

7. Isaiah's prophecy revealed God's intention to overthrow human wisdom and eclipse human insight, and Paul recognized that this promise has now been fulfilled in Christ. *Yet God has not destroyed these prized human commodities by eliminating them altogether, but by unmasking them and showing them for what they really are.* He has shown them to be empty and impotent foolishness, and He has done so by confronting them with His own wisdom, understanding and power made manifest in the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This was Paul's thesis, substantiated as true on the basis of the prophetic Scriptures now fulfilled in Jesus. And his reason for presenting it to the Corinthians wasn't to inform them of something they'd never heard or known, but to press them with their own foolishness and thereby drive them to repentance. They had allowed their hearts and minds to be recaptured by natural wisdom and that could not be allowed to stand. In the first place, they'd become infatuated again with the very thing their God had stripped naked and revealed as impotent and worthless. But, in so doing, they were also effectively denying His wisdom and power. Whether or not they realized it, they had everything backward: foolishness and wisdom, impotence and power, vanity and value.

- a. Jesus has revealed to the world God's wisdom and power by being their tangible embodiment (1:23-24, 31); the mere fact of His incarnation and redemptive work has debunked and delegitimized the wisdom and power of men. There was no doubt in Paul's mind that the Corinthians understood this, for they'd heard and embraced *his* gospel – the gospel of Christ crucified (2:1-5), and he'd spent more than a year discipling them in that gospel.

Though they'd drifted in their thinking and judgment, the Corinthians were yet saints of God: They knew He had triumphed over human wisdom. And so Paul could pose to them a compound rhetorical question whose answer was as obvious to them as it was to him: "*Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?*" No one at Corinth would deny that sages and scholars were still present and active in the world and even in their city, but the truth embodied in the "word of the cross" has emasculated all such men; in His Son and His gospel God had made foolish the wisdom of the world (1:20).

- b. Paul followed his rhetorical questions with a statement that directly answers what those questions imply: The sages and philosophers of this age have indeed been vanquished, laid bare in the piercing light of the sunrise from on high. God's wisdom has shown the world's wisdom to be nothing more than a delusional charade; what men regard and exalt as wisdom is actually foolishness.

Paul insisted that God's wisdom has exposed the world's foolishness, but that assertion by itself is insufficient to make the case; it must be defined and bounded before its truthfulness can be determined. Upon hearing Paul's spectacular claim, a thinking person should respond by asking what exactly he meant by it. In what sense is this claim true? What exactly is the "wisdom of the world" and how has God revealed it to be foolishness?

Paul himself recognized that his assertion needed clarification to be credible, and he provided it in his very next statement (1:21). The wisdom he was referring to is concerned with men's knowledge of God.

In the most basic sense, wisdom can be defined as the ability to discern something – persons, things, circumstances, situations, events, etc. – as it actually is and respond to it perfectly appropriately. This being the case, it follows that the knowledge of God is fundamental and absolutely essential to wisdom. The reason is that God is the designer, overseer and director of all created existence:

- He created everything that exists and He orders and directs all things according to an all-encompassing purpose.
- This means that all things – as well as the circumstances and situations of their existence – find their definition and meaning in relation to God. Things are what He created them to be and what He knows them to be.

The truth of a thing is what its Creator knows it to be in itself and in relation to all other things. Thus the true knowledge of a thing depends upon perceiving it the way God perceives it, and this like-mindedness, in turn, depends upon a person knowing God and being aligned with and yielded to His mind and judgment. In the language of the Scripture, *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*

Man is a spiritual being, created in the divine image and likeness, and so he instinctively recognizes that truth and meaning are ultimately spiritual matters. That is, the true meaning of a thing cannot be determined by purely material (physical) considerations and investigation. People recognize that the pursuit of wisdom moves them beyond the physical and empirical to the metaphysical and philosophical (the word *philosophy* is the transliteration of the Greek term meaning “love of wisdom”). But in their natural state – their state of estrangement from God, human beings cannot go beyond their own minds; their wisdom is confined to human categories and conceptions.

For all his apparent insight and understanding, the natural man is incapable of knowing God. He believes wisdom is within his grasp and that this wisdom includes the knowledge of deity and spiritual verities, but the truth is that his wisdom is foolishness; the only “god” he knows is a notion conceived in his own mind: *The world in its wisdom does not – and cannot – know the living God.*

At the same time, the very limitation that precludes human wisdom keeps people ignorant of their error. They believe they're wise and are convinced that their notions of God correspond to the reality of Him (substantially and truly if not exhaustively or perfectly). Men don't realize their tragic plight, but God does. He sees things as they really are; His wisdom enables Him to recognize what “wise” men cannot: *Their apparent wisdom is of no use in knowing Him, and since they don't know Him, they don't know anything else in truth – not even themselves.*

Men cannot see the vanity of their “wisdom” and so put their trust in it. They look to it as their guide and protector – ultimately as their savior. No one entrusts his life and destiny to that which he perceives as foolish and impotent, and this is precisely why the natural mind looks for salvation beyond (or in addition to) the Christ of the gospel. People are able to recognize their need to be “saved,” but they seek it in a “savior” their sensibilities recognize and affirm. So it was with many in Israel during Jesus’ earthly life (John 5:39-40), and so it is to this day.

Human wisdom cannot attain to the knowledge of God, but neither can it obtain salvation. Men cannot know God, but He knows them; their wisdom cannot secure their salvation, but His can and does. His wisdom has brought salvation to the world of men, but in what appears to natural wisdom to be a most moronic way: through the apparent foolishness of the *kerygma* – the word of the gospel.

- c. The reason the kerygma appears foolish is that its message rings hollow; it comes across as irrelevant, if not absurd. People desire salvation (however they might conceive it), but their native “wisdom” compels them to have certain expectations of what salvation involves, how it is obtained, and how its purveyors are authenticated. So Paul’s experience was that the Jewish mind, conditioned by scriptural patterns, expected to see God’s truth and servants – including the Messiah Himself – authenticated through miraculous signs (cf. Matthew 12:38-40, 16:1-4; Luke 11:16-30; cf. also John 2:13-19 with 10:22-25, 15:24). On the other hand, the Greek philosophical mind sought truth and authentication in wisdom itself – that is, in the human wisdom it recognized and embraced (1:22).
- d. Though Jew and Gentile approach the matters of wisdom and salvation from differing vantage points (even to this day), both are bound by natural minds and natural expectations that cause them to reject the gospel as preposterous. Paul had experienced this response over and over again, and yet he refused to succumb to human conceptions and expectations; regardless of the outcome, he was committed to proclaiming only “Christ crucified” (1:23; cf. vv. 17-18, 21).

This proclamation was a stumbling block to the Jews because Jewish christology had no category for such a thing. The notion of Israel’s Messiah being crucified by Rome was inconceivable and utterly abhorrent; Yahweh was sending Him as a triumphal king to conquer His enemies and deliver and restore His people, not be killed by those enemies and leave Israel under the foot of the Gentile authority.

To Gentiles, the gospel message is nonsensical. In the first place, where are wisdom and spiritual power in the brutality and defeat of a Roman crucifixion?

*“The scandal of this message is difficult for Christians of a later era to imagine. To proclaim a crucified Messiah is to talk nonsense... As a particularly horrible form of public torture and execution, it was designed to demonstrate that no one should defy the powers that be. Yet Paul’s gospel declares that Jesus’ crucifixion is somehow the event through which God has triumphed over those powers.”*

*“Rather than proving the sovereignty of Roman political order, it shatters the world’s systems of authority. Rather than confirming what the wisest heads already know, it shatters the world’s systems of knowledge.”* (Hays)

Beyond the crucifixion event itself, the gospel proclaims that, in Jesus, deity has condescended to meet humanity in its need and impotence. This notion is antithetical to man’s natural egocentric spirituality which, regardless of the specific form it takes, always envisions a scheme in which the human being is able to ascend, as it were, into the heavenlies so as to take hold of deity and its benefits. Primitive paganism, world religion, or popular Christianity, man is a consummate and incurable magician, always constructing his Tower of Babel.

With the Greeks in particular, the gospel of “Christ crucified” proved to be especially foolish because it is the proclamation of Christ *resurrected*. It wasn’t that the Greeks denied immortality; quite the opposite, their philosophers taught that the human soul is inherently eternal and cannot be destroyed. It was bodily resurrection that they couldn’t accept. Even if such a thing were possible, the whole notion was repugnant. For the Greeks, the goal of death was the soul’s liberation from the body; only in that way could a human being finally attain to the fullness of his true nature and existence. Far from being impressed with Jesus’ bodily resurrection, in their “wisdom” the Greeks perceived it as contemptible.

- e. Whatever the particular personal, cultural, or historical factors, the fact remains that the gospel strikes the natural mind as strange and ultimately incoherent. Thus the response of many is outright rejection; in others it is revision – the reforming of the gospel truth to make it fit the parameters and expectations of natural wisdom. But this is not the case with everyone: In the instance of those who are being saved (here, “*those who are the called ones*”), Jesus Christ is perceived in truth, not as a tragic and pathetic victim of Roman brutality, but as the very wisdom and power of God (1:24, cf. again v. 30 and Colossians 2:1-3).

In their case, this seemingly “foolish thing of God” – Christ crucified – is discerned to be wiser than human wisdom at its height, even as the apparent impotence of the cross is discerned to be mightier than anything men can imagine or hope to accomplish (1:25). The power and wisdom of God have been revealed and glorified in the person and work of Jesus Christ, but unto the end that they should also be manifested, affirmed and exalted in human beings. God’s design in the exercise of His wisdom and power was not displaying them to his creation, but *reconciling* and *transforming* it. He didn’t want men to merely acknowledge the impotence of their supposed power and the folly of their supposed wisdom, but to lay hold of His wisdom and power by becoming partakers in His Son.

This emphasis becomes clearer when verses 18 and 23-24 are recognized as forming an *inclusio*: a pair of literary bookends bounding the passage. These bookends frame Paul’s argument, showing that his ultimate concern in treating the contrasting pairs of wisdom and folly, power and weakness, and vanity and value is *salvation* in contrast to *ruination*.