





Sunday School Lesson
1 Cor. 1:18-31
 by Lorin L. Cranford
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The Preaching of the Cross



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In this third lesson under the title “Challenges of the Christian Faith” in the Smyth-Helwys Formations series, we focus on Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth at [1:18-31](#). The SS lesson title is “Wisdom” but this only captures a part of the meaning of this passage. Actually, the key theme of the passage surfaces in the first verse, “the word of the cross” (ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ). God’s wisdom -- not human wisdom -- then emerges as a secondary emphasis in the passage, along with an emphasis upon God’s power. But both of these center upon the gospel as a preached message. Also the theological side is found in vv. 18-25, while the application of that to the Corinthians is contained in vv. 26-31. Thus this second segment needs to be considered along with the first segment in order to gain a fuller picture.

I Context

The consideration of both the historical and literary settings of this passage play a role in correct interpretation of the scripture text. Thus both will be considered.

a. Historical

The **external history** of 1 Corinthians contains many fascinating aspects. Even though our text comes from the document titled 1 Corinthians, this was not the first letter that Paul wrote to the Christian community at Corinth. It was his second letter. All together Paul dictated at least four separate letters to this group of believers and we have only two of them preserved in our New Testament. Thus it becomes helpful to survey Paul’s relationship with the believers in the ancient city of Corinth. At [Cranfordville](#) I have an outline summary of the points of that relationship, which is reproduced here:

1. Initial Ministry

established the church on the second missionary journey
AD 50-51

Sources: Acts 18:1-17; 1 Thess. 3:6-13; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 1:13-17; 2 Thess. 3:1-5; 1 Cor. 3:5-10; 11:2, 23, 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7-9

2. Prior Letter

written before 1 Corinthians, now lost
may be partially contained in 2 Cor. 6:14-71
AD 52 (?)

Sources: 1 Cor. 5:9

3. 1 Corinthians

written from Ephesus while on third missionary journey
to respond to questions from the household of Chloe (chaps 1-6) and the Corinthian delegation (chaps 7-16)
AD 54-55 (spring time)

4. Painful Visit

purpose: to try to correct ongoing problems in the church
AD 55

Sources: 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1,2

5. **Sorrowful Letter**

written from Ephesus after return from Corinth
possibly contained partially in 2 Cor. 10-13, but most likely lost
AD 55

Sources: 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8

6. **2 Corinthians**

written from Macedonia after leaving Ephesus on third missionary journey
prompted by joyous report from Titus regarding the relief offering etc.
AD 56 (?)

possibly only containing chaps 1-9, if 10-13 are a part of the 'sorrowful letter'

7. **Third Visit to Corinth**

AD 57

Sources: Acts 20:1-3

From just a quick glance at the above outline, one can easily tell that Paul's relationship with the believers at Corinth is complex and quite involved. Also evident from this is the very summary nature of Luke's depiction in the book of Acts. If our only source of information was Acts, we would have just points 1 and 7. If Paul's writings were our only source, point 7 would not show up. Plus, an overview perspective to serve as a conceptual framework would be much more difficult to construct. Our letter, called 1 Corinthians, comes then after Paul's initial ministry on the second missionary journey in the early 50s. When he arrives at Ephesus on the third missionary journey in the mid-50s for the lengthy two plus year stay there, he is forced by



troubles in the Corinthian church to spend time and energy trying to help the Corinthians get on top of numerous problems. During that Ephesian ministry, he wrote three letters and made one trip to Corinth (Luke doesn't mention this one in Acts). Two dynamics emerge. (1) The Corinthian believers, although growing in number, especially in house-church groups, developed a host of serious problems, both morally and theologically. This demanded increasing amounts of time and energy from Paul. (2) Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church became increasingly strained, at one point, so bad that he had to send Titus to try to work out the strained relationships, instead of going himself. The nature of that strained relationship is not entirely clear, but from 2 Corinthians (cf. chaps 10-13) it centered on a serious questioning by the Corinthians of Paul's claim to being an apostle. From all indications this was not based on the Judaizing challenge to his apostleship, like at Galatia (cf., Gal. 1-2). The net impact was that the Corinthian church became one of those "troubling making" congregations that had some kind of internal conflict going on constantly. Ironically, when Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians at the close of the first century ([1 Clement](#)) the church was still a source of ongoing problems, some 50 years later.

1 Corinthians comes in the early stages of Paul's lengthy ministry at Ephesus on the third missionary journey and was prompted by two things: (1) a report by members of the household of Chloe about problems [chaps 1-6, cf. [1:11](#)], and (2) a list of questions sent to Paul by the Corinthians wanting his feedback [chaps 7-16, cf. [7:1](#)]. When these two things are added together, one has a long list of serious matters plaguing the Corinthian church. These range from divisions centered over a "favorite preacher" (chap. 1) to a member living in an incestuous relationship with his birth mother (chap. 5) to some members questioning the resurrection of Christ (chap. 15). Thus, since Paul could not at that time make another trip from Ephesus to Corinth to address these issues personally, he did the next best thing -- he wrote them a letter giving his perspective. This is not a church that a young, inexperienced pastor should want to tackle! What I find even more curious is that this church, probably the most problem plagued church in all of Paul's ministry, is most often held up as the example for modern churches to emulate! As a pastor, I prayed that

God would never call me to pastor a church like the one at Corinth!

That this letter called 1 Corinthians was the product of the apostle Paul is not questioned by virtually any biblical scholar, even the most radical ones over the past 200 years. That this letter was dictated by Paul to a writing secretary is confirmed by his statement in 16:21, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (NRSV). From a previous study we learned that a statement like this, very typical in ancient formal letters, indicated that the official sender of the letter, as indicated in the Adscriptio of the letter (cf. 1:1), has taken pen in hand to write in his own handwriting at least a part of, if not the entire, Conclusio of the letter as a verification that the contents of the letter represent his thoughts, even though written in another's handwriting. Unfortunately, that person is not named here, like in Romans and 1 Peter.

The **internal history** of our passage overlaps the external history somewhat at two points: (1) the preaching ministry of Paul generally (vv. 23-24) and the conversion experience of the Corinthians (v. 26). Paul's initial ministry in Corinth is described by Luke in [Acts 18:1-11](#):

1 After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together — by trade they were tentmakers. 4 Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks. 5 When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. 6 When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

7 Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. 9 One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." 11 He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (NRSV)

Paul had his own way of characterizing that ministry; cf. [2:1-5](#) below. He focused on the message of Christ as the prophesied Messiah to the Jews, as well as on the clear demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit through his preaching. All of this was centered on the gospel, the good news about Christ (cf. 1:17 below). The indication by Luke is that the initial converts at Corinth were both Jews and Gentiles. In our passage, Paul will give another perspective: the Corinthian believers came from very diverse backgrounds, socially, economically etc. (cf. 1:26). One interesting side note. In Acts 18:17, Sosthenes is the leader of the synagogue opposition who brought charges against Paul before the Roman governor Gallio. But by the writing of 1 Corinthians, Sosthenes is a devout brother who is listed as the other sender of the letter from Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1). There must be a marvelous story behind this!

b. Literary

The literary form, that is, the genre, is obviously an ancient letter, and is written in the style of ancient, not modern, letters. [1 Corinthians](#) has the traditional Praescriptio (1:1-3), Proem (1:4-9), Body (1:10-16:18), and Conclusio (16:19-24). Thus our passage comes as the second segment of the letter Body: 1:10-17 followed by 1:18-31.

The literary context of our passage is very important. The "for" ($\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$) in 1:18 plays an important role here. It establishes our passage, vv. 18-31, as the basis of Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians' divisiveness over their favorite preacher (vv. 10-17):

"10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power." (NRSV).

When a community of believers divides itself over preachers, the power of the cross is nullified. This means the congregation has shifted its focus away from the spiritual power resident in the crucified and raised Christ in gospel preaching to the persuasiveness of human words delivered by skilled preachers. Paul saw the danger in this and rebuked the Corinthians for allowing themselves to be trapped by this subtle but deadly view. Right after our passage, [2:1-5](#), Paul reminded the Corinthians that his initial preaching ministry in Corinth bore no resemblance to the skilled rhetoric of the [Sophist philosophers](#) who traveled the countryside “preaching” their philosophy of life, and outwardly resembled the Christian missionaries in their way of operating:

2:1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (NRSV)

Thus 1:18-31 stands as an important anchor, theologically, to Paul’s call to unity and to authentic spiritual experience growing out of a genuine encounter with the living Christ, rather than a false spiritual experience as the result of persuasive rhetorical skills by a preacher.

II. Message

A careful examination of vv. 18-31 clearly reveals that two natural divisions of thought emerge: (1) the emphasis upon the cross (vv. 18-25) and (2) an application of this to the Corinthians (vv. 26-31). The details of this become clearer with an examination of the [block](#) and [semantic](#) diagrams, along with the [exegetical outline](#) available in the larger internet version of this Bible study.

a. Preaching the Cross, vv. 18-25

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>1:18 Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σωζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ἐστίν. 1:19 γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐπιθεωρῶ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν καὶ τὴν συνέσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω. 1:20 ποῦ σοφός; ποῦ γραμματεὺς; ποῦ συζητητὴς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου; οὐχὶ ἐμώρανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου; 1:21 ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σῶσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας. 1:22 ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτοῦσιν καὶ Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν, 1:23 ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις</p>	<p>18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for</p>	<p>18 For the message 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 the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand</p>	<p>18 I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God. 19 As the Scriptures say, "I will destroy human wisdom and discard their most brilliant ideas." 20 So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made them all look foolish and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense. 21 Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never find him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save all who be-</p>

μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἔθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, 1:24 αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς, Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἕλλησιν, Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ θεοῦ σοφίαν· 1:25 ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενές τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

Notes:

Paul's initial declaration is to categorize two

distinct responses to the preaching of the cross of Christ. The negative reaction is defined two ways. It comes from those who are perishing. That is, those who are on their way to eternal damnation adopt this hostile response. Secondly, their rejection to the preaching of the cross is to label it as "foolishness." This common English translation tones down the Greek expression considerably. The Greek word defining their reaction is to call it *μωρία* (*moria*). The personal noun derived from this Greek term is *moron*, the adjective is *moronic*. The abstract noun closest to the Greek word is *moronity*, which is seldom used in every day language. To the perishing, the preaching of the cross of Jesus is the utterances of a moron. Anyone with a lick of sense would see the stupidity of such words; this is their viewpoint.

Paul had encountered just such a reaction, when on the second missionary journey, he had preached the gospel message in Athens on the Areopagus prior to coming to Corinth to first preach the gospel in Corinth ([Acts 17:16-34](#)). To be sure, the especially upsetting thing to the Athenians was the mentioning of the resurrection of Christ, but I suspect in Paul's mind the preaching of the cross included the resurrection. Also, during his lengthy missionary career, I'm confident he encountered many people who reacted this way to his gospel preaching.

The opposite of this hostile rejection to Paul's preaching of the cross is also defined two ways. The positive response comes from "us who are being saved." Both Paul and the Corinthians are included in this, as well as anyone else making a positive response. It stands as the opposite of "the perishing." The positive response comes from those on their way to Heaven, rather to Hell. To such individuals the preaching of the cross represents "the power of God." How is that? How is the death of Jesus a manifestation of God's power? On the surface, it would appear just the opposite -- a defeat for things righteous and holy.

These two closely related declarations will need explanation and defense. This Paul does in verses 19-25. In a series of statements Paul argues for his point made in verse 18.

Most of his defense of this declaration about positive and negative reactions to the preaching of the cross grows out of a quote from the Old Testament in verse 19: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." This comes from [Isaiah 29:14](#):

13 The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; 14 so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. **The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.** 15 Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the Lord, whose deeds are in the dark,

wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

lieve. 22 God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. 23 So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. 24 But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. 25 This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.



and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" 16 You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, "He has no understanding"?

The differences in the wording between 1 Cor. 1:19 and Is. 29:14 probably lie in the explanation provided in the *UBS Translation Handbook* on 1 Corinthians by Paul Ellingworth and H. Hatton:

Like most of Paul's quotations, this one is taken from the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), though Paul as a rabbi could have quoted the Hebrew text (see Acts 22.3; Phil 3.5). Books were bulky and expensive, and Paul very likely could not take them with him on his frequent travels. So he made many of his quotations from memory. Sometimes, therefore, he gave the general sense rather than the exact wording. This is what he does here. At the end of the quotation, in place of the Septuagint's rendering "I will hide," Paul writes "I will set aside." He may be thinking of Psa 32.10 (Psa 31.10 in Greek), where the phrase "set aside" (*TEV*) is used twice about God's "setting aside" the plans of the Gentiles.

Whatever the case, it is clear that this OT scriptural principle becomes the basis of his subsequent comments. The principle is easy to understand: God will demonstrate the superiority of His knowledge over that of prideful humans.

Paul's "exegesis" of this OT text begins with a series of rhetorical questions in verse 20: "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" In taunting tones Paul challenges the human expert -- both the knowledgeable and the skilled speaker -- to debate God. He then challenges his readers to recognize that God has already made the wisdom of this world seem to be foolishness. We have our moron word this time in the Greek verb ἐμώρανεν (*emoranen*; from μωραίνω). Thus, God has already made the smartest and most gifted speakers appear to be morons.

But how? This Paul answers in verse 21: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe." The world was not smart enough to figure out how to build a relationship with God. Thus God proved the superiority of His wisdom to give eternal salvation to believers through the "foolishness" of the preaching of the cross. Once again we have our moron word. Thus what the world in all its smartness still considers as μωρία God uses to save those who become believers in this crucified Jesus.

Verses 22-25 become an elaboration on verse 21: "22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." The perishing now are split into two groups: the Jews and the Greeks. The pragmatic Jewish attitude wants something visible to confirm the spiritual significance of Christ crucified. The intellectual Greeks want a clear, rational explanation of the same thing. But God provides neither. Thus the preaching of the cross becomes a roadblock to acceptance of the crucified Jesus. Instead, to those who are called to be believers including both Jews and Greeks, Christ in his death satisfies the need for a sign and for "wisdom." What Paul seems to be getting at here is that the issue of acceptance of the spiritual significance of Christ's death is a faith issue, not a visual or intellectual issue. God invites both Jews and Gentiles to believe. Those who are truly wise and perceptive respond in faith, and then realize, both in experience and in their minds, the profound significance of Christ crucified. Christ then becomes both the power of God and the wisdom of God.

All this is based upon (v. 25) the reality that God works at a level that makes Him so much smarter than any human that His "foolishness" is wiser than the smartest human among the Greeks. His "weakness" is so much stronger in demonstration than the strongest Jew. Thus Paul returns to the beginning point in the OT quote in verse 19.

Want to see how smart God is? Then look at Jesus hanging on Calvary! It defies human wisdom! It looks like utter weakness! No human being within himself can see what God is up to on that cross. But in gospel proclamation, it becomes clear to those experiencing the spiritual achievement of Jesus on the cross, to those becoming believers. Wonder of all wonders. Jesus hanging on Calvary stands as the smartest thing God could have ever thought up. It becomes the greatest expression of power ever displayed in our world. Through that death of Jesus as a criminal, God effects the eternal salvation of the vilest sinner ever to walk on planet earth! Now that's being smart and powerful!

b. Beware, vv. 26-31

GNT

1:26 Βλέπετε γὰρ τὴν κλησιν ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα, οὐ πολλοὶ δυνατοί, οὐ πολλοὶ εὐγενεῖς· 1:27 ἀλλὰ τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα κατασχύνη τοὺς σοφοὺς, καὶ τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα κατασχύνη τὰ ἰσχυρά, 1:28 καὶ τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὰ ἐξουθενημένα ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, τὰ μὴ ὄντα, ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ, 1:29 ὅπως μὴ καυχῆσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ. 1:30 ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὃς ἐγενήθη σοφία ἡμῖν ἀπὸ θεοῦ, δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἁγιασμός καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις, 1:31 ἵνα καθὼς γέγραπται, Ὁ καυχώμενος ἐν κυρίῳ καυχάσθω.

NASB

26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, 29 so that no man may boast before God. 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

NRSV

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

NLT

26 Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. 27 Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. 28 God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, 29 so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God. 30 God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Christ to be wisdom itself. He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy, and he gave himself to purchase our freedom. 31 As the Scriptures say, "The person who wishes to boast should boast only of what the Lord has done."

Notes:

Paul now turns to his Corinthian readers to further confirm the wisdom and power of the cross. The key link between vv. 26-31 to vv. 18-25 is the repetition of the word "calling" in both vv. 24 and 26. To the "called" (κλητοῖς) among both Jew and Greek Christ on Calvary becomes both the power and wisdom of God. He now elaborates on that in vv. 26-31. The verb of admonition, βλέπετε, in verse 26 calls for serious reflection and awareness. What they were to reflect on was that "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." The Corinthian community of believers was not made up mostly of the most educated, the wealthiest nor the "blue-bloods" of Corinth. To be sure some in the various house-churches at Corinth would fall into those categories, but the vast majority didn't. Thus, their Christian experience stood as concrete proof of the superior wisdom of God in Calvary.

Verses 27-28 elaborate on this through general principle statements: "27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,..." In a three fold pattern matching that in verse 26, Paul indicates what God is up to in the crucified Christ. The conversion of the uneducated, of the powerless, of the non-artisocrats becomes ultimately a shaming of the wise, the powerful and the aristocratic. In this those who think they have God "figured out" will come to realize -- perhaps not before judgement day -- that they were absolutely stupid and powerless in this. Those who assume their privileged status as aristocrats automatically give them privilege with God will discover that they are "nothings"

in the sight of God. To be sure, Paul includes in this the believers who did come from the ranks of the educated, powerful and well bred, who were a part of the community of believers. In spite of their status they had insight to come to faith in Christ. In some ways they stood as even greater examples of what Paul was talking about here.

The issue of “calling” has to do with salvation. It is further explained in this two verses with the verb repeated three times “did not God choose” (ἐξελέξατο). Paul’s point is dramatic. The wise, the powerful, the well-bred -- all these try to figure out ways on their own to come to God, by using their wisdom, power or family status. But this has the spiritual issue flip flopped. It’s not a matter of us finding our way to God. Rather, it’s a matter of God finding and inviting us to come to Him. It is our responsibility, then, to believe. That is, to entrust our lives unconditionally into his hands.

What is the intended outcome? Verses 29-31 answer that question: “29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” If we could find our own way to God, then we would have bragging rights about our wisdom, our power or our status. But if God found us, and we responded in simple faith, we have nothing to brag about. Faith has nothing to do with wisdom, power or status.

Everything depends completely upon God, not us. As verse 30 affirms, He alone is the source of our life both now and for eternity. That life comes exclusively “in Christ Jesus.” No where or no one else can provide this life. This is because Christ stands to believers as the wisdom of God, the righteousness of God, the sanctification of God, and the redemption of God. Thus, everything that matters for us comes from God through Christ.

Paul’s point is again reinforced by an Old Testament passage, [Jeremiah 9:24](#) which is paraphrased in verse 31: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” This comes from the larger context of Jer. 9:23-26:

23 Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; 24 **but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord;** I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. 25 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will attend to all those who are circumcised only in the foreskin: 26 Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all those with shaven temples who live in the desert. For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

Although Paul only captures the essence of Jer. 9:24 with his reference, he does so very accurately. This was an important point of the prophet Jeremiah to the Israelites. All claims of accomplishment must go to God alone. If this was so in Jeremiah’s day, how much more is this true for the believer who depends upon God’s activity through Christ for absolutely everything!

What lessons come out of this passage? They are too numerous to talk about in detail. One of the most important ones to me is insight into the meaning of wisdom and power from God’s perspective. Our human definition of these things seems so trivial and shallow. The mind of God works in such profound ways. Who would ever have seen profound wisdom and tremendous power being expressed in a Jew dying on a cross outside Jerusalem? One has to have spiritual eyes and the revelation of God in the gospel in order to see this. Human wisdom is not strong enough to ever see such from Calvary.

Another insight is the critical importance of coming to God at His invitation. Each of us as believers has had a calling from God to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. We did not find God; our faith did not happen by our determination. God found us and then invited us to become His child through faith in the crucified Christ. We merely responded to that invitation by entrusting our lives into God’s hand through Christ. In a “I’ll do it my way” mentality that pervades American society, it really is refreshing and encouraging to realize that in our salvation we did it God’s way. God chose us, and we said yes to Him.

A final thought. Since all this is at God’s initiative, all the glory goes to Him. We have nothing to brag about, nothing to boast about. All belongs to God. This is where it should be. And we can never glory in our God sufficiently. His work of salvation deserves our endless praise. It’s no wonder that the first hymn to be sung in Heaven according to [Rev. 4:8](#) is “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty who was and is and is to come.” And the second hymn in [Rev. 4:11](#) is “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power...” May we not wait until Heaven to sing these praises to our God.

GNT

1:18 Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σωζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ἐστίν. 1:19 γέγραπται γάρ,

Ἐπολεῖ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν

καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω.

1:20 ποῦ σοφός; ποῦ γραμματεὺς; ποῦ συζητητὴς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου; οὐχὶ ἐμώρνανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου; 1:21 ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σῶσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας· 1:22 ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτουοῦσιν καὶ Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν, 1:23 ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἔθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, 1:24 αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς, Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἕλλησιν, Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ θεοῦ σοφίαν· 1:25 ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

1:26 Βλέπετε γὰρ τὴν κλῆσιν ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα, οὐ πολλοὶ δυνατοί, οὐ πολλοὶ εὐγενεῖς· 1:27 ἀλλὰ τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεὸς, ἵνα κατασχῆ τὸς σοφοὺς, καὶ τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα κατασχῆ τὰ ἰσχυρὰ, 1:28 καὶ τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὰ ἐξουθενημένα ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, τὰ μὴ ὄντα, ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ, 1:29 ὅπως μὴ καυχῆσθαι πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ. 1:30 ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὃς ἐγενήθη σοφία ἡμῖν ἀπὸ θεοῦ, δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἁγιασμὸς καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις, 1:31 ἵνα καθὼς γέγραπται, Ὁ καυχώμενος ἐν κυρίῳ καυχάσθω.

NASB

18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, 29 so that no man may boast before God. 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

NRSV

18 For the message 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 the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

NLT

18 I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God. 19 As the Scriptures say, "I will destroy human wisdom and discard their most brilliant ideas." 20 So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made them all look foolish and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense. 21 Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never find him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save all who believe. 22 God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. 23 So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. 24 But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. 25 This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.

26 Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. 27 Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. 28 God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, 29 so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God. 30 God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Christ to be wisdom itself. He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy, and he gave himself to purchase our freedom. 31 As the Scriptures say, "The person who wishes to boast should boast only of what the Lord has done."

GNT Diagram

¹⁸ γάρ
1 Ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ (ἐστίν) τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν,
δὲ
2 τοῖς σφζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ἐστίν.

¹⁹ γάρ
3 γέγραπται,
α Ἐπολῶ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν
καὶ
β τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω.

²⁰
4 ποῦ σοφός;
5 ποῦ γραμματεὺς;
6 ποῦ συζητητῆς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου;
7 οὐχὶ ἐμῶρανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου;

²¹ γάρ
ἐπειδὴ... τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος
ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ
διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν,
διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος
8 εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς... σῶσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας·
δὲ
²² ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτοῦσιν
καὶ Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν,
9 ²³ ἡμεῖς... κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον Ἰουδαίοις
μὲν
σκάνδαλον,
δὲ
ἔθνεσιν
μορίαν,
δὲ
²⁴ αὐτοῖς
τοῖς κλητοῖς,
Ἰουδαίοις
τε καὶ
Ἕλλησιν,
Χριστὸν
θεοῦ δύναμιν
καὶ
θεοῦ σοφίαν·

²⁵ ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν
καὶ
τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

²⁶ γὰρ
10 **Βλέπετε τὴν κλήσιν ὑμῶν,**
ἀδελφοί,
ὅτι οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα,
οὐ πολλοὶ δυνατοί,
οὐ πολλοὶ εὐγενεῖς·
²⁷ ἀλλὰ
11 **τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός,**
ἵνα καταισχύνη τοὺς σοφούς,
καὶ
12 **τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός,**
ἵνα καταισχύνη τὰ ἰσχυρά,
²⁸ καὶ
13 **τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου**
καὶ
τὰ ἐξουθενημένα ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός,
τὰ μὴ ὄντα,
ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ,
²⁹ ὅπως μὴ καυχῆσθαι πᾶσα σὰρξ
ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.
³⁰ δὲ
14 **ἐξ αὐτοῦ ὑμεῖς ἐστε**
ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,
ὃς ἐγενήθη σοφία
ἡμῖν
ἀπὸ θεοῦ,
δικαιοσύνη
τε καὶ
ἀγιασμός
καὶ
ἀπολύτρωσις,
³¹ ἵνα -----
καθὼς γέγραπται,
ἐν κυρίῳ
γ **Ὁ καυχώμενος...καυχάσθω.**

Semantic Diagram

		Conn	Func	Tense	Pers	#	Subj
		γάρ					
	a.-----	1	Dec	Pres	3	S	ὁ λόγος
	1.-----						
	b.-----	2	Dec	Pres	3	S	(ὁ λόγος)
A.-----							
	2.-----	3	Dec	Perf	3	S	OT quote
	a.-----	4	?	(Pres)	3	S	σοφός
	b.-----	5	?	(Pres)	3	S	γραμματεὺς
I.-----							
	1.-----c.-----	6	?	(Pres)	3	S	συζητητῆς
	d.-----	7	?	Aor	3	S	θεός
B.-----							
	a.-----	8	Dec	Aor	3	S	θεός
	2.-----						
	b.-----	9	Dec	Pres	1	P	ἡμεῖς
	A.-----	10	Imp	Pres	2	P	(ὑμεῖς)
	a.-----	11	Dec	Aor	3	S	θεός
II.-----							
	1.-----b.-----	12	Dec	Aor	3	S	θεός
	c.-----	13	Dec	Aor	3	S	θεός
B.-----							
	2.-----	14	Dec	Pres	2	P	ὑμεῖς

Exegetical Outline

- I. (1-9) The preaching of the cross demonstrated the inability of human thinking to figure out spiritual matters.
 - A. (1-3) God proved his wisdom in the message of the cross
 1. (1-2) The message of the cross had different meanings to different people
 - a. (1) The message of the cross meant foolishness to those perishing
 - b. (2) The message of the cross meant power to those being saved
 2. (3) This was based on Old Testament principle
 - B. (4--9) God's wisdom was demonstrated by the irrationality of Christ's crucifixion
 1. (4-7) Paul asked a series of questions to elaborate on the OT quote
 - a. (4) Paul asked rhetorically where the sage was
 - b. (5) Paul asked rhetorically where the expert interpreter of the law was
 - c. (6) Paul asked rhetorically where the skilled debator was
 - d. (7) Paul asked rhetorically whether or not God had not made foolish human wisdom
 2. (8-9) This human folly was based on God's saving action and Paul's preaching
 - a. (8) God was pleased to save those who believed
 - b. (9) Paul's preaching centered on Christ crucified
- II. (10-14) This wisdom of God in the cross was based upon the Corinthians experience of salvation.
 - A. (10) The Corinthians were admonished to consider their calling to salvation
 - B. (11-14) The actions of God stood as a good reminder to the Corinthians.
 1. (11-13) God's wise actions demonstrate the uselessness of human thinking
 - a. (11) The moranic things God chose to shame the wise
 - b. (12) The weak things God chose to shame the strong
 - c. (13) The low and despised things God chose to render useless the things that exist
 2. (14) God was the Corinthians source of life in Christ.