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1 Corinthians

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 1 Corinthians 1:21

Paul introduced the main thought of this section showing that the cross is the power of God unto salvation and that the thoughts of man, no matter how high and lofty, are foolishness when considered apart from the cross.

Thinking on the great mental achievements of man - philosophical, logical, scientific, etc., we find that none of them bring us any closer to how to actually be saved. They may be filled with incredible amounts of knowledge and yet still not explain what is truly important. Yes, it's interesting to know about quasars in the farthest reaches of the galaxies, but if we are destined to perish apart from God, what difference does the knowledge of them make?

And so Paul begins verse 21 with "For since..." Because the sage, the scribe, and the disputer could never attain to the highest and most important knowledge of all, "in the wisdom of God" another path was chosen to reveal that knowledge. Why is that important? The reason is that salvation is completely separate from human ability, endeavor, or determination. If the very highest aspect of man (the intellectual mind) cannot attain to God, then whatever God gives to bring that reconciliation is greater than that highest aspect of man.

Though "the world through wisdom did not know God" is reaffirming the concept that the sage, the scribe, and the disputer (these highest offices in man's

understanding) still don't know Him. They may be able to deduce there is a God. They may be able to deduce things about this God. They may even be able to know that there is a disconnect between this God and themselves. However, they have absolutely no idea how to resolve the disconnect.

The sage who gives advice can only say, "I think" this is the answer (while being wrong), or he can simply lie and make up a religion, which is why there are so many false religions.

The scribe can pull out his many texts on science, logic, philosophy, etc and say "these don't resolve that particular problem." Again, when this fails, he can make up a fib - "The universe created itself. There is no God. Problem solved!" Unfortunately, the problem isn't solved.

The disputer can argue back and forth with a classroom full of inquisitive minds about a relationship with God, but the answers will always fall short of satisfying those inquisitive minds. Like the scribe, he can make up a tale and tell the world the problem is solved - "We evolved from lower species. Natural selection and evolution have brought us to where we are." But again, we know that there is sin in the world and one cannot evolve into "sin." There would be no consideration of wrongdoing if natural selection were true.

No matter what approach is considered, without God's special revelation, the wisdom of the world cannot know God. And so because of this, God demonstrates His ultimate wisdom in a way which thus confounds the greatest thinking of man. In this "it pleased God." In other words, God is satisfied in the method that He chose because it demonstrates His omniscient authority over every man and over all men. This isn't God "lording" his wisdom over us in an arrogant way, but His demonstration to us that this way is the perfect way. It allows the young child, the jungle dweller, the man on the street, and the business executive - and any other person who so chooses to accept it - to rely wholly and solely on Him. In it His grace is seen because there is a total and absolute reliance on Him.

And this beautiful, marvelous demonstration of God's wisdom is "the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." It isn't the preaching which saves, it is the message contained in the preaching. Therefore, the preacher is wholly dependent on the accuracy of the message. This again demonstrates that even the preacher and the listener are altogether dependent on God for salvation. If the preacher preaches a wrong message, intentionally or through incompetence, then there is no salvation. Thus, there is the responsibility on the listener to check up on the preacher.

In this, Paul calls the message preached "foolishness." He will explain this in the coming verses, particularly verse 25. But to consider the context now will help us think through what he means. If the greatest minds in humanity, pursuing God through the greatest disciplines, cannot find how to be reconciled to Him, then whatever He devises for our reconciliation is higher than what those great minds with their great achievements can attain. And if that immensely great plan of God is mere "foolishness," then imagine how stunningly awesome is the overall wisdom of God!

Life application: Never underestimate the greatness of God.

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 1 Corinthians 1:22

This verse expands on what was just said by Paul, that "it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." The term "for" means "since" and therefore this is less of an explanation than a continued rendering of the same idea. In this then, he details the categories of those who would reject "the foolishness of the message preached" and why they would reject it.

The first are the Jews. They "request a sign" in order to believe a message. However, the term "request" doesn't fit with our concept of what the word means. When we think of "request" in modern English, we think of someone asking for more soup in a polite way. What the Jews wanted in a sign was more of

a demand. In essence, "We will believe you only after we see a sign." This is seen several times in the gospel records, such as in Matthew 12:38 - "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.'"

By receiving such a sign, they certainly felt that it validated their status as a people before God as much as it validated the authenticity of the one to provide the sign. As the covenant people, they had the oracles of God, the prophecies of a great future kingdom, etc. They could refer to the great signs and miracles of the past which showed that they were God's favored. And so they expected them to be shown as continued evidence of this. However, a sign from a person, if a true sign, is ultimately a sign from God. If it is, then what the one who reveals the sign proclaims is expected to be listened to and acted upon.

In Jesus' ministry, He performed a specific group of signs, beginning with turning water into wine and culminating with the resurrection. And yet, despite this proof, they rejected the message that accompanied the signs. Paul, and all of the apostles, preached the message of the cross. The cross implies that there was a sin-debt to be paid before one was right with God. But the Jews, believing that they were already right with God, rejected their crucified Messiah - the message was "foolishness" to them. Thus, the signs that accompanied the message were rejected. Because the signs were rejected, the One (God) from whom the signs came was also rejected.

Unlike the Jews, the "and Greeks seek after wisdom." The Greek approach to enlightenment was to go deeper and deeper into the heart of a matter, searching out the nature of things. New ideas were constantly received and evaluated. This is seen in the book of Acts when Paul went to Athens. There Luke records, "For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." (Acts 17:21)

Ever in search of new things, new ideas, and new concepts of the workings of the world around them, the Greeks sought out answers to everything in exacting detail. This is equivalent to the world of scientists today. They are looking for the

exact details of the Big Bang, they are searching for the "God particle," they want to know everything about everything because they believe that through knowledge alone, they can identify the meaning of life and the reason for our existence.

Because of this, the message of the cross is utter foolishness. How could everything be so intricately balanced, so marvelously timed, and so exactly researchable and yet require an act of grace from God in order for us to be made right with Him? If He existed at all, then certainly He would find us acceptable because we have spent our time searching out His creation so carefully. Wouldn't He?

But searching out creation is not the same as searching out God. The creation declares the glory of God, but it is separate and distinct from Him. We don't worship the Creator through His creation, we worship Him because of it and because He is the Originator of it. As the psalmist said -

"Of old You laid the foundation of the earth,
And the heavens *are* the work of Your hands.
They will perish, but You will endure;
Yes, they will all grow old like a garment;
Like a cloak You will change them,
And they will be changed.
But You *are* the same,
And Your years will have no end." Psalm 102:25-27

The Greeks, like the intellectuals of the world, search after wisdom through the creation and miss the One who gave the creation. The message of the cross has no place in their minds because it doesn't fit with their presuppositions about how things should work in a universe which is so organized and seemingly understandable.

In both approaches, the problem is a misunderstanding of self. Sin is a barrier to the message of the cross. For the Jew, sin is discounted because of Jewish-ness. For the Greek, sin is discounted because an orderly universe demands an orderly answer to all things in a way which is reconcilable apart from God.

Life application: The message of the cross is God's way of telling Jew and Greek that sin is a real problem and that it can only be fixed by Him. Don't over-analyze the situation to the point where you miss the grace. And don't expect the grace to be granted through a miraculous sign. Accept the grace and be reconciled to God.

...but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 1 Corinthians 1:23

This verse is given as a contrast to what was just stated. Taken together, they read

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"For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness..."

Whereas the Jews request a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom, those who hold to the doctrine of Christ have a different view of a relationship with God. "But" is the contrasting conjunction, "we however preach Christ crucified." Signs are unnecessary for a right relationship with God. Abraham is the pattern of those declared righteous by faith. He was given a promise which would otherwise seem impossible and he believed. In his belief, God credited it to him for righteousness.

The work of God in Christ is that He would be crucified for our sins, but the Jews were looking for something outwardly great in their Messiah. Surely he would be a grand king, a conquering ruler who would vanquish their enemies. Instead, He was a humble servant who was nailed to a tree. This would be particularly offensive because the law which established them says explicitly, "he who is hanged *is* accursed of God." (Deuteronomy 21:23)

Because of the way in which Christ died, as much as anything else, they simply couldn't believe. Where a sign was expected, a dead man on a tree was displayed. This then became a "stumbling-block" to their understanding of God's redemptive work. A stumbling-block (Greek: skandalon) is something which trips one up. When one walks and there is a large block in front of them, they walk over or around it. But when there is just a slightly-raised and almost imperceptible bump, it isn't noticed. Because of this, one trips up because of it. This is what happened with the Jews. They simply tripped over the work of Christ, not seeing it for what it was.

For the Greeks who looked to wisdom as the ultimate goal of existence, the cross was simply foolishness. The body of Christ was crucified and died. How could God's redemptive plan include something so base, so not mind-centered. Wouldn't the Christ be able to speak out wisdom that was hidden concerning all things? Wouldn't He be able to explain why we were here and what our purpose was? If He died as He was nailed to a tree, then obviously He didn't understand the way to living forever! And if He was dead, then He was gone. The resurrection must be the foolish delusions of His followers.

This is why Christ is rejected by Jew and by intellectual. They are looking at the world around them with presuppositions about how God *would* do things. But we are men and not God and we cannot fathom what God would do. All we can do is look at what He does and accept His work by faith.

Life application: Christ's death atones for sin. Christ's resurrection proves that His death atones for our sin. Have faith in these things and be reconciled to God.

...but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:24

In the previous verse, we read that the apostles preached "Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness." Without the crucifixion of Christ, there would be no atonement, no forgiveness, and no reconciliation with

God. But the message seems foolish to the majority of those who hear it, both Jew and Gentile. However, Paul tells us that "to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks," there is an understanding that what God has done in Christ is of the utmost value and importance.

Because he mentions "Jews and Greeks" in one verse it is saying that regardless of heritage, there is one body in Christ. We are shown in Romans 3 that there is no difference between Jew and Greek because both are bound under sin. In Galatians 3:28, he tells us that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In Ephesians 2:14, he says that the "middle wall of separation" is broken down. The middle wall was a barrier at the temple which separated the Jews from the Gentiles. These distinctions are now erased in Christ.

But it goes further. The term "Greeks" here is used to represent all Gentiles. Paul is saying that it makes absolutely no difference where one is from, what their lineage is, nor the color of their skin. There is one body comprised of people from all groups, male and female alike. And they have all come to the same glorious conclusion, which is "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Because all are bound under sin, then there must be a level playing field on how that sin is removed. As we cannot do it, then it is obviously beyond our power and our wisdom. As this is certain, then it truly is a demonstration of "the power of God and the wisdom of God." Jew and Greek alike fall short of the remedy, but God makes the offer. Therefore, the person who accepts the gift, though possibly with a mental defect, has more wisdom than the most intelligent minds of humanity who reject it.

Think of it! A mentally-challenged person who is ridiculed by those around him has the ability to grasp what they cannot. The little child who receives Jesus by faith has a greater understanding of God's salvation than the scientist who works on nuclear physics but who shuns Christ. And the believing slave who is beaten and scorned by the master, has a greater position by far than the non-believing master will ever imagine! This is the wisdom of God and the foolishness of man. It

is the glory of God revealed in an instrument of scorn and shame. It is the cross of Jesus Christ - power, wisdom, and majesty from heaven's throne!

Life application: Do you feel snubbed by the world sometimes because of your faith? So what! You have access to heaven's riches. All they have is temporary access to earth's vanishing vapors. Stand fast in your faith in Jesus Christ - the power of God, and the wisdom of God for all who believe.

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Corinthians 1:25

This verse needs to be considered from the perspective of man rather than the reality found in God. It is speaking of *perception*, not in *actual* terms. In other words, "Because the foolishness of God" is a *perception* of what God has done, is doing, or will do rather than the *actuality* of those things.

God's plan is anything but foolish, but when man sees it (meaning "man" in general) he finds it foolish.

"Taking thousands of years to save the world? What about all those who died in the flood? How stupid!"

"Picking a bunch of tent dwellers to reveal His plans to the world... How stupid!"

"Hanging someone hang on a tree to save someone else... how stupid!"

"Going away after being 'resurrected' from the dead? And still being gone 2000 years later? How stupid!"

Unregenerate man sees these things as "foolishness." Picking up the Bible and turning to any page will reveal more "foolishness" to them because they simply cannot grasp the enormity of the plan, the perfection behind it, and the wisdom that is involved. To the logical statistician, the numbers don't add up. To the

scientist, the data seems to suggest chaos rather than order. To the philosopher, there is always the question of how evil fits into the picture and how unjust God must be to send so many people to hell.

All of these seemingly foolish things have purpose, they have order, they have sure and just resolutions, but the individual man cannot see beyond his particular shortcomings. In this "foolishness," as *perceived* by man, the one who understands the gravity of the situation and the perfection of the cross will find that truly "God is wiser than man."

Again, in the second half of the verse Paul speaks of *perception* rather than *actuality*. "The weakness of God" is how man sees this plan.

"How could God use someone like Jacob who supposedly saw Him on several occasions, wrestled with Him in the night, was carried along all his days, and yet was so weak in his faith as to worry about losing his son Benjamin? What kind of God would use him?"

"In the line of the 'Messiah' are prostitutes, fornicators, murderers, adulterers, and on and on. What kind of plan is that? A bunch of weak and useless sorts leading to someone great... I think not!"

"The 'Messiah of the world' hung on a cross! You must be kidding. If He is so great, why didn't He actually call down the angels He claimed He had available? Why doesn't He write His name in the sky so that we can all see it? What a weak God....!"

Again, to the one who hasn't seen sin for what it is; to the unregenerate man; to the one looking for external displays of power and might - to all of these the plan seems filled with weakness. But the *perceived* weakness of God is *actually* stronger than men. What He has done is of such a magnitude of power more than any person could conceive that it is simply astonishing. Every drop of rain in the

upper Nile was calculated into what would become a famine in the middle-east so that Israel would need to travel to Egypt.

Every grain of grass is monitored to ensure that all things work out as they should. Every galaxy and star in the heavens has an exact place to keep the universe properly balanced for the life on earth. What man fails to consider is held tightly under control by the God who knows all things, sees all things, and directs all things according to His wisdom and might.

Life application: When Paul says in Romans 8:28 that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose," we can be 100% sure this is true. The wisdom of God and the power of God are so far beyond our comprehension that we cannot come close to perceiving it. Rest in the knowledge that God is God and He will take care of you according to His promise.