

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: the grace of God

How can I thank You, dear Jesus, for the love You have showed me? How can I thank You, dear Jesus, for the death You have endured on my behalf? How can I thank You, dear Jesus, for pursuing my soul for its salvation? How can I thank You, dear Jesus, for the promises You have made in Your Word? Your grace is indeed sufficient for my soul, and I rest in Your love. AMEN

For myself

Pray in silence. Let your mind wander on this theme of the grace of God. Remember His love, His sacrifice, His work, all for you, and give thanks.

For others

Pray for Egypt, and pray for the many people who live there and who struggle with all that has happened, and the conflicting forces of democracy, progressive Muslim politics, conservative secular and multicultural agendas, and much more.

Meditation

What is the truth behind Your love, O Lord?
A love which made the world and chose a people,
And led a broken nation through the desert;
A love which spoke through kings and prophets,
And wept and bled when all seemed lost through sin ...

Yet through a love of pure and unsurpassed beauty,
What was lost was found again and to our favour!
Christ, God's Son, has come to love the lost!
This man, He took upon Himself all our rejection
And bore it all the way to hellish death,
The brutal Cross of crucifying shame ...
And Yes, He did all this that good might conquer death
And claim love's all-embracing victory,
To prove to all the world a timeless truth;
Its best and only hope is in a risen Saviour!

Friend! This love will only find a home in you and me,
Those for whom the past or present make us ever lost ...
So, as we place our future's hope in Him,
The One who longs, in love, to be at home in us
Will grasp our faith and hold us closer to our destiny.

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:2

A ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel; and not with skilful speech lest the Cross of Christ be robbed of its power!

B ¹⁸ For the Word about the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the insight of the intelligent.'

C ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish?

D1 ²¹ *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom,*

D2 *God chose to save those who believe through the foolishness of our preaching!*

D3 ²² *For Jews demand signs and Greeks strive for wisdom,*

D4 ²³ *but we proclaim Christ crucified,*

D3 *a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles;*

D2 ²⁴ *but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

D1 ²⁵ *For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

C ²⁶ Consider your own call, fellow believers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish in the world to shame the wise.

B And God chose the weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ He chose inferior and despised things in the world, even what does not exist, to do away with what exists. ²⁹ He did this so that no worldly person might boast in the presence of God.

A ³⁰ Because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, for God made Him our wisdom, and also our righteousness, holiness and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, 'Whoever boasts should boast in the Lord.' ¹ Now when I came to you, fellow believers, I did not come proclaiming the evidence of God to you in high sounding words or wisdom.

Message ² For I decided to know nothing whilst I was with you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

Review

At first sight, this is a wonderful passage which has at its heart the proclamation of the Gospel. This is compared with skilful speech and found to be much better (1:17f.), it is superior to human wisdom (1:18-20), it is a message about the importance of the death of Jesus (1:23), which is 'foolishness' to the world (1:25). Yet despite its unattractive features from an earthly point of view, this is the Gospel of God, the message of Jesus Christ, and Word of God at the heart of the Christian church (1:30-2:2). No wonder many preachers have used it over the centuries.

Some interesting features of the passage

Yet the more we read this passage, the more complex it seems, containing many messages and repeating them in patterns. Have a look, for example, at verse 20, which says '*where is the wise man? Where is the Scholar? ... Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish?*' Now read verse 26, which says, '*consider your own call ... not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, But God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise*'. You will find that these two verses say essentially the same thing, but in very different ways! How then do we get to the heart of this passage and find some perspective on Paul's message here in this letter?

You will see that I have written the text with subheadings in the form of lettering; A,B,C, then D1, D2,D3,D4. You will also see that each paragraph is indented, thus making a pattern to the whole text. In addition, you will find

that sections of the passage with the same lettering have a very similar message, but as above, each message is put in very different ways. So what is this all about?

A very skilful piece of writing for one that berates 'wisdom'!

In order to explain, I must tell you that this passage is an astonishing piece of literature, and one of the most complex in all Paul's letters. Anyone who read this in the first century would have noticed that it was written in an elaborate Greek style, well known to people of the day. This style is used more often in Scripture than most of us know, and if we can spot it, it can add immensely to our understanding of Scripture. So I will explain it, and ask you to follow this to the point where we can arrive at an understanding of the heart of Paul's message here.

To start with, despite Paul's forthright insistence that human wisdom is foolishness compared to God's wisdom, his words are an example of some of the finest and most complex style of Greek writing available! It is as if he is saying, *'I am writing this message about the Cross with the finest literary methods, because I want you to know that the Cross of Christ, which seems so simple and so foolish, is far more wise, powerful and effective than anything I or anyone else can write or say!'* Extraordinary!

The literary style of this text

Bear with me. Today, we think a story is well told when it is told in sequence leading up to a climax. For example, a story about Grandad might go like this:

Grandad was coming and we were all excited. He arrived and we welcomed him. Then he greeted us and we had a chat, before having a meal together. We had a great time.

Now this is a simple story, highlighting the good time had with Grandad. But in ancient times, stories were often told in a different way, and with a more complete picture of what happened. The story would start as above, but it would go on to say:

... After the meal we talked some more until it was time for him to say goodbye. When he left, we were all pleased that he had come.

Comparing the two, the second more ancient story style continues rather like a 'mirror' of the first part of the story. In particular, the second half of the story records his talking 'some more', saying goodbye and leaving; all in reverse order to his coming, welcoming and initial 'chat', as recored in the first part of the story. It ends with a comment about the pleasure of the visit, complimenting the opening sentence which anticipates the happy visit.

This pattern as found in today's passage

Now look at the text for today, and look at each section. You will find Paul does something very similar. Each section is 'mirrored' by another part later on; so what Paul says in section A at the beginning is very similar to what he says in section A at the end. Then look at each sections, B and C to check this out. In addition, Paul uses the same technique to deliver his the message at the heart of the piece, as found in sections D1, D2, D3, D4, where again, you will see the same things being said by Paul in parallel sections. For example, in the first section D2 Paul says that God will save those who believe the foolishness of the preaching of the Gospel, and in the parallel section D2, he says something similar about the power and wisdom of God to save people, etc.

Was Bible study ever supposed to be so complicated? Well, this is the Scripture we have and we must deal with it as we find it. This is the only way to get to grips with the detail and work it all out!

The heart of the message here

So what is the message we are left with? We must place together all the A's, B's etc and we will soon begin to get Paul's message in a language we can more clearly understand. At the heart of this structure is Paul's firm reminder to God's people that the Gospel is first and foremost about the Cross of Christ; *'but we proclaim Christ crucified'* (1:23), a message repeated at the very end of the text (2:2). Now if we remember that Paul was writing to fight the insidious problem of division within the Corinthian church (1:10-17), this singular and simple message makes sense. There can be no room for divisions amongst God's people if the Gospel message is but one thing!

Everything else is peripheral to this central truth; human wisdom (1:18,20,26,30), religiosity (1:22,23), and people's individual striving to find God (1:28,29), are all found wanting and inadequate guides to God. It is God's perfect will that His salvation be found in Jesus Christ and specifically in the fact of His crucifixion (1:23, 2:1,2). Moreover, the preaching of this truth is the means by which it is brought to people and made effective. Paul is therefore reminding the Corinthians that this is what he did when bringing the Gospel to Corinth; he preached it! The Cross and the preaching of it is at the centre of the Gospel, not people, not the church, not theology, not religion, not philosophy or anything else imaginable on earth.

So Paul uses the most complex literary way of getting his point across, as if to say to people that even if he uses the highest level of literary skill possible, this is nothing compared to the greatness of God's plan of salvation! Because of this, it is only when we surrender our feelings, thoughts and lifestyle to the Cross of Christ that we

gain perspective on our lives and our faith. There is much more for us to work through here, but this basic message is undoubtedly what Paul wanted the Corinthians to hear from him in this complicated little speech, before he moves on.

Discipleship

Application

Is Paul anti-intellectual, and is the Gospel anti-intellectual?

Paul may seem to 'lead us around the houses' in this passage, but his point is clear; our salvation is by faith and not through our own intellect. But once we have become children of God, then our minds have access to the spiritual wisdom and guidance of God, which is far higher than human wisdom in extent and value. Many scriptures say the same and more.

With sadness, many Christian people feel this passage is 'anti-intellectual'. This attitude is unhelpful, because although Paul found the Corinthian church was too dependent upon intellectualism and spoke out against it, his main purpose was to place things in their proper order in the church, not to speak against the use of the mind. To put it simply, this passage tells us that in God's eyes, faith leads us to salvation not the intellect; it does not tell us that knowledge and wisdom have no value in the Kingdom of God. Wisdom and intelligence remain important to God's church but they are not its message, and throughout the centuries people of great intelligence have served the church to its benefit.

The wisdom of this passage

Our passage says that the Gospel is focussed on the preaching of Christ crucified, and our full appreciation of this is not a matter of intelligence but of appreciation by the whole person, body, mind, spirit and soul, in feelings, in emotions, in remembrance, and in every form of human engagement with God. It is when the Holy Spirit makes a connection between ourselves and this preached message that we respond to it in faith, and become God's children. In church life, people easily become attracted to various aspects of the Gospel, grace, faith, hope, love and charity, for example, and some become fascinated by an intellectual approach to matters of faith. It therefore does us good to remember this passage and its insistence that the Gospel is a message about the Cross of Christ.

One of the most important sections of this passage comes in verse 30 which places wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption together in describing the '*new life in Christ*'. The more we explore what these four mean, the more we will benefit spiritually, and grow in grace and the likeness of God.

Ideas for what to do

- *Read through this passage again several times and check out that you understand it to your satisfaction. When you do, then read it to a friend and see how they react to it, and see if you can explain it to them.*
- *Pray for all who are studying theology at College or university. Many find it hard to come to terms with the way matters of faith are taught. Pray that their faith will be sustained.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you feel that Paul means by speaking of the 'foolishness of our preaching' (1:21)?
2. Discuss the four qualities of faith; wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption. Do they balance each other, or is one more important than another?
3. Should a preacher learn good communication skills in order to begin the task of preaching the Gospel?

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, You trust me, and I do not understand why You feel able to do this. Sometimes I can trust myself, but often I cannot. Your love and compassion is more than I can understand, but use me, I pray for the work of Your Kingdom, and may I be an ever willing servant! AMEN