

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The previous lesson closed the great argument of Chapter 1 by driving it home to its purpose. From 1:18 through 1:31, the wisdom and power of God stood revealed in the crucified Christ, over against the wisdom of the world, and the congregation at Corinth stood as the living proof: not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble, so that no flesh could boast and the only boast left was in the Lord. The doctrine had been established, and the settled state of things was clear. God chose the foolish and weak and lowly things and sourced the whole of the believer's standing in Christ alone.

Now the letter turns from the congregation to the Apostle Paul himself. Having pointed to the Corinthians as the proof of the argument, Paul will now point to himself. Chapter 2 opens with his own coming to Corinth, and it embodies in a single ministry the very principle just taught. What was done to the world's wisdom in the doctrine of Chapter 1, and what the composition of the church displayed in fact, the manner of Paul's preaching now enacts in person. He came with no superiority of speech or wisdom, resolved to know only Christ crucified, weak and trembling, so that the faith of the Corinthians would rest on the power of God and not on the wisdom of men.

The paragraph moves in four steps. Verse 1 states the manner of his coming, negatively: not with superiority of speech or wisdom. Verse 2 states the single thing he resolved to know: Christ crucified. Verse 3 states the condition he was in: weakness, fear, and trembling. Verses 4 and 5 state what his preaching was and why: not persuasive words of wisdom but demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that their faith would have the right foundation. Verse 5 is the keystone the whole paragraph is built to carry.

"And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

TEXTUAL OBSERVATION: THE MYSTERY OF GOD (2:1)

The NASB, along with most English versions, reads "the testimony of God" at the end of verse 1. Behind that translation lies one of the more evenly balanced textual questions in the letter, and it is worth a brief pause, because the decision shapes how the whole paragraph reads and because it opens a small window onto how the text was copied and preserved.

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Two Greek words stand in competition. One is μαρτύριον *marturion*, “testimony” or “witness.” The other is μυστήριον *mustērion*, “mystery.” In Greek, the two are nearly identical, differing by only a few letters, so a copyist’s eye or ear could slip from one to the other without difficulty.

The oldest witnesses read “mystery.” The earliest surviving copy of this letter, a papyrus from around AD 200, reads μυστήριον *mustērion*, and it is joined by the original hand of two of the great fourth-century codices and by other early manuscripts. The reading “testimony” is carried by another of the great codices and by the later majority of manuscripts. Weighed by age, then, the external evidence leans toward “mystery.”

One manuscript preserves the debate in a single glance. In Codex Sinaiticus, the scribe first wrote μυστήριον *mustērion*, “mystery”; a later corrector added small letters above the line to change it to μαρτύριον *marturion*, “testimony.” A fourth-century reader is caught in the act of second-guessing this very word.

The internal evidence cuts both ways, which is what makes the case genuinely close. “Mystery” could be a copyist’s anticipation of verse 7, where God’s wisdom is spoken of as a mystery; a scribe with that phrase coming up might let it slip back into verse 1. But “testimony” could just as easily be a copyist’s echo of 1:6, where the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed among them; that phrase, fresh from the opening, could pull the pen toward “testimony” here. The two possibilities pull in opposite directions and roughly cancel.

The case for “mystery” rests, then, on the age of its witnesses and on how well it fits the flow of the argument. At this point in the paragraph the theme of a hidden wisdom has not yet been introduced; it surfaces openly at verse 7. “Mystery” is therefore the less expected word here, and the less expected reading is often the earlier one, since copyists tend to smooth toward the familiar.

The two readings shape the verse differently. If the word is “testimony,” verse 1 looks backward, pairing with 1:6 and describing the proclamation as the attested witness of the gospel. If the word is “mystery,” verse 1 looks forward and becomes the thesis of the chapter: the mystery of God is proclaimed, and the rest of the chapter unfolds what that mystery is and how it is known. The sense of μυστήριον *mustērion* carries the weight here. In Pauline letters, it does not mean the unintelligible or the permanently secret. It means what human reasoning cannot reach on its own, hidden and then disclosed, made known by the Spirit through the prophets and apostles. This is why the gospel is a mystery to the wisdom of the Greek: not because it is incoherent, but because it is transcendent, prior to man and antithetical to anything human wisdom can produce, and so it can be received only as God reveals it. Read this way, verse 1 sets the theme the whole paragraph serves, and “mystery” is the reading this lesson follows.

EXPOSITION

Verse 1: The Manner of Paul's Coming

Paul opens with καὶ ἐγὼ kagō, a compressed “and I” (καί kai joined to ἐγὼ egō). In 1:26 the congregation was held up as evidence, “consider your calling”; now the same evidence turns to the Apostle himself. Two exhibits are set side by side, the people God called and the preacher God sent, and both are unimpressive by the measure Corinth kept. The “and I” also reaches back to 1:17, where the commission was first stated in the same terms, not in cleverness of speech. What was announced there as principle returns here as practice.

The sentence is deliberately slowed by a doubled verb of coming, both from ἔρχομαι erchomai: “when I came to you, I came.” The repetition throws the weight off the fact of the arrival and onto its manner. Everything that follows describes how he came.

That manner is stated first by what it refused: “not with superiority of speech or of wisdom.” The noun is ὑπεροχή huperochē, preeminence, elevation, a standing above others; the same word describes those in high position in 1 Timothy 2:2. It names the raised platform and the conferred status the orator won by performing. Paul refused to arrive on that high ground. The refusal is then split into two by the disjunction “or.” The two levels diagnosed earlier in the section are named separately and both are to be discarded: λόγος logos, the rhetorical surface, the entertaining delivery and eloquence prized as form; and σοφία sophia, the wisdom underneath it, the philosophical framework and value system that gave the eloquence its content. In 1:17 the two were fused into a single phrase; here they are pulled apart, and both are declined. He came neither as the accomplished speaker nor as the philosophical sage, though both were the currency of standing in Corinth, and σοφία sophia was the very thing the Greek demanded (1:22).

What he did instead is named by a herald's word, καταγγέλλω katangellō, to announce or proclaim publicly. He came proclaiming “the mystery of God.” There is a fitting tension between the verb and its object. A mystery, by the world's expectation, is what is kept hidden; the mystery Paul proclaims is the once-hidden thing now openly heralded. He does not whisper a secret; he publishes in the open what human wisdom could never have found on its own.

Verse 2: The One Thing

Verse 2 gives the ground of verse 1, opening with “for.” The manner of his coming, stripped of the trappings of wisdom, followed from a prior decision about content. “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” The verb rendered “determined” is κρίνω krinō, to judge, to reach a verdict. In a section whose whole burden is that human judgment has been set aside, the one verdict Paul reserves for himself is the verdict to know nothing but Christ crucified. The aorist marks it as a settled decision carried into his ministry.

The “knowing” is not a claim of ignorance. οἶδα oida here names his operative, advertised knowledge, the competence he would hold forth among them. To know nothing except Christ

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crucified is to make the cross his everything, to conduct his ministry as though he had no other expertise to offer. The point is exclusivity of emphasis, not lack of other knowledge.

The object narrows twice, like a funnel. First from everything down to a person, Jesus Christ. Then “and Him crucified” tightens the focus onto a single aspect and holds it there. The participle is σταυρώω *stauroō* (Perfect Passive Participle) is the same word we saw in 1:23. The perfect tense carries a completed act whose result stands into the present: not Christ who was crucified once, but Christ the crucified, whose crucifixion is His abiding identity. The risen and glorified Lord is still, and permanently, the crucified One. The resolve is not to preach a past event but a present and permanent reality.

Verse 2 also supplies the content of the mystery named in verse 1. The mystery of God is not a body of hidden lore or a secret technique; it is a Person held in His crucified identity. This is why it remains a mystery to those who measure by the world’s framework: its content is a crucified Messiah, which is σκάνδαλον *skandalon* to the Jew and μωρία *mōria* to the Greek (1:23). The Spirit discloses it; human wisdom cannot arrive at it, not because the information was sealed away, but because the thing disclosed is the very thing the natural framework is built to reject.

Verse 3: In Weakness, Fear, and Trembling

The paragraph’s structure becomes visible here, because verse 3 opens with κἀγώ *kagō* again, the same “and I” that began verse 1. Verse 1 described the coming by what it refused; verse 3 describes the same coming by the condition Paul was in. The verb shifts from “I came” to γίνομαι *ginomai*, “I came to be, I found myself among you.” Between the two statements sits the content resolve of verse 2.

“In weakness” is the anchor. ἀσθένεια *astheneia* shares its thought with the weakness of God in 1:25 and the weak things God chose in 1:27. God chose the weak things to shame the strong, and here the Apostle arrives as one of them, a personification of the principle rather than an observer of it. The weakness stands opposite the ὑπεροχή *huperochē* of verse 1: the orator came in commanding presence, Paul in evident insufficiency. The Corinthians felt it and later said so to his face, complaining that his bodily presence was weak and his speech contemptible (2 Corinthians 10:10). The weakness need not be narrowed to one thing; it gathers up bodily frailty (Galatians 4:13), an unimposing presence, and sheer human inadequacy, and its function is single: he came manifestly unequal to the task by Corinth’s scale.

“In fear and in much trembling” can be read two ways.

The first reading takes it as genuine fear, an actual state of mind. Paul reached Corinth after a punishing stretch: he was beaten and jailed at Philippi, driven out of Thessalonica and Berea, coolly received at Athens, and now arrived alone before his companions rejoined him. The narrative supplies a striking confirmation. At Corinth the Lord appeared to him in a night vision, “Do not be

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afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent” (Acts 18:9). A reassurance against fear presupposes that the fear was real. Paul admits the same elsewhere, “conflicts without, fears within” (2 Corinthians 7:5). On this reading, the power of God ran through a genuinely frightened man whom the Lord had to steady.

The second reading takes “fear and trembling” as a fixed expression used elsewhere for reverent, self-distrusting seriousness before God rather than fright. Believers work out their salvation “with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12); the Corinthians received Titus “with fear and trembling” (2 Corinthians 7:15); servants obey “with fear and trembling” (Ephesians 6:5). In none of these does the phrase mean terror. On this reading, the trembling is the disposition opposite the self-assured orator: not the confidence of a man trusting his own σοφία sophia and λόγος logos, but the holy self-distrust of one who has set his own props aside and feels the weight of what he handles.

The two readings converge rather than compete. A genuinely frightened man is driven to trembling dependence, and reverent self-distrust and real fear are not rivals. Whether the fright was literal or the trembling was reverence, or both together, the function is identical. The weakness, fear, and trembling stack up, cumulatively, as the exact inverse of the orator’s ὑπεροχή hyperochē. Paul arrived emptied of the very self-confidence Corinth prized.

This condition is not incidental to the argument; it is evidence for it. Had Paul come strong, eloquent, and self-assured, and had Corinth believed, the result could be credited to the man, his powers and his presence. He came weak, afraid, and trembling, manifestly insufficient, and they believed all the same. The outcome cannot be traced to the vessel. The inadequacy of the messenger becomes the proof that the power was God’s, the same law stated plainly later, “power is perfected in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Verse 4: The True Persuasion

Paul now names what his preaching was made of, pairing two terms and owning both: “my message and my preaching.” The first, his λόγος logos, is his speaking, the manner and delivery of his words. The second, his κήρυγμα kērugma, is the heralded content he set before them, the thing proclaimed rather than the act of proclaiming, as established at 1:21. Both together, the how and the what, were free of the same thing.

“Not in persuasive words of wisdom” brings the σοφία sophia and λόγος logos pairing, now describing actual practice. What was laid down as principle in 1:17 is here reported as method: the gospel was not delivered in wisdom’s words. The adjective “persuasive” belongs to root πείθω peithō, to persuade, and persuasion was the whole craft of the orator; rhetoric is the art of winning assent by skill. That craft was set aside. (The word used for “persuasive” is a rare one, unattested elsewhere, which unsettled later copyists; some smoothed it to a more familiar form and a few dropped the word “words” altogether. The variants leave the sense untouched.)

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Against persuasion Paul sets “demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” The noun is ἀπόδειξις *apodeixis*, and it too is drawn from the world of argument, where it names the stronger category. Persuasion produces only probable assent, mere opinion; demonstration is compelling proof that yields certainty. Paul is not renouncing proof or conviction; he wants their faith firmly grounded. He sets aside the orator’s persuasion and claims the higher thing, demonstration, but he relocates its source. The proving is not done by technique; it is done by the Spirit, in power. The two nouns, πνεῦμα *pneuma* and δύναμις *dunamis*, name the agent and the mode together: the demonstration the Spirit works, and works in power.

The δύναμις *dunamis* in view is the ability established earlier in this section, not the preacher’s rhetorical force, which he has just disowned, and not a mystical energy infused into the hearer; but it is the effective, saving ability of God resident in the word of the cross. A common reading takes “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” as miraculous confirmation, signs accompanying the preaching. Had eloquence merely been traded for a display of wonders, faith would still be resting on an external, human-observed spectacle, only a more dramatic one, and verse 5 forbids exactly that. The demonstration is the Spirit’s saving power evidenced in what it produced: believers from the lot of the unintelligent, weak, and low born. The proof of the message was that it worked and was by an ability that was God’s and not the preacher’s.

At this point, the whole New Testament speaks with one voice about the primacy of the word, and one witness deserves to be set beside Paul. Peter had stood on the mountain, seen the majesty with his own eyes, and heard the voice of the Father, and he weighs that experience against the word:

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty... and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place... for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1:16-21)

Peter subordinates the greatest sign-experience imaginable, a genuine mountaintop appearing of glory, to the prophetic word, which he calls more sure. The word is the lamp; the word is what men carried along by the Spirit spoke from God. This is the same relocation Paul makes. The ability does not reside in the impressive display, not even in an authentic vision of glory, but in the Spirit-borne word. Two apostles, from opposite angles, reach the identical verdict: the surest ground is not what the eye sees but what God has spoken.

Verse 5: Where Faith Is

The paragraph resolves into its purpose. Everything cleared away on the human side, the superiority of speech and the persuasive words of wisdom, was cleared for a reason, and verse 5 states it: “so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” The conjunction is ἵνα hina, “so that,” the keystone the four preceding moves were built to carry. It runs the same logic as 1:29, where salvation was ordered so that no flesh could boast; here the ministry is ordered so that no faith would rest on flesh.

A word on “faith” is needed, because the English can mislead. πίστις pistis is a noun, and it does not simply mean the act of believing. It points to that which is believed: the body of God-given truth, the doctrine of the gospel delivered to be received. When Scripture speaks of “the faith,” or of “the faith of God” and “the faith of Christ,” the sense is not possessive but concerns God, concerns Christ, the content held out for belief. When a person or an assembly takes that content in, it becomes “your faith”: they are recognized as holding a substantial body of truth understood and believed. “Your faith” in verse 5 is therefore the believed gospel the Corinthians came to hold, and the question is what that believed truth rests upon.

The verb “rests” is simply εἰμί eimi, “to be:” faith’s location, where it resides, what it stands on. Two foundations are set in strict opposition. Faith stands either “in the wisdom of men” or “in the power of God.”

“The wisdom of men” is σοφία sophia one last time, now named as the foundation to be avoided, “of men,” from ἄνθρωπος anthrōpos. This is the human wisdom that by its nature could never reach God (1:21). To rest faith there is to build on the very ground the section has been dismantling. Here the strength or weakness of a faith is exposed. A faith propped on human reasoning is thin; convinced by argument, it can be unconvinced by a better argument, and under testing it fails, because it was never anchored in the whole counsel of God’s word. A faith that rests instead on the power of God takes up that Word, sees how it coheres from beginning to end, and stands, because it is grounded in the wealth of God-given truth and in the ability resident in it.

“The power of God” is δύναμις dunamis while naming whose power it is, θεός theos. Faith’s true foundation is not a feeling, not the persuasiveness that first produced it, not the preacher, but the effective, saving ability of God lodged in the message believed. Set 1:18 beside 2:5 and the section closes its own circle: in 1:18, the word of the cross is the power of God to those being saved; in 2:5 their faith rests in that power of God. The paragraph ends where the greater section began, on the same phrase, now naming not only what the gospel is but the ground beneath the believer.

Paul came without impressive speech or wisdom (verse 1), knowing only Christ crucified (verse 2), weak and trembling (verse 3), preaching without persuasive technique but in the Spirit’s demonstration (verse 4), so that (verse 5) the faith that resulted could not be credited to the man

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or his methods, and could be credited only to God's power. The weakness of the vessel was never incidental; it was the mechanism. Because Paul came weak and Corinth believed regardless, the foundation is demonstrably God's.

SUMMARY

The argument lands on the Corinthians' own faith, and through them on every assembly. The section forbade boasting in the flesh (1:29) and boasting in men (the factions of 1:12). A faith resting on the wisdom of men would be that same disease at its root, belief propped on human impressiveness, which is only "I am of Apollos" moved from the teacher to the technique. Verse 5 pulls the foundation out from under the factions one final time. If faith rests on the power of God and not the wisdom of men, no teacher's eloquence can be its ground, and the whole economy of boasting collapses at its base.

The manner of Paul's coming is therefore the doctrine of Chapter 1 enacted in a single ministry. He proclaimed the mystery of God (verse 1), whose content is Christ crucified (verse 2), carried by a weak and trembling man (verse 3), through the Spirit's demonstration rather than human persuasion (verse 4), so that faith would rest on the power that saved them and not on the wisdom that could never have found them (verse 5).

The mystery named in verse 1 still awaits its full unfolding. It has been proclaimed and its content named as the crucified Christ, but how this mystery is known, and why it stays hidden from the natural man while the Spirit searches and reveals the deep things of God, belongs to the verses ahead. From 2:6, the argument turns to the hidden wisdom of God, spoken among the mature, revealed by the Spirit, and received only by those who have the Spirit. That is the ground taken up in the next lesson.