

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The previous lesson closed the circle the greater section had opened. From 1:18 the word of the cross stood as the power of God to the saved ones, and by 2:5 the faith of the Corinthians was set to rest not on the wisdom of men but on that same power of God. Between those two points the whole framework of the world's wisdom was exposed and set aside, and the manner of Paul's own coming to Corinth, weak, trembling, and stripped of persuasive technique, enacted the doctrine in a single ministry. The section had said all it needed to say about what the gospel is not: it is not human wisdom, and it does not rest on human wisdom.

At 2:6 the argument turns. "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature." The connective is the adversative *δέ* *de*, and after a chapter and a half of setting wisdom aside, a wisdom is now affirmed. This is not a reversal, and the section is at pains to show why. The wisdom now affirmed is contrasted with the wisdom already dismantled not by the word but by its source: it is "not of this age nor of the rulers of this age," but "God's wisdom in a mystery." The same term, *σοφία* *sophia*, names both; everything depends on where the wisdom comes from.

This lesson is an overview of a single sustained passage, 2:6 through 3:4. Its purpose is to lay out the shape of the passage, gather the general observations that will guide the exegesis, and name the interpretive questions the text forces, together with the readings that have been placed on it. The close, verse-by-verse work belongs to the lessons that follow, where each question raised here will be answered from the text.

THE SHAPE OF THE PASSAGE

2:6-3:4 is one movement, not two. It runs on a single theme, the wisdom of God: hidden from the world, disclosed by the Spirit, received by the spiritual and resisted by the natural. And it ends, as the argument of Chapter 1 ended, by turning the doctrine onto the Corinthians in particular. Just as 1:26 pressed the demolition of the world's wisdom onto the congregation ("consider your calling"), so 3:1 presses this passage onto them ("and I could not speak to you as to spiritual men"). The chapter break at 3:1 is a later addition; the thought runs straight through.

The passage falls into three related parts.

First, the wisdom of God hidden from the rulers (2:6-9):

"Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, Things which eye has not seen and ear has

not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Second, the wisdom of God revealed by the Spirit, and the two men who stand opposite each other before it (2:10–16):

“For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that He will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.”

Third, the turn onto Corinth (3:1–4):

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not mere men?”

The big idea holds the three parts together. God’s wisdom is not reached by human means; it is revealed by the Spirit and received according to how a person thinks. And, as the turn onto Corinth will show, the indwelling of the Spirit is no automatic guarantee that a believer will receive it.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

- The identity thread continues. The people who receive this wisdom are named as those to whom “God revealed them” and who “have received... the Spirit who is from God” (2:10, 12), the people traced from the opening of the letter. Opposite them stands the natural man who does not receive it. The line drawn through the human race in 1:18, the perishing and the being saved, is still the line in view.
- Two Old Testament citations anchor the passage, and both concern knowing. 2:9 declares what the eye has not seen and the heart of man has not conceived; 2:16 asks who has known the mind of the Lord. The wisdom in question is not something human faculties can generate or reach; it must be given.

- The vocabulary of the section is deliberately paired and set in opposition: the wisdom of this age against the wisdom of God, the spirit of the world against the Spirit who is from God, the natural man against the spiritual man, milk against solid food. The passage teaches by antithesis.
- A single word of inability appears at both ends. The natural man “cannot” receive the things of the Spirit (2:14), and the Corinthians “were not... able” to receive solid food (3:2). Whether these two disabilities are the same in kind is one of the questions the passage raises.
- The section lands where the letter’s trouble began. The turn onto Corinth in 3:1–4 ends on the factions (“I am of Paul... I am of Apollos”), the very quarrels named in 1:12. The doctrine of wisdom is brought to bear on the original problem of division.

A WISDOM NOT OF THIS AGE (2:6)

The verse opens with the wisdom Paul does speak, placed in immediate tension with all that has gone before. “Yet we do speak wisdom.” The δέ *de* is adversative, and it guards the whole section from misreading: the message that refuses the wisdom of speech is not itself devoid of wisdom. What is refused is the world’s wisdom as a source and a standard; what is spoken is a wisdom whose source is God.

This wisdom is spoken “among those who are mature,” ἐν τοῖς τελείοις *en tois teleiois*. The term τέλειος *teleios* carries two possible senses, and the choice between them shapes the passage. It can mean mature as against immature, the grown as opposed to the infant, which would set the τέλειοι *teleioi* of 2:6 directly against the νήπιοι *nēpioi*, the “infants,” of 3:1. Or it can mean complete, whole, and so serve as a way of naming the believer as such, the one who has the Spirit over against the natural man who does not. A word study inclines toward the first sense, maturity as opposed to infancy, given how sharply 3:1 sets the “infants” against those who could be addressed as mature. But which sense is right cannot be settled in isolation, because it feeds directly into the larger question the section forces about the natural, the spiritual, and the fleshly. The decision is deferred to that discussion.

The wisdom is then fenced off from the present order twice over: it is “not of this age (αἰών *aiōn*) nor of the rulers of this age.” Both the age and its rulers “are passing away.” The verb behind that phrase is καταργέω *katargeō*, to render inoperative, to bring to nothing, to strip of standing and effect. The same doom rests on the age and on those who rule it. The phrase “this age” reaches back to 1:20, where the “debater of this age” stood among the wise man and the scribe as the recognized experts God had made foolish. The wisdom of 2:6 is set against the same doomed, human establishment already dismantled in Chapter 1. The continuity is deliberate: the σοφία *sophia* rejected here is the σοφία *sophia* rejected there.

THE RULERS OF THIS AGE (2:6, 8)

The identity of the “rulers of this age,” has been read two ways. On one reading, they are the human authorities, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Rome, who tried and executed Jesus. On the other, they are the spiritual powers, the demonic rulers behind the visible thrones.

Several considerations settle the foreground on the human authorities. The decisive clause is 2:8: these rulers “crucified the Lord of glory.” The crucifixion was carried out by human hands, a Roman sentence executed at the instigation of the council; whatever powers may stand behind the act, the actors named in the clause are men. The stated logic points the same way: “if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” That reasoning fits a genuine human misjudgment of who Jesus was. It sits far less comfortably on the adversary, whom the Gospels show not ignorant of Jesus but actively driving His death, entering Judas to accomplish the betrayal (Luke 22:3). And the context confirms it: the “rulers of this age” pair naturally with the “wise man... scribe... debater of this age” of 1:20, the human establishment, intellectual and governing, that the cross exposed. To read the ἄρχοντες archontes as demons would break the continuity the section has carefully kept; to read them as the human authorities preserves it.

This does not deny a spiritual dimension behind the human one. A doomed order stands behind the doomed rulers, and the language of abolition (καταργέω katargeō) reaches toward the day when God abolishes “all rule and authority and power” (15:24), while the powers themselves are shown elsewhere as onlookers to a wisdom they had not grasped (Ephesians 3:10). The reading followed here keeps the human authorities in the foreground of 2:6 and 2:8, with the spiritual powers of a passing order acknowledged behind them. “The Rulers of this age” stays human, and the wisdom set aside in 2:6 stays continuous with the human wisdom of Chapter 1.

HOW THE WISDOM IS KNOWN (2:10-16)

If the wisdom of God is hidden from the rulers, the obvious question is how anyone comes to know it, and the passage answers: “to us God revealed them through the Spirit.” The Spirit searches the depths of God and discloses what human faculties could never reach on its own.

A word of care is needed here about the Spirit’s work, because this passage is often pressed into service for a claim it does not make. In the first instance, the text describes the reception of revelation itself, the Spirit disclosing to the apostles the things “freely given to us by God,” which “we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit” (2:12–13). That is the giving of the word that would be written. What the passage does not teach is that the indwelling Spirit functions as a private interpretive faculty, automatically supplying the meaning of Scripture to every believer apart from labor and instruction. The ordinary means by which the word is understood includes teachers, elders, and others; an automatic infused understanding would

1 Corinthians Lesson 11

1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4 Overview

render teaching unnecessary. The Spirit's role in this section, and its bearing on how the believer comes to understand, is itself one of the matters the coming lessons must handle with care.

The heart of the passage sets two men opposite each other. "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God... and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (2:14). The natural man is the ψυχικός *psuchikos*, the man of soul-life only, without the Spirit. Against him stands "he who is spiritual," the πνευματικός *pneumatikos*, who "appraises all things" (2:15). Two verbs emphasis here: the natural man does not accept, οὐ δέχεται *ou dechetai*, and he cannot know, from γινώσκω *ginōskō*, experiential knowing; while the spiritual man appraises, ἀνακρίνω *anakrinō*, to examine, to sift, to put to the question.

Here, a second interpretive question arises. The natural man's "cannot" has been read as an incapacity of equipment: lacking the Spirit, he simply has no faculty for these things, and the door is shut. It has also been read as a refusal that runs downstream of rejection: he does not accept the things of the Spirit, and what a man will not receive he cannot come to know experientially, for γινώσκω *ginōskō* names the knowing that comes only of acquaintance. On the second reading the natural man does examine the message; he examined a crucified Messiah and returned the verdict "foolishness" (1:23), appraising it by the very framework God had already set aside. Which of these the text intends bears directly on the passage's central question, and it is weighed in the lessons ahead. The section then caps the contrast with a citation, who has known the mind of the Lord, that He will instruct Him? and answers it: "But we have the mind (νοῦς *nous*) of Christ" (2:16).

THE TURN ONTO CORINTH (3:1-4)

At 3:1 the lens narrows from the two classes of humanity to this one congregation, and the doctrine becomes personal. "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ." The controlling word is the little particle ὡς *hōs*, "as to." Paul does not say the Corinthians are natural men; he says he had to speak to them as though they were operating at the level of the fleshly and the infantile. The comparison describes how they were functioning, not a change in who they were, and the "in Christ" that closes the verse holds their position firm even as their thinking and conduct is rebuked.

The rebuke is then pressed. They were given milk, γάλα *gala*, not solid food, βρῶμα *brōma*, "for you were not yet able to receive it" (3:2), the same language of inability that described the natural man in 2:14. The cause is named plainly: "you are still fleshly, σαρκικός *sarkikos*, for there is jealousy (ζῆλος *zēlos*) and strife (ἔρις *eris*) among you" (3:3). And the evidence is the premise problem in the letter: "when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,'" they are "walking like mere men" (ἄνθρωπος *anthrōpos*), behaving by the very human standard the whole section has set aside. The passage that began with the wisdom of God hidden from the rulers ends on the quarrels of a divided church, and the distance between the two is precisely the point.

NATURAL, SPIRITUAL, AND FLESHLY: THE QUESTION THE SECTION FORCES

Three descriptions of persons stand across this passage, and any faithful reading must account for all three and for how they relate. There is the natural man, ψυχικός *psuchikos*, who does not have the Spirit (2:14). There is the spiritual man, πνευματικός *pneumatikos*, who has the Spirit and appraises all things (2:15). And there is the man of flesh, σάρκινος *sarkinos*, the fleshly, σαρκικός *sarkikos*, addressed in 3:1–3, who is “in Christ” and yet walks “like mere men.”

Two interpretive questions press on this arrangement, and they pull in opposite directions.

The first asks whether the fleshly man is a third kind of person, a settled category standing between the natural man and the spiritual man. On this reading 3:1 carves a permanent middle tier into the anthropology: alongside the natural man and the spiritual man there stands a distinct and abiding class of believer, the carnal Christian, marked off as a group of his own.

The second question comes from the opposite side and asks whether fleshly conduct is in fact evidence that a person is not in Christ at all. On this reading “still fleshly” collapses back into “natural;” the man who walks in the flesh shows thereby that he lacks the Spirit, and there is no such thing as a genuine believer who walks like a mere man. The walking itself is taken to expose the absence of life.

Everything turns on whether these words name a fixed identity or a present function of the Corinthian church, and the passage supplies the data the decision must account for: the comparative force of ὥς *hōs* in 3:1, the “cannot” and “were not able” of 2:14 and 3:2 and whether they are one kind of inability or two, and the settled identity the letter has assigned from its opening, sanctified, called, and in Christ, against which any account of the “fleshly” believer must be measured. The letter’s own procedure belongs to that reckoning as well, for it continues to set spiritual matters before these same people through thirteen more chapters. These are the questions that are of special interest to us. The conflict is named here, and we will return to it in due time.

THE QUESTION BEFORE US

- In what sense is wisdom spoken “among the mature” (τέλειος *teleios*): to grown believers as against infants, or to the believer as such, the complete against the natural?
- What is the wisdom of God “in a mystery” that was hidden and is now revealed, and how does it relate to the mystery named already in 2:1?
- How does the Spirit make this wisdom known, and what does the passage say, and not say, about the Spirit’s work in the believer’s understanding?

1 Corinthians Lesson 11

1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4 Overview

- Is the natural man's inability to receive the things of the Spirit an incapacity of faculty or a refusal born of the world's framework?
- Do "natural," "spiritual," and "fleshly" name three kinds of person, or two kinds with the "fleshly" describing a believer's malfunction? And is fleshly conduct compatible with genuine standing in Christ, or evidence against it?

SUMMARY

The passage before us is a single section in three parts.

1. God's wisdom, hidden from a passing age and its rulers (2:6-9)
2. Wisdom revealed by the Spirit to those given the Spirit (2:10-16);
3. That same wisdom exposes a congregation that, though truly in Christ, was walking like mere men (3:1-4).

Th connection: the wisdom of God is not reached by human means but given by the Spirit, and possessing the Spirit is no guarantee that a mind running on the world's framework will receive it.

The exegetical questions have been set out rather than settled. Chief among them is the relation of the natural, the spiritual, and the fleshly.