

# 1 Corinthians Lesson 8

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The previous lesson carried us into the thesis of this whole section. In 1:17, Paul set his commission (preaching the gospel) apart from baptizing and added the purpose clause that governs everything that follows: the gospel is not delivered *in cleverness of speech*, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void, drained of its own operative power. From there verse 18 laid down the two verdicts on *the word of the cross*: foolishness to those who are perishing, but the power of God to those who are being saved.

Two results from that lesson carry directly into this one. First, the contrast in verse 18 is not foolishness against wisdom but foolishness against power, and *power* is δύναμις *dunamis*, ability. The ability belongs to God, and God has invested it in His word; the sharpest expression of that word is the message of the cross. Second, the two parties named in verse 18 are marked by articular participles standing in strict parallel, *those who are perishing* and *those who are being saved*. As we established, this is category language, settled identity and not gradual process. A person's verdict on the cross reveals which side of that line he already stands on. Both threads, the power that resides in the word and the identity that the word assigns, run straight through the paragraph before us.

The occasion for all of it lies underneath the factions. On the surface the Corinthians ranked their teachers by rhetorical polish; underneath, they had absorbed the culture's whole standard of what counts as wise, strong, and worthy. Measured against that framework, a crucified Savior did not compute. Verses 18-25 are God, through Paul, exposing and setting aside that entire framework and putting His own wisdom and power in its place. The big idea is simple and total: God's wisdom and power are revealed in the cross, not in human cleverness.

## THE WISDOM OF GOD

Before we walk the verses, a word about the phrase that dominates them. Wisdom of God appears twice in this paragraph, and it does not mean the same thing both times. Naming the two senses now keeps us from being jarred when the phrase shifts under our feet across a few verses.

The first sense is God's wisdom as His wise arrangement. In verse 21, in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God. This is not a comment on how much God knows; it is a comment on how God ordered things. He so arranged reality that the world's wisdom would fail to reach Him by its own route, precisely so that salvation would come by the message and by grace, and not by human achievement. The failure of human wisdom is not a problem God worked around. It is the very thing His wisdom arranged, and it clears the ground so that no one may boast (a point Paul makes explicit in verses 29 and 31).

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The second sense is God's wisdom as a person. In verse 24, Christ crucified is declared to be the wisdom of God. Here wisdom is not an arrangement but the crucified Christ Himself, the very thing the Greek was hunting for, standing in front of him in the last place he would think to look. This sense opens toward the next chapter, where Paul speaks of God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom (2:7). We plant it here and let chapter 2 unfold it.

The prelude is this: God wisely arranged that human wisdom could not find Him (verse 21) and then revealed His own wisdom in the crucified Christ (verse 24). One phrase, two senses. We will tap each as we reach it.

## GRAMMATICAL THREAD

One observation is best made up front, because it spans the whole paragraph and is easy to miss verse by verse. Paul names the redeemed three times across these verses, with three different words, and all three point to a single settled identity of the people standing opposite the perishing.

- Verse 18, *those who are being saved* (σώζω *sōzō*), the articular participle we already examined, identity and not process: the saved ones.
- Verse 21, *those who believe* (πιστεύω *pisteuō*), the ones God is well-pleased to save through the proclaimed message: the believing ones.
- Verse 24, *the called* (κλητός *klētos*), the same word of identity we studied at 1:1-2, where the gospel is the call and all who believe it are *the called*.

These are not three groups but one, described from three angles: saved by God's act, believing the message, called by God's summons. They stand over against a single opposing class, *those who are perishing* (ἀπόλλυμι *apollumi*), likewise named more than once. The word of the cross draws a line through the whole human race and sorts it into two settled camps. Keep this thread in view; we will touch each name as we land on its verse.

## EXPOSITION

### Verse 19: The Framework Set Aside

Paul grounds the claim not in his own argument but in Scripture: *For it is written*. The word that sets human wisdom aside is itself the Word of God, quoted from Isaiah 29:14. And the speaker throughout is God in the first person: *I will destroy... I will set aside*. It is not our cleverness deployed against theirs; it is God who does the undoing.

Two verbs carry the weight. God will *destroy* (ἀπόλλυμι *apollumi*, the same root as *those who are perishing* in verse 18) the wisdom of the wise, and He will *set aside* (ἄθετέω *atheteō*) the cleverness of the clever: nullify it, declare it invalid, strip it of standing. The second term rendered *cleverness* here is σύνεσις *sunesis*, not the σοφία *sophia* of verse 17, but the faculty of

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comprehension, the ability to bring the pieces together into a coherent whole. This is the framework by which the intelligent make sense of reality. God does not merely rebut a conclusion here or there. He sets aside the entire framework by which the world assembles its understanding.

A word of caution on the reach of this. It is tempting to narrow the *cleverness of the clever* to one culture's system, the Greek philosophical project in particular. But the next verse pairs the *scribe* (Jewish) with the *debater* (Greek), and Isaiah's own words fell first on Israel's wisdom under judgment.

What God sets aside is human comprehension as such, Jew and Greek alike, not one ethnic system. The dismantling here is fundamentally epistemological: human wisdom cannot arrive at God, by God's own design. The deeper problem is sin, and Paul will press it, but the stated hinge in these verses is that the wise cannot know God and cannot stop boasting. We take the point the text is making before importing the one it makes later.

## Verse 20: The Experts Summoned and Found Absent

Verse 20 confronts human wisdom with three challenges hurled at the whole intellectual establishment: *Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?* The wise man, the scribe, and the debater, Greek philosophy and Jewish scholarship together, are the recognized experts of the age, the men who felt responsible for explaining the world. They are summoned and found missing. The reason they cannot answer is the one just stated: human reason on its own does not reach the truth of God.

Then the closing question: *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* The verb is *μωραίνω* *mōrainō*, to make foolish, and God is the actor. By the single event of the cross He rendered the whole enterprise foolish, exposing it as the empty thing it always was. The wisdom of the world was not merely outscored by a better argument. It is by nature moronic.

## Verse 21: Wisdom Arranged, and the Message That Saves

This is the first of the two wisdom-senses from our prelude. *For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God.* The phrase *in the wisdom of God* can be read two ways, and the choice matters. It is not mainly a statement about God's foreknowledge, as though God simply saw ahead that human wisdom would fail. It is a statement about God's wise arrangement: God so ordered things that the world, operating by its own wisdom, would not find Him along that road. The failure was designed. He arranged it so that the way to Him would not be human achievement.

The result: *God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.* The word rendered *message preached* is *κήρυγμα* *kērugma*, and its precise sense is load-bearing. *κήρυγμα* *kērugma* is the thing proclaimed, the content of the announcement, not the

activity of proclaiming it. The foolishness lies in *what is said*, the announcement of a crucified Christ, not in the act of saying it. This keeps the term aligned with *the word of the cross* back in verse 18: both point at content. And it guards the verse against a common misreading. God does not save through a mystical experience or an inward event with no definite content. He saves through an objective message with a fixed content, received when one believes it. Here, too, is the second name in our identity thread: *those who believe* (πιστεύω *pisteuō*), the same settled class as *those who are being saved* in verse 18.

### Verse 22: Two Demands

*For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom.* The two great cultures of Paul's world are set side by side, each named by what it demands as the price of belief. The Jew asks for a sign, σημεῖον *sēmeion*, a miraculous confirmation, a public demonstration of power on the order he expected of Messiah. The Greek searches for wisdom, σοφία *sophia*, a philosophical account that would satisfy his framework for making sense of the world. Hold both demands in mind exactly as Paul states them, a sign of power and a wisdom, because the paragraph is about to answer both in a single crucified man.

### Verse 23: Christ Crucified, and the Twin Offense

*but we preach Christ crucified.* The phrase is Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον *Christon estaurōmenon*, and the participle repays close attention. ἐσταυρωμένον *estaurōmenon* (from σταυρόω *stauroō*) is a perfect passive participle.

The perfect tense denotes a completed past act whose result stands into the present. Paul does not preach *Christ who was crucified once* and moved on. He preaches Christ-the-crucified, the One whose crucifixion is His abiding standing. The risen and glorified Lord is still, and forever, the crucified One. This sharpens the offense rather than softening it: the scandal is not a bad weekend God recovered from and left behind. It is the permanent identity of the Messiah the called now proclaim.

- **1 Corinthians 2:2** — “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” Paul uses the identical perfect participle construction. His settled resolve is to know and make known Jesus specifically as *the Crucified One*. This is not temporary emphasis for the Corinthians; it is the fixed content of his message.
- **Galatians 3:1** — “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” Again, the perfect participle. Paul’s preaching “placarded” or vividly set forth Jesus as the Crucified One before their eyes. The portrayal is of a permanent reality, not a temporary phase of His history.
- **Revelation 5:6, 9, 12** — John sees “a Lamb standing, as if slain” (perfect passive of σφάζω *sphazō*). Heaven worships Him precisely because He “was slain” and purchased

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people with His blood. The marks and the identity of the slain Lamb remain in the throne-room vision. The One who is worthy is still known as the One who was slain.

That crucified Christ lands on the two demands of verse 22 as a twin offense. To Jews He is *a stumbling block*, σκάνδαλον *skandalon*, a scandal, a trap that trips. A Messiah executed on a Roman cross, under the law's own curse, was the precise opposite of the sign of power they demanded. To Gentiles He is *foolishness*, μωρία *mōria*, the root behind our word *moron*. A god who dies violates the Greek's very idea of the divine; a crucified deity was not profound but absurd, beneath serious thought. The one message offends both, and it offends each at exactly the point of its cultural pride.

## Verse 24: What Each Was Seeking, Present in the Cross

*but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* Here the identity thread reaches its third name: *the called* (κλητός *klētos*), the same word of settled identity we studied at the opening of the letter, where the gospel is God's call and all who receive it are the called. The dividing line is not ethnic; it runs *both Jews and Greeks*. What separates is not culture but those who believed the call and those who did not.

And now the structural point that this whole movement has been building toward. Read verse 24 back against verse 22, and the terms line up in order:

- Jews ask for a sign of power, and to the called Christ is *the power of God* (δύναμις *dunamis*).
- Greeks search for wisdom, and to the called Christ is *the wisdom of God* (σοφία *sophia*).

The order of verse 24 (power, then wisdom) tracks the order of verses 22-23 (Jew, then Greek). So, Paul is saying more than *the cross offends everyone*. He is saying that the very thing each party was chasing, the Jew's demonstration of divine power and the Greek's true wisdom, is actually present in the crucified Christ. The cross is not merely the stumbling block that turns them away. It is the answer to the exact hunger that sent them searching, standing in the one place their framework taught them not to look. To the called, and only to the called, the sign and the wisdom are seen for what they truly are.

*Christ the wisdom of God* does not mean that the believer receives a superior cleverness or a renewed way of thinking. Here it means the cross itself is God's wise saving act, wisdom embodied in the crucified Christ, over against the σοφία *sophia* the Greek hunted.

## Verse 25: The Irony That Closes the Argument

*Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* Paul closes with a deliberate irony, and its edge must fall in the right direction. *The foolishness of God* (τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ *to mōron tou theou*) is not a clumsy move God happened to make that fortunately paid off. It is the foolish-seeming thing of God, foolish only to a mind measuring by the

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wrong standard. Judged objectively, it is the highest wisdom there is; the joke is entirely on the wise. The same holds for *the weakness of God* (τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ θεοῦ *to asthenes tou theou*): what the world files under weakness, a Savior nailed up in public defeat, is stronger than the whole of human strength.

So, the pointed application for the way we think: if this apparent foolishness of God is wiser than the best of men, and this apparent weakness stronger than the best of human strength, then we are not embarrassed by a message the world files under nonsense, and we do not improve it by dressing it in the very cleverness God set aside. If this is God's foolishness, we need more of it, not less.

### SUMMARY AND TRANSITION

Gather the paragraph. God wisely arranged that human wisdom could not reach Him (verse 21), summoned the experts of the age and found them unable to answer (verse 20), and by the single act of the cross made the world's wisdom foolish (verses 19-20). The Jew's demand for a sign and the Greek's search for wisdom are both offended by a crucified Christ (verses 22-23), yet both are answered in Him: to the called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (verse 24). And the apparent foolishness and weakness of God outstrip the best that men can muster (verse 25). One settled people, named three ways, sees this; the perishing cannot.

We should notice what this paragraph is and is not doing. From verse 18 through verse 25 the weight falls almost entirely on the *is*: the doctrine of the cross as God's wisdom and power, over against human cleverness. The "ought" is deliberately held back. Paul does not discharge it until he turns, in verses 26-31, to the Corinthians' own calling (*consider your calling, brethren*) and drives the whole argument home to its purpose: *so that no man may boast before God and let him who boasts boast in the Lord*. That is the ground the wise arrangement of verse 21 was clearing all along. We hold the application here and take up their calling, and the boasting it forbids and the boasting it commands, in the next lesson.