

*DESTROYING THE WISDOM OF THE WISE**1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25 (PART II)**PASTOR JIMMY SNOWDEN***INTRODUCTION**

This morning we will be revisiting the same portion of 1 Corinthians that we looked at last week. I will briefly recap what was taught last week and then we will jump right into the thick of the particulars of our text. Last week's sermon focused primarily on the foolishness of the message of a crucified Messiah. The Gospel that Paul preached, a Gospel which centers on a crucified Messiah, Jesus, was utter madness and folly to those living in the first century. In vs. 18 Paul actually says that "the message of the cross is foolishness" "to those who are perishing." He goes on to say (in vs. 23) that the message of the crucified Messiah is a "stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles." We spent the majority of our time last week explaining why the message of the cross was so foolish to the average joe walking on the street in Palestine in the first century.

I explained three primary features of what purpose the cross served in the first century that are necessary for understanding why the cross was so offensive. First, I established the fact that the cross was an instrument for capital punishment used by the Romans. Second, I added that the cross was designed to bring public shame to the criminal being crucified. In other words, the cross was not merely an instrument of capital punishment. Unlike the electric chair, lethal injection, or the gas chamber the cross was designed to draw the death of the criminal out as long as possible. And unlike our modern day forms of capital punishment, the cross was meant to make a public spectacle out of the criminal. The beatings that the criminals received before being nailed to the cross were much worse than depicted in any movie. Without a doubt, if any film were to portray the true gore of the cross it would never make it to the theatre—it would be shot down as too gruesome, horrific, and unbearably grotesque for any slice of the public. The goal of the Roman soldiers was to make hamburger out of the criminal with the goal of putting his mutilated body on public display so that all onlookers would scoff in horror; "What did that vile man do to deserve such a shameful and disgraceful death?" Third, I stated the fact that the cross was reserved for only the worst of criminals. The Romans had other forms of capital punishment and only the worst of the worst were subject to the shameful death of the cross. The Roman practice of capital punishment by way of a cross was something of a cultural taboo in the ancient world—it was not to be brought up in casual or civilized conversation.

The concept of a crucified Christ was oxymoronic to those living in the ancient world. How could a man who died a death deserving of only the most vile offender possibly save me from my sin? How could a man who was brutalized by His own enemies through the torturous and shameful death on a cross possibly be called the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? The message preached by the apostles was utter madness to the first century mind. Thus, the message of the cross truly is foolishness to those who are perishing. God, in His transcendent wisdom, devised a plan for the salvation of the world which confounded the wisdom and power of men. No man using the faculties of human reasoning and logic could ever arrive at God's master plan of salvation through His Son, Jesus. Why could the world never reason their way to God's plan of salvation? Because, such a plan not only transcends the limitations of human

reason and logic, but actually runs counter to the man-centered values that humans hold so dear. David E. Garland explains:

The cross makes hash of all secular and religious attempts based on human wisdom to make sense of god and the world. Victory is won by giving up life, not taking it. Selfish domination of others is discredited. Shame is removed through divine identification with the shamed in a shameful death. God offers a new paradigm that makes the experience of shame the highest path to glory and honor... What makes the story of the cross even more offensive to humans is that it is not simply the foundation of human redemption but is also to become the way of life for believers.<sup>1</sup>

You could imagine if I were to walk into a restaurant and order some sweet lemonade and was given a crucible full of black peppercorns and habanero peppers. I address the waitress; "I asked for sweet lemonade. How do you expect me to get sweet lemonade out of ground black pepper corns and habanero peppers?" The point is that you can't! The same is true with the cross. How can you get victory by way of the cross? How could Jesus establish Himself as King over all through dying on the cross? Only God in His infinite wisdom could accomplish such a task. **God took the most shameful, foolish, and weak thing in the world (the cross) and used it to put on display His infinite wisdom and strength.**

It is impossible to arrive at the key to God's saving and conquering program through the means of worldly wisdom alone. And why? Because God does not bow His knee to the rational demands of His creatures. Rather, He trumps the wisdom of His creatures with a transcendent wisdom. This is something that Paul harps on in a large way in 1 Corinthians 1:19-21.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 1:19-21**

Take a look at the text with me.

<sup>19</sup> **I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the understanding of the experts.** <sup>20</sup> Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish? <sup>21</sup> For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believed through the foolishness of the message preached.

As is evidenced by the **bold** letters, Paul quotes a passage from the Old Testament to give further weight to his main point. Paul's point is that God does not bend over to the finite limits of human beings to win their approval, but rather seeks to outwit the wise to show them how foolish they actually are.

Paul was not careless when he quoted from the Old Testament (as some would suggest), as if his only goal were to find thin proof from the OT regardless of whether or not he was abusing the text or not. Rather, we must remember that the Old Testament was Paul's only

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 63.

Bible. And Paul considered it sufficient for the task (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). I believe that Paul chose this text to bolster his point because the whole context of Isaiah 29:14 provides such a clear and practical example of the wisdom of God confounding the wise. It will be profitable at this point to take a look at the text which Paul quotes. So turn with me to Isaiah 29:13-15.

<sup>13</sup> The Lord said: Because these people approach Me with their mouths to honor Me with lip-service —yet their hearts are far from Me, and their worship [consists of] man-made rules learned [by rote]—<sup>14</sup> therefore I will again confound these people with wonder after wonder. **The wisdom of their wise men will vanish, and the understanding of the perceptive will be hidden.** <sup>15</sup> Woe to those who go to great lengths to hide their plans from the LORD. [They do] their works in darkness, and say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"

The Lord is here speaking against the people of Israel. At this point in their history they were a hard-hearted, rebellious people. God, through His prophet Isaiah, exposes their hypocritical worship. He says that they honor Him with their lips but that their hearts are far from Him and that they have become a lifeless shell of formality. They have no true desire to do what God would have them to do. They were dabble dabbling in the things of God enough to look religious, but they were keeping God at arm's length lest they should find a conflict between their will and His. They had a classic case of convenient Christianity.

And what is God going to do about their Spiritual immaturity? He is going to show them the folly of their thinking. He is going to expose His superior, transcendent wisdom "with wonder after wonder." God took it upon Himself to show them how incapable they were of calling the shots, and how dependent they were on Him for direction and guidance. His plan was to do 'wonder after wonder' to bring them to a state of absolute confusion—to do so many unexplainable things that they would be brought to a place where they didn't know which way was up or down. He wanted to bring them to a place where they felt the limitations of their own wise plans. God then levels a *Woe*, a statement of judgment, against His people for relying so heavily on their own wisdom—so heavily that they felt that they did not need His input or perspective (see vs. 15). The Israelites had apparently felt that they had come to a place where they were able to make it on their own without the guidance of God. And it was His goal to show them exactly how badly they needed Him. He rebukes them for hiding their plans from Him; for seeking to live a life of independence. Their number one advisor should have been the Lord, and they were going to everyone but Him for advice.

Now we must ask, what were these plans that they were hiding from the Lord (see vs. 15)? Isaiah reveals these plans in 30:1-5. Before we take a look at the text it will be helpful to get an understanding of the historical background of the passage. Isaiah wrote this to the Israelites during a time of great vulnerability. I will explain the background of the text with five simple points. 1. *Assyria World Power*: Assyria was the world power at the time. Assyria had already wiped out the entire Northern part of Israel and was at the door step of Southern Israel ready to pounce. The Assyrians were a brutal people, they were known for their ruthless, barbaric ways. 2. *Israel Helpless*: Israel, led by King Hezekiah (a righteous man, for the most part), had no chance of surviving Assyrian invasion on her own. Assyria had both more fighting men and a superior arsenal, complete with the (at that time) latest and most updated weapons

of warfare. 3. *Israel Needs Egypt*: Looking at it from an earthly perspective, Israel, if she wanted to avoid complete destruction, had one option; to seek help from a relatively well-to-do neighboring country, Egypt. Israel simply did not have enough military might to protect herself against the powerful Assyrians. 4. *God Pledges Protection*: Although it appeared that Egypt was Israel's only hope against Assyrian invasion, God, through the prophet Isaiah, promised Hezekiah that He would fight for them, fending off the Assyrians, if (and this is a big 'if') they did not seek Egypt's help but rather trusted in the Lord alone for help. 5. *Advisor's Foolish Advice*: Although God had promised Hezekiah that He would protect Israel against the Assyrians if they did not seek the help of Egypt, Hezekiah's political/military advisors were doing everything they could to convince him to disobey the word of the Lord as delivered through Isaiah. Hezekiah's royal advisors trusted in the strength and power of Egypt more than in the strength and power of God, and they did absolutely everything they could to change Hezekiah's mind. Did they convince Hezekiah to disobey the Lord and seek an alliance with the Egyptians? I will answer that in a moment.

However, these were the 'hidden plans' that the Lord speaks of in 29:15. They were planning on seeking the aid of Egypt against the commandment and promise of God. You can see this clearly by looking at Isaiah 30:1-3, 31:1-3, and 31:5-8

Isaiah 30:1-3; <sup>1</sup> Woe to the rebellious children! [This is] the LORD's declaration. They carry out a plan, but not Mine, They make an alliance, but against My will, piling sin on top of sin. <sup>2</sup> They set out to go down to Egypt without asking My advice, in order to seek shelter under Pharaoh's protection and take refuge in Egypt's shadow. <sup>3</sup> But Pharaoh's protection will become your shame, and refuge in Egypt's shadow your disgrace.

Isaiah 31:1-3; <sup>1</sup> Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and who depend on horses! They trust in the number of chariots and in the great strength of charioteers. They do not look to the Holy One of Israel and they do not seek the LORD's help. <sup>2</sup> But He also is wise and brings disaster. He does not go back on what He says; He will rise up against the house of wicked men and against the allies of evildoers. <sup>3</sup> Egyptians are men, not God; their horses are flesh, not spirit. When the LORD raises His hand [to strike], the helper will stumble and the helped will fall; both will perish together.

31:5-8 <sup>5</sup> Like hovering birds, so the LORD of Hosts will protect Jerusalem—by protecting [it], He will rescue [it], by sparing [it], He will deliver [it]. <sup>6</sup> Return to the One the Israelites have greatly rebelled against. <sup>7</sup> For on that day, each one will reject the silver and gold idols that your own hands have sinfully made. <sup>8</sup> Then Assyria will fall, but not by human sword; a sword will devour him, but not one made by man. He will flee from the sword, his young men will be put to forced labor.

What is the point of all of this? So we know about God's promise to Hezekiah and the temptation for Hezekiah to seek aid from the Egyptians—So what? Here is the point: was Hezekiah wise or foolish for not seeking the help of the Egyptians? From an earthly perspective, was the advice given by Hezekiah's royal advisors good or bad? From an earthly perspective, the advice given to Hezekiah only made sense. After all, Israel, apart from either a miracle from

God or from the help of another nation, was completely incapable of protecting herself. And *from an earthly perspective* Hezekiah's decision to not seek the aid of Egypt was literally the stupidest decision that he could have ever made. If God did not pull through, Hezekiah was in a lot of trouble. You have to understand that Hezekiah's decision, and he did end up choosing correctly, would have been considered political suicide, military suicide, national suicide. I am sure that his advisors 'sat on him'—put pressure on him—because of his decision to not make an alliance with Egypt. They would have called it foolish, stupid, and irresponsible. I am sure that his many advisors oft reminded him of the great consequences if God did not pull through. From an earthly point of view, Hezekiah's decision was stupid. If God did not pull through, Hezekiah would have been up a creek without a paddle; Assyria would have pounced on Israel (Judah) and they would have had no one to fall back on. Hezekiah's decision would have been the death knell to what little remained of the nation of Israel.

But did God pull through? Of course He did! Take a look at Isaiah 37:33-36

This is what the Lord says about the King of Assyria: "He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or build up an assault ramp against it. <sup>34</sup> He will go back on the road that he came and he will not enter this city. This is the Lord's declaration. <sup>35</sup> I will defend this city and rescue it, because of Me and because of My servant David." <sup>36</sup> Then the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of Assyria. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!

185,000 Assyrians were slaughtered in one night! That would be the equivalent of every person living in Manchester, Concord, Penacook, Boscawen, Laconia, Franklin, and Tilton combined! Could Egypt even dream of pulling off such a fantastic military victory? Of course not! **Israel didn't have to lift one sword and the entire Assyrian army was put to flight.**

**God certainly destroyed the wisdom of Hezekiah's wise advisors; He certainly set aside the understanding of the experts!** The amazing thing about the story in Isaiah is that the Lord crumbled the pride of man. After reading the story of Hezekiah your eyes are opened to the fact that with the Lord there are no limits. God is not limited to our finite reasoning. He is not to be put in a box! He is the Lord of Glory and He is not bound to the confines of human logic and reasoning. In fact, God will go to any length to give men undeniable truth of the limit of their own wisdom and the infinite resvior of God's pure and sovereign genius. God's advice to Hezekiah went against all human reason and yet it was the plan of God. Remember what God said in Isaiah 29:14?

Therefore I will again confound these people with wonder upon wonder..."

God often-times likes to remind us of this so that we might never forget that we can only have certainty when we accept our own stupidity and bow, looking to Him and Him alone for the answers.

*Back to 1 Corinthians*

Back to 1 Corinthians. This is the text that Paul quotes to prove the folly of human wisdom and strength. It was no mistake that Paul chose Isaiah 29:14 to bolster his point in 1 Corinthians 18-25. Interestingly enough, Paul goes on in vs. 20 and draws another parallel to the story of Hezekiah in Isaiah. Instead of quoting directly from Isaiah as he did in vs. 19, he merely draws an allusion. Consider what he says in vs. 20 and then compare it to Isaiah 33:17-18.

1 Corinthians 1:20; Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the world's wisdom foolish?

Isaiah 33:17-18; <sup>17</sup> Your eyes will see the king in his beauty; you will see a vast land. <sup>18</sup> Your mind will meditate on the [past] terror: "Where is the accountant? Where is the tribute collector? Where is the one who spied out our defenses?"

What is Paul getting at? How well did the wisdom and understanding of King Hezekiah's advisors serve Hezekiah? Not that well. How far did human reason get Hezekiah's advisors? Not very far. In fact, God's wise plan completely confounded them. Paul is saying that the same thing is true with the Gospel, not even the most advanced expert could reason their way to God's peculiar way of attaining both ultimate victory and ultimate salvation. Paul seems to be leveling a challenge against all so-called experts.<sup>2</sup> God has certainly shown the limitations of the human mind by gaining ultimate victory and salvation by Himself becoming man and by dying at the hands of His own enemies on the world's foremost object of shame, weakness, foolishness, and scorn (the cross).

Paul then states that it pleased God to save men in the most unlikely way, humanly conceivable. God chose to save men in a way that evidenced His transcendent wisdom.

For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of the message preached.

Salvation is not attained through lifting weights or by reading and memorizing Christian literature. Salvation is only attained when one embraces the crucified Christ. The Gospel is advanced not through slick rhetoric or masterful light shows on a stage or even through fantastic music, but rather through the foolish message of the crucified Messiah. God was pleased to display His transcendent wisdom (and in the process display the woeful inadequacy of mere worldly wisdom) by saving those who believe in the most foolish and weak manner as possible. The message of a crucified Christ fit the bill perfectly.

Jesus says that one must become a child before he can see the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3). What do you think He might mean? That one must believe God without reserve, without bringing up arguments and counter arguments for or against His assertions. A child simply believes, regardless of whether it gels with what he/she knows to be true or not. A

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<sup>2</sup> See Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corintios*. Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forthcoming), 71.

child is moldable and knows that he/she must look to another, to Christ, for all the answers. Ultimately, a child is dependent—dependent for provision, protection, and even for answers.

### **CONCLUSION**

As I asked earlier, how do you get sweet lemonade from crushed up peppercorns and habanero peppers? You don't! Unless, of course, God gets involved. How does tiny Judah (1/12 of the nation of Israel) fend off the world super power without seeking alliances with any foreign nations and even without lifting one single sword? How is victory and salvation gained through the defeat and shame and weakness and foolishness of a crucified Christ? Only God could think up and pull off such a feat. And he did it all to show us finite humans our need to abandon all self-sufficient pride and throw ourselves at His feet as our only hope, as our only reliable guide, as our only answer.