

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The previous lesson surveyed 2:6 through 3:4 the letter runs as one greater section in three parts. First, the wisdom of God, hidden from a passing age and its rulers (2:6-9). Second, that same wisdom revealed by the Spirit, with the natural man and the spiritual man set opposite each other before it (2:10-16). Third, the turn onto Corinth, where a congregation truly in Christ is found walking like mere men (3:1-4). One idea is clear: God's wisdom is not reached by human means. It is revealed by the Spirit and received according to how a person thinks, and possessing the Spirit is no guarantee that a mind running on the world's framework will receive it.

Several points were settled in that overview and are carried forward here. The identity thread continues: the people to whom "God revealed them through the Spirit" (2:10) are the same settled people traced from 1:18, the saved ones, the believing ones, the called. The "rulers of this age" are the human authorities who crucified the Lord of glory, with the spiritual powers behind them. The passage teaches by antithesis, pairing 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. And a single word of inability stands at both ends of the section, the natural man who "cannot" (2:14) and the Corinthians who "were not able" (3:2).

Five questions were set out rather than answered, and they remain the structure for this lesson and the lessons that follow:

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

This lesson takes up verses 6 and 7, and with them the first two questions. The remaining three wait on the verses that raise them.

METHODOLOGY OF THIS SECTION

For this section the pace slows and the method changes. The previous lessons were more expository: giving the sense of the text, while dealing with the original text lightly. From here the treatment becomes exegetical: making sure that the sentence and thoughts of the text is understood. The reason is the weight of what lies ahead. On questions of this kind the conclusion should be seen, so that anyone could reach it from the text.

THE WISDOM OF GOD

The phrase dominates the paragraph, and verse 7 assigns the wisdom to God outright. Scripture does not supply a single dictionary sentence for the wisdom of God. It names that wisdom by whose it is, by how it comes to man, and by the person in whom it is finally found.

What Wisdom Is

The word is σοφία *sophia*, and it has been before us since 1:17. It is not information and it is not mere intelligence. BDAG defines it as the capacity to understand and to function accordingly. Two things are joined in that definition: understanding, and conduct that follows from it. Wisdom is the framework by which a person makes sense of reality and then lives by that sense. The contrast that runs through 1 Corinthians is therefore not between more knowledge and less knowledge. It is a contrast of source. The question is always whether a person's understanding, and the conduct that follows from it, is drawn from the world's system or from God's.

God Possesses Wisdom

Wisdom is God's own before it is anything else. "Wisdom and power belong to Him" (Daniel 2:20). "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33).

This wisdom is original with God and is not discoverable by man. Job 28 asks twice where wisdom can be found, and the answer runs through the whole created order. The deep does not have it; the sea does not have it; gold, silver, onyx, sapphire, coral, and crystal cannot buy it; it is hidden from the eyes of all living. Then the chapter turns: "God understands its way, and He knows its place... Then He saw it and declared it; He established it and also searched it out" (Job 28:23, 27). The one door left open to man is named in the last verse: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28). Wisdom begins for man not with a discovery but with a posture toward God.

This wisdom is older than creation and was present when the world was made. "The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens" (Proverbs 3:19). "O LORD, how many are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all" (Psalm 104:24). In

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Proverbs 8 wisdom is personified and speaks: “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established... When He established the heavens, I was there” (Proverbs 8:22-23, 27). Proverbs 8 is taken here for the point it makes, that wisdom is prior to the works of creation. The identification of God’s wisdom with Christ is made below, in the New Testament’s own words, and not by reading the personified wisdom of Proverbs 8 as a direct name for the Son.

This wisdom is inexhaustible, and yet it is given. Romans 11:33 calls God’s judgments unsearchable and His ways unfathomable. 1 Corinthians 2:10 says the Spirit searches even the depths of God and reveals them to us. Colossians 2:3 says the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ: hidden, not absent. The tension the text leaves standing is that the wisdom of God cannot be exhausted, and the believer is not left without it.

God Gives Wisdom

Wisdom comes to man by gift, and the gift comes by God’s word. “For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6). The setting of that verse is instructive: it is the conclusion of a call to receive God’s words, treasure His commandments, and cry out for discernment (Proverbs 2:1-5). “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). “I love those who love me; and those who diligently seek me will find me” (Proverbs 8:17). Wisdom is not earned, and it is not manufactured. It is asked for, sought diligently, and received from the mouth of God, which is to say from His word.

When it comes from God it has a recognizable shape. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy” (James 3:17). That description will matter before this greater section is finished, because James sets a counterfeit beside it, and the counterfeit has a recognizable shape too.

Two further texts locate this wisdom. It rests on the Messiah: “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (Isaiah 11:2). And it is now displayed through the church: “so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10). The church is the communicator of this wisdom, not its source.

Christ Became Wisdom

The third statement gathers the first two into a person. “But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24). “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1:30). “In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”

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(Colossians 2:3). God has wisdom; God gives wisdom; and to those in Christ, Christ became wisdom from God. The wisdom the Greek was hunting is a crucified and risen Lord.

From this several nuances follow, each one already established in chapter 1. The wisdom of God is closed to human wisdom: “in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God” (1:21). God’s wisdom is transcendent and prior to man, and it is antithetical to what human wisdom produces, so that man cannot arrive at it without revelation. The same wisdom looks like two opposite things at once: to the perishing it is foolishness and a stumbling block, to the called it is power and wisdom (1:18, 23-24; 2:14), and the difference is not in the content of the message but in whether the wisdom of God is accepted. God chose what the flesh calls unwise in order to nullify what the flesh calls wise (1:27-29), and this is not God counteracting man’s wisdom; man’s wisdom rejects the wisdom of God on purpose and calls God’s plan, purpose, and activity foolish. Wisdom’s purpose toward man is life and the exclusion of boasting: “For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 8:35); Christ became wisdom from God “so that, just as it is written, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1:31).

The text sets the wisdom of God as that which is God’s own, issued from His mouth, begun in man by the fear of the Lord, hidden from the world’s framework, and finally named as Christ Himself for those who are called. This is the wisdom now spoken in 2:6.

A WISDOM NOT OF THIS AGE (2:6)

The verse opens in an unusual way. In Greek the direct object stands first: Σοφίαν δὲ λαλοῦμεν Sophian de laloumen, “wisdom, however, we speak.” Greek ordinarily leads with the verb or the subject; a direct object placed at the head of the sentence is thrown forward for emphasis. The first word out of Paul’s mouth after a chapter and a half of setting wisdom aside is wisdom.

The emphasis does not stop with the word order. Wisdom is stated three times across verses 6 and 7, and the three occurrences run as three beats. First, wisdom is affirmed: “yet we do speak wisdom.” Second, wisdom is fenced off from the age: “a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age.” Third, wisdom is assigned to God: “but we speak God’s wisdom.” The fronted object announces the theme, and the threefold repetition drives it in. Everything set aside in chapter 1 was the wisdom of the world; what is affirmed here is the divine nature of God’s truth over worldly philosophy.

The connective is the adversative δέ de, as established in the overview, and the verb is λαλέω laleō, to speak, in the present tense: an ongoing practice, not a single occasion. The “we” is the apostolic “we” that carries through verse 13, “which things we also speak.” The message that refused the wisdom of speech (1:17; 2:1, 4) is not a message without wisdom. What was refused was the world’s wisdom as source and standard; what is spoken is a wisdom whose source is God.

“Among Those Who Are Mature”

The wisdom is spoken ἐν τοῖς τελείοις en tois teleiois, “among the mature.” The adjective is τέλειος teleios, and the first question of the section turns on it. The lexicon gives the general sense as “attaining an end or purpose, complete,” and then two branches:

- Pertaining to meeting the highest standard: of things, *perfect*; of persons who are fully up to standard in a certain respect and not satisfied with half-way measures, *perfect, complete*.
- Pertaining to being mature: *full-grown, mature, adult*.

The second branch is the one in view here, and the way to see it is to read the word where the New Testament uses it of believers. Four passages settle the matter, and the same denominator runs through all four.

1 Corinthians 14:20. The nearest use is in this same letter: “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.” The word is τέλειος teleios, and it is located in a specific place, the thinking (φρήν phrēn, the faculty of understanding). It is also a command. The verse opens a difficult correction on the exercise of tongues, and before the correction is given the Corinthians are told to think maturely. Maturity is something a believer is called to do with his mind, and it is asked of him precisely when a hard doctrine is about to be handled.

Philippians 3:4-15. Paul lists his credentials in the flesh, circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor, as to righteousness under the Law found blameless. He would out-flesh any of the critics he has just called dogs. Then he counts it all loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ, of being found in Him with a righteousness not his own, of knowing the power of His resurrection and being conformed to His death. Two verses in that section must be read together. In verse 12: “Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on.” In verse 15: “Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude.” The word rendered “perfect” in both is the τέλειος teleios root, the same word rendered “mature” in 2:6. Three verses apart Paul denies that he is τέλειος teleios and then counts himself among the τέλειοι teleioi. The two statements can both be true only if the word does not mean sinless perfection or a finished rank. What it names is a settled way of thinking, “have this attitude” (φρονέω phroneō, to think, to set the mind), the attitude that counts the flesh as nothing and Christ as everything. The first branch of the lexicon, meeting the highest standard, is ruled out by Paul’s own denial. The mature man is the one who thinks this way about the flesh and about Christ, and he is called to keep thinking that way.

Hebrews 5:11-6:3. This is the tightest parallel to our passage, because it uses the very antithesis 3:1-2 will use. “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and

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not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (5:12-14). Milk (γάλα gala) against solid food, the infant (νήπιος nēpios) against the mature (τέλειος teleios): these are the exact terms of 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, where Paul gave the Corinthians milk and not solid food because they were infants. Hebrews tells us what maturity is and what it does:

- Maturity indicates a level of understanding sufficient for teaching; the immature have to be taught the elementary principles again.
- Maturity can handle deeper and more difficult doctrine, the solid food; those who are not mature must perpetually refresh the basics.
- Maturity has its senses trained, and trained “because of practice” (ἔξις hexis, a habit formed by use), to distinguish the beneficial from the worthless. The distinguishing in view is between doctrines and spiritual matters.
- Maturity does not need to relearn the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God (turning from self-righteousness to believe in Jesus for the righteousness of God), instruction about washings and the laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment, the eschatology of both believer and unbeliever (6:1-2).

Maturity here is a trained capacity, formed by practice, exercised on doctrine. It is a way of handling the word, not a status conferred apart from handling it. And the writer of Hebrews, having said all this, goes on to give his readers the solid food anyway (6:1, “let us press on to maturity”), which is the same thing Paul does through thirteen more chapters of this letter.

Ephesians 4:11-14. The fourth passage supplies the means and the benchmark. Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” The doctrine of the apostles and prophets is taught by pastor-teachers to equip the believers. The goal is the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. Maturity (τέλειος teleios again, “a mature man”) is a solid understanding and belief of the doctrines of God, and specifically of the fullness of Christ. And the result of maturity is a fully established and unmovable doctrinal footing in the basics of God and Christ: no longer children, no longer carried about. Maturity comes through teaching, and it shows itself as stability in what is believed.

The common denominator is unmistakable. In all four passages τέλειος teleios is located in the mind. It is a way of thinking, and not only a matter of what to think but of how to think: thinking

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that is not childish (14:20), thinking that counts the flesh nothing and Christ everything (Philippians 3), thinking trained by practice to discern doctrine (Hebrews 5), thinking made stable through instruction so that it is not tossed by every wind (Ephesians 4). In none of the four is τέλειος *teleios* a rank, a class, or a claim to sinless completion. In all four it describes a believer functioning a certain way with the truth, and in three of the four it is something the believer is told to do.

This settles the first question. The mature of 2:6 are not the complete as against the natural, the believer as such. They are the grown as against the infant, and the infants are about to be named in 3:1. Nor are they an inner circle who receive a secret content. Paul had one content at Corinth, Christ crucified (2:2), and he spoke it to all. The wisdom is spoken “among the mature” because the mature are the ones thinking spiritually and maturely about that content, and so receiving it as wisdom. This is why Paul must encourage mature thinking before handling difficult doctrine (14:20), and why the Corinthians, who had the Spirit, could still be fed milk. What was lacking was not the Spirit and not the message. It was the manner of thinking with which the message was received.

“Not of This Age nor of the Rulers of This Age”

The second beat fences the wisdom off from the present order twice over: “not of this age (αἰών *aiōn*) nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away.” Both the age and its rulers stand under the verb καταργέω *katargeō*, to render inoperative, to strip of standing and effect. Both points were established in the overview and are only marked here. “This age” reaches back to “the debater of this age” in 1:20, the recognized experts God has made foolish, and the ἄρχοντες *archontes* are the human authorities who crucified the Lord of glory (2:8), with the powers behind them acknowledged as onlookers to a wisdom they had not grasped. The wisdom of God is directly contrasted with the wisdom of this age refuted across chapter 1 (1:20, 28). And the contrast lands on the point just made about maturity: to think by this age is the opposite of thinking maturely, because this age and its whole framework of evaluation are being brought to nothing.

WE SPEAK GOD’S WISDOM IN A MYSTERY (2:7)

The third mention of wisdom begins with a strong adversative ἀλλά *alla*, “but,” and again the order carries emphasis. The Greek reads θεοῦ σοφίαν *theou sophian*, the possessive “God’s” placed before “wisdom.” Having twice said what the wisdom is not, the text now says whose it is and says it first.

The phrase “in a mystery” (ἐν μυστηρίῳ *en mustērīō*) needs care, because it can be attached in two places. It could be read as a descriptor of the wisdom, so that Paul speaks God’s mysterious wisdom. But the phrase is the indirect object: “speaking in mystery.” It is the means by which Paul speaks God’s Wisdom and describes the manner of the speaking. Paul speaks God’s wisdom, and he speaks it in a mystery, in the form of a mystery.

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The sense of μυστήριον *mustērion* was fixed at 2:1. In Paul it does not mean the unintelligible or the permanently secret. It means what human reasoning cannot reach on its own, made known only as God reveals it through the prophets and apostles. The content of the mystery was named at 2:2: Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. So, the answer to the second question begins here. God's wisdom whose content is the crucified Christ, now set against the wisdom of the age that could not find it.

"The Hidden Wisdom"

The wisdom is then called "the hidden wisdom:" a wisdom standing in a condition of having been hidden. This does not name who did the hiding, and the text answers a different question first: hidden from whom. Verse 8 supplies it, "the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood." The hiddenness is stated relative to the rulers and to the age whose framework they think by.

God did not withhold His plan of redemption from the world until Christ came. The redemptive program through the Messiah was revealed in the Old Testament. A suffering Savior was not a secret. What was hidden was hidden by the unbeliever (self-blinded, self-deafened, self-deceived). This is why God's wisdom is spoken "in a mystery": not because God whispers, but because what He proclaims openly cannot be received by the framework of the world and the natural mind.

"Which God Predestined Before the Ages to Our Glory"

What is predestined in this verse is the wisdom, the plan. It is a statement that God's saving wisdom, whose content is Christ crucified, was fixed by God "before the ages." The wisdom of this age is a latecomer; the wisdom of God is prior to time.

The rest of Scripture says the same of the plan. God "made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him... having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:9, 11). Grace "was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Timothy 1:9). Eternal life was "promised long ages ago" by the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Christ "was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you" (1 Peter 1:20). And the cross itself, the content of the mystery, was carried out "by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). None of this was improvised or plan B. The crucified Christ whom the rulers did not recognize was the substance of a wisdom settled before the ages began.

The clause closes on its purpose: "to our glory" (εἰς δόξαν ἡμῶν *eis doxan hēmōn*). The wisdom planned before the ages terminates in the glory of the people it saves. God fixed before the ages a wisdom that would carry nobodies to glory, and He fixed it so that no flesh could boast of getting there.

SUMMARY

Wisdom stands first in the sentence and is stated three times: affirmed, fenced off from the age, and assigned to God. The wisdom of God, gathered from the whole of Scripture, is God's own possession, given to man from His mouth, and become a person in the crucified Christ. It is spoken among the mature, and the mature, tested across four passages, are not a rank and not an inner circle; they are believers thinking spiritually and maturely about the truth, a manner of thinking that is commanded, trained by practice, and formed through teaching. It is spoken in a mystery, not because its content is obscure but because a world measuring by its own framework cannot receive what God has published openly. Its content, Christ crucified, was declared by the prophets and fixed by God before the ages, and its end is the glory of those who were nothing.

The first two of the five questions are now answered from the text.

1. "Among the mature" means among the grown as against the infant, and maturity is a way of thinking with the truth.
2. The mystery of 2:7 is the mystery of 2:1, God's wisdom whose content is Christ crucified, hidden to the framework of the age and revealed to the called.

That is how the trees serve the forest. The greater section runs from the wisdom of God hidden from the rulers (2:6-9), through that wisdom revealed by the Spirit and received by the spiritual man (2:10-16), to a congregation in Christ walking like mere men (3:1-4). Verses 6 and 7 are the doorway, and they set the terms for the whole. If the wisdom of God is God's and comes only by His giving, then no one reaches it by the age's framework, which is what 2:8-9 will say of the rulers. If the wisdom is received by a manner of thinking, then a believer can still fail to receive it by thinking like the age, which is what 3:1-4 will say of Corinth. James draws the same line and names both wisdoms. Beside the wisdom from above, pure and peaceable, stands a wisdom that is "earthly, natural, demonic," and its fruit is "jealousy and selfish ambition" (James 3:14-16). "Natural" in James is the same word for the natural man in 2:14, and jealousy is the very thing named at 3:3 as the mark of the fleshly Corinthians. The difference between 2:6 and 3:3 is the wisdom a believer thinks by.

Paul is dismantling the wisdom of the world, but he does not dismantle wisdom. The true wisdom of God cannot be found; it must be revealed, and it has been revealed, to the prophets and apostles, and set down in the word of God. That word is now in our hands. If we want to know the wisdom of God, the way is open: read it, study it, and accept it. In doing so we hold something that the world and the rulers of this world do not understand, and we are called to think about it maturely.