. People who had written us off will be astounded at how God is using and blessing us. That's what God specialises in doing—he takes guys like you and me and uses us to advance his kingdom on planet earth.

We don't have much to shout about in and of ourselves, but that's what it's all about for it means the spotlight is shining on Jesus. This is the divine masterplan, the divine strategy, it is to keep us from getting big heads and swollen egos. If I have any thing to boast or brag about, it's all about Jesus! I couldn't do what I'm doing if it wasn't for the Lord. In your life and mine, in your ministry and mine, Jesus is the centre of attraction and attention. To put it simply, I am nothing, I am a nobody, Jesus Christ is everything!

Think about that over the next few minutes and when we come back I want us to dig a little deeper into Paul's theology in verse 30.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul reminds us again in verse 30 that all that we are, and all that we have, and all that we ever hope to be, is down to the grace of God in our lives. We are debtors to mercy alone, we are on the receiving end of God's generous love and faithful care. We are what we are, we are who we are, we are where we are, all because of God's abundant grace! Look, my friend, we owe it all to him! He takes the credit for making something out of us. The praise goes to him. If anyone deserves a pat on the back, it's our Father God.

This is absolutely thrilling for it says a lot about the infinite patience of God in dealing with each of us individually, he's the God who specialises in the personal touch. On top of that, it's a poignant reminder, if one were needed, that the Lord is totally committed to us. He's working in us, he's working on us, and he's working through us!

Paul details a few of the remarkable benefits that God has given to us at the end of the verse. He writes: '[he] has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and

redemption.’ That should blow the cobwebs out of our lives at this point in time! In the final analysis, it confirms something we know already, God is on our side!

You see, God meets us where we are, he takes us the way that we are, and he pours himself into our hearts and lives. When he lives within us, by his Holy Spirit, we have no lack. All we need is found in him and, remember this, God never short changes his people. Each of these wonderful qualities that Paul highlights are invested in us right now and they’re there for us to appreciate and appropriate. In other words, in my ignorance, God is my wisdom; in those moments when I blow it big time and get it wrong, the Lord is my righteousness; when I don’t have that sanctified feeling and am overwhelmed with a sense of unworthiness, Jesus Christ is my holiness; and when I despair over my past and have doubts about my future, I can hold on to the fact that God has bought me and redeemed me to himself, he has my future in his hands. See what I mean, see how wonderful it all is!

When your life and mine is centred on Jesus Christ, when our ministry is God focused, we’re on the right track. We’re on the road that leads to phenomenal blessing for we’re a people who are saturated with God. We are permeated with the power and presence of a rejuvenating God, a God who revives and restores his people. That’s all that counts in this life!

Paul rounds the chapter off with something that he’s already said a few times before. He just wants to remind us again to get our act together when he challenges us: ‘let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’ In other words, says Paul, if you want to shout it from the rooftops, make sure you give God every bit of the glory. He alone is worthy.

If he’s nothing else, Paul is a realist. He knows what we’re all like and he also knows the pitfalls of gospel ministry. He’s all too aware that there are times in our lives when we like to hog the limelight, when we want to be centre stage. That’s what he wants us to guard

against, for he also knows how much better it is when Jesus is number one!

I think we'll stop for a moment's reflection, we'll take a music break and when we come back we'll move straight into chapter two and we'll see Paul in his true colours—this guy practised what he preached.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

In chapter 2, Paul gives us an intensely personal and up-close illustration of his own experience when he first came to their part of the world in Corinth. Even though he was a household name in Jewish circles, even though he had an unbelievable CV, even though he had a distinguished and illustrious career up to his Damascus road encounter with the living Christ, even though he was all of that and more, we read in verse 1 that he 'did not come [to them] with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.'

The thing about Paul is this, what you see is what you get. He doesn't put on any airs or graces depending on the company he's in. 24/7 he's the same, every time, every place! This guy is brutally honest in his assessment of his own life and ministry and he tells it, warts and all. What a wonderful quality for any man to have! The fact is we don't achieve anything by putting a gloss on our ministry, it's best to come clean and be upfront in all our relationships. Sure, we can fool each other some of the time, and we can massage our own egos for a wee bit more of the time; however, when all is done and dusted, we can't pull the wool over God's eyes. He sees all and he knows all and we can't fool him!

Paul's all-consuming passion in life and ministry was to glorify Jesus, he ate it, he drank it, he slept it. This was his sole aim in all that he did, this was the driving force in his life; he wanted nothing more than to magnify his Lord and Saviour. He never forgot what he once was! He never forgot that it was God who miraculously saved him. Paul's big ambition was to know nothing among them 'except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' Wow! He wasn't there to talk about

himself, he wasn't there to promote his own ideas or even to gain their support—he was there as God's ambassador and in all fairness to Paul, he was more than happy with that role!

He's big enough to admit his own shortcomings and, so far as he is concerned, there were plenty of them. That's the gist of his comments in verse 3. When the prince of preachers arrived in Corinth, he was scared stiff, the guy was petrified, I mean he was trembling in his sandals. Here's the man who had taken the gospel message to the regions beyond, the man who blazed a trail for Jesus to the ends of the earth, the man who pioneered and saw many miracles happen in his ministry, and yet, he's in Corinth, and he's weak at the knees. That says something! To me that shows the calibre of this preacher man—he has guts, he has God, and that's all that matters!

He readily acknowledged in verse 4 that he wasn't the most captivating or dynamic of speakers, in fact, he was downright boring. This guy didn't leave you enthralled with his skilful eloquence and oratory—if the truth be told, it was hard work listening to him. On a human level, he was a turn-off. It was probably easier watching paint dry or looking at the green grass growing. Much more absorbing!

However, what Paul had to say was well worth listening to! It was the word of God and it didn't need his help or eloquence to enhance it or improve it. In fact, if God could speak through Balaam's ass, he could speak through Paul. His obvious lack of charisma was no setback so far as the gospel was concerned, it certainly did not impede its progress in any way—read Acts to see what happened in the space of thirty years!

The human vessel did not detract in any way from the quality of God's word. He may not have been the most convincing key note speaker in the world, but the Lord mightily used him, that should be a source of immense encouragement to the rest of us lesser mortals.

In his weakness, God came! In his feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, God came! In his ordinariness, God came! Look, folks, that's what it's all about—those are magic and special moments when God comes and takes over and he does what he does best. God blesses his word to such a degree that men are amazed and blown out of their minds at the outcome—it's what Paul calls at the end of verse 4: a 'demonstration of the Spirit's power'. To me, that's what happens when God moves in real blessing, it's what transpires when God comes down in the high energy of the Holy Spirit and anoints his servants.

The result is a genuine awareness that God has done something that only he is able to do. Men know they are in the presence of the living God and they're quick to acknowledge that this is an awesome display of the power of God. You see, according to Paul in verse 5, our simple faith is resting, not on the shaky foundation of man's wisdom, but it's anchored to the solid rock of God's ability. That means, come what may, there's nothing for us to worry about. Our past is behind us, our future is before us, and right now, God can use us and God will use us!