

**THE GOD WHO CHOOSES NOBODIES****1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31**

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**INTRODUCTION**

We will be moving along in 1 Corinthians this morning. As I have stated more than twenty trillion times, Paul is addressing the Corinthian's division problem in chapters 1-4. In the text that we will be considering this morning, Paul will seek to demonstrate how silly their boasting is in light of their insignificant position in life. Their divisions are the result of pride, as all division is. Some in the church feel that they are superior to others in the church. Paul's purpose in this text is to give them verifiable, reality-check proof of their position in life so that they might learn to boast in God and God alone, rather than boasting in themselves. In other words, his whole goal is to absolutely ruin their self-esteem so that they might come to esteem Christ and Christ alone, so that they might not divide over false notions of their own superior Christian (or otherwise) status.

**THE NOBODYNESS (INSIGNIFICANCE) OF THE CALLED (1:26)**

In vs. 26 Paul calls the Corinthians to consider their humble beginnings in the faith.

<sup>26</sup> Brothers, consider your calling: not many of you were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth.

In this verse Paul is asking the believers in Corinth to consider their situation in life at the time of their conversion.<sup>1</sup> He wants them to consider their entrance into the Christian life so that they might be reminded of their 'nobodyness' (or insignificance). The question is this; "Who was I when God called me—was I a somebody or a nobody?" Paul's answer is quite clear. He reminds them of the fact that the majority of them were insignificant nobodies. He is careful, though, to clarify that they were no bodies "from a human perspective," or literally "according to the flesh." The idea is that they were nobodies according to the standards of the world.

Notice that Paul does not say that "not any" but that "not many" of them were wise, powerful, or of noble birth. We must never fall into the trap of liberation theology, which teaches that God is primarily concerned about the poor and that He is opposed to the rich. He

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<sup>1</sup> Not all commentators are in agreement with this statement. For example, Witherington suggests that their "calling" is not a reference to the time of their conversion, but rather to their "socioeconomic position or social status." Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 113. Witherington, however, is in the minority on this point. Garland suggests that the lack of a verb (are/were) suggests that although Paul invited them to consider their calling (a past event), the absence of the verb may be an indication that Paul wanted them to also consider the fact that their conversion in no way changed their position in life (according the flesh). He says, "If they were to take stock in themselves and their fellow recruits, they would readily recognize that most, if not all, do not fall into the category of 'the cream of society.' Becoming Christians also has done nothing to enhance their social estate, which is why the missing copula to be inserted in the litotes should be "are," not "were". David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 73.

does not say that they were **all** nobodies, but rather that the majority of them were nobodies. Yes, God is in the business of saving doctors and lawyers and politicians and other such people who are considered well-to-do or respectable in the eyes of the world. Jesus is the “Savior of the World” (John 4:42). Without a doubt, the church in Corinth was extremely diverse, consisting of both the poor and the rich, the respected and the neglected, and every shade between.<sup>2</sup> In fact, this was the driving factor behind the situation concerning the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34—the haves were suppressing the have-nots. It must also be remembered that two of the first converts in Corinth, Crispus and Sosthenes, were both rulers of the local synagogue (Acts 18:7-8, 14-17).

Christianity is no more a poor man’s religion than it is a rich man’s religion, and it is no more a middle class religion than it is a poor man’s religion. God is in the business of saving all sorts of people, and the diverse nature of the church of Jesus Christ is a reflection of the fact that God is in the business of saving all different sorts of people from all different walks of life. This is the very idea that Paul was communicating to the Colossians in Colossians 3:11.

Here there is not Greek or Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all.

So do not misunderstand Paul here. A poor man is no more apt to respond to the Gospel than a rich man.<sup>3</sup> A poor man is not more savable than a rich man and a rich man is no more

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton explains the particulars of this situation in Corinth; “...the Corinthian congregation is marked by internal stratification.’ The argument for the presence of those who held some status or influence may be drawn from references to officeholders (Crispus, Erastus); to heads of significant households (Crispus, Stephanas); to those who could render ‘services’ to Paul or to others which presupposed a measure of wealth or influence (Epaphroditus, Gaius, Titius Justus); and to those who need to travel, often as merchants or for business purposes (Aquila and Priscilla, Phoebe, Erastus, Stephanas, Chloe’s people). Most would... agree that Paul addresses the message of the cross to a community which experiences ‘status inconsistency.’ ‘The social level of the Corinthian Christians apparently varied from quite poor to rather well-off... a fair cross-section of urban society.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 181-182.

<sup>3</sup> Many wrongly use passages like Matthew 19:23-26, as if it were Jesus’ point to suggest that poor people were more easy to save than rich people. One must notice, however, that Jesus doesn’t say anything about the poor in this passage. His only point in this specific context is to highlight, not the difficulty, but the **impossibility** of the salvation of the rich apart from a supernatural work of God. Thus the point is not to highlight the *relative* difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom of God when set next to the *relative* ease of the poor entering the kingdom of God. Many also misunderstand Luke 6:20; “Blessed are the poor, because the kingdom of God is yours.” Jesus is not here speaking about those who are poor in an economic sense, but in a spiritual sense. In other words, Jesus is not pronouncing a blessing on those who lack significant financial funds. One only need consider Matthew’s rendering of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3 to understand what Jesus was getting at. Jesus, as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, says, “Blessed are the poor **in spirit**, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.” Robert H. Stein explains the difference between Luke’s and Matthew’s recording of Jesus’ words; “It is clear that Matthew understood ‘poor’ in this religious sense, for he qualified the term by adding ‘in spirit.’ Thus Luke provided his readers with a word-for-word translation of Jesus’ beatitude and Matthew a thought-for-thought one, but for both this term was understood as referring not to the economic poor of the world but to believers who are poor, i.e., the humble/poor in spirit.” Robert H. Stein, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 200.

savable than a poor man. All men are equally dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:12-13) and all men are equally in need of the new birth for the ability to respond to the Gospel call.

Paul's point is merely to draw their attention to their humble beginnings—to remind them of the fact that most of them came into the faith as nobodies. The church in Corinth was culturally diverse, but it was made up of people who were primarily insignificant. The church in Corinth was just like Sovereign Grace Fellowship! We are a mixed multitude as well. However, the majority of us are insignificant. If I were to die today there would be a certain number of people—a certain portion of my family, you here at SGF, and many of my friends—who would mourn my death; a certain number of people would feel my absence. However, the majority of the world would not even hear of my passing. And the same is true for most of you. I know that this may sound depressing. Welcome to humanity! Welcome to the domain of the insignificant!

Why would Paul want to remind them of this fact? We will get there in a moment. For now I will just say in short that he does so to take the spring out of their step. He wants to demonstrate for them the ridiculousness of their pride, to give them a piece of 'humble pie' so that they might not think themselves to be higher than what they actually are. Pride is, after all, one of the main reasons why the people of God divide.

### ***GOD'S INTENTIONAL SELECTION OF NOBODIES (1:27-28)***

In the next two verses Paul seeks to prove from a theological standpoint why "not many" of the Corinthians are/were wise, powerful, or of noble birth. Contemplate the text with me.

<sup>27</sup> Instead, God has chosen the foolish things to shame the wise, and God has chosen the world's weak things to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God has chosen the world's insignificant and despised things—the things viewed as nothing—so that He might bring to nothing the things that are viewed as something.

This passage clearly teaches the doctrine of predestination or election. For those of you who may not know what predestination or election is I will provide a definition for you. Wayne Grudem defines it as:

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Thus I would disagree with Garland who says, "The foolish, weak, and despised... respond more readily to the shame of the cross because they themselves are already shamed. Unlike the powerful, those who are deemed as foolish are weak and amendable to receiving the paradox of divine weakness that conveys strength. They respond more readily to the shame of the cross because they themselves belong to the shamed." Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 76. This may be true in a worldly sense, but it simply does not take into account the reality of total depravity and thus the need for the new birth. When a poor man is converted to Christ it is no less a miracle of God's grace, and no less explainable, than when a rich man responds to the Gospel call. It also does not account for the fact that the weak, foolish, and poor struggle with sins of covetousness, bitterness, and feelings of entitlement (and especially in today's welfare state in America) just as much as the rich struggle with vanity and pride. It must be said that a sense of entitlement rips all of the grace out of grace just as much as does vain conceit. The rich say that they don't need it because they can earn it on their own while the poor say that they are entitled to it because of their unique and oppressed position in life. Either way, salvation by grace alone is undermined.

“An act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his good pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>

Or to put it in the words of R.C. Sproul:

What predestination means, in its most elementary form, is that our final destination, heaven or hell, is decided by God not only before we get there, but before we are even born. It teaches that our ultimate destiny is in the hands of God. Another way of saying it is this: From all eternity, before we ever live, God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven and others he chose to pass over, to allow them to follow the consequences of their sins into eternal torment.<sup>5</sup>

So what does predestination and election have to do with what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 1:27-28? It has everything to do with our text. First, what Paul is saying is not merely that God chose whom He was going to save before the foundations of the world were set in place, but that He chose with *intentionality*. In other words, God did not put all mankind into a large bucket, put a blind fold on, and then just reach into the bucket and pull out whomever His hand happened to grab. God did not choose whom He was going to save blindly. God was choosy in whom He chose; He was selective in whom He selected. In other words, God did not just pick who He was going to save willy-nilly.

And whom did God intentionally choose to save? Nobodies! Paul identifies those whom God decided to save in these verses. He refers to them as 1) “the world’s foolish things,” 2) “the world’s weak things,” 3) “the world’s insignificant and despised things,” and 4) “the things viewed as nothing.” This last statement (“the things viewed as nothing”) is climactic. It is literally rendered, “the things that are not,”<sup>6</sup> and is a reference to “those who in the eyes of the world did not exist.”<sup>7</sup> And this is what God is in the business of doing: creating something out of nothing, creating somebodies out of nobodies.

Second, notice that it is **not** the nobodies of the world who decided to choose Christ; it was God who decided to choose and thus save the nobodies! In other words, God didn’t choose the nobodies because they were more responsive to Him in their nobodiness. The nobodies of the world are no more savable than the somebodies. Why then did God choose to save the nobodies? Paul gives three reasons why in vss. 27-28: 1) “to shame the wise,” 2) “to shame the strong,” and 3) “to bring to nothing the things that are viewed as something.” Once again, the last statement (“to bring to nothing the things that are viewed as something”) is climactic. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 670. The quote above is actually Grudem’s definition of election. He suggests that predestination includes the doctrine of election but communicates more than just the idea of election. “In this textbook, and in Reformed theology generally, *predestination* is a broader term and includes the two aspects of election (for believers) and reprobation (for unbelievers).”

<sup>5</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Thisselton, *The Epistle to the Corinthians*, 185.

<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 54.

literally rendered, “the things that are,”<sup>8</sup> and is a reference to those are publicly honored and recognized in the community.

So God has intentionally chosen the foolish things to “shame” the wise, the weak things to “shame” the strong, and the ‘things that are not’ to “bring to nothing” ‘the things that are.’ God did not seek to bring the wise and the strong to public shame; rather He intentionally selected the foolish and weak things so that the wise and strong might have a keen awareness of the uselessness of their wisdom and strength when it comes to things of eternal significance.<sup>9</sup> He selectively selected the foolish and weak things of this world to “render idle’ or ‘inoperative”<sup>10</sup> the wisdom and strength of this world. All men will have to stand before God, and all of the worldly wisdom or strength or clout in the world will help him zip, zero, zilch. God did not predestine the weak and foolish because they were easier to save. Rather, He did so for the purpose of making a statement. He wanted the whole world to understand that wisdom and power do not make one more acceptable to God. God saves on the basis of grace (unmerited favor) and grace alone. David E. Garland explains God’s intent:

God did chose the weak not to make them strong, to help them move into the ranks of the upper crust, or to begin a new class struggle but to subvert, invert, and convert human values. God chose the foolish because the wise thought the cross was sheer folly as a means for saving the world, the weak because the strong thought they were powerful enough without God, and the low and despised because the high and mighty didn’t care enough to debase themselves by attaching themselves to a crucified God.<sup>11</sup>

### **GOD’S PURPOSE IN CHOOSING NOBODIES (1:29-31)**

It is in vss. 29-31 that we find God’s *ultimate* purpose in selectively choosing the nobodies of the world. Why, in an ultimate sense, did God selectively choose the nobodies of this world? Look at the passage with me.

<sup>29</sup> so that no one can boast in His presence. <sup>30</sup> But from Him you are in Christ Jesus, who for us became wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, <sup>31</sup> in order that, as it is written: **The one who boasts must boast in the Lord.**

So why did God selectively choose the nobodies of the world? We have already seen one purpose; that God may “shame” and “bring to nothing” the wisdom and strength of this

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Fee suggests the same but takes it a step further and asserts that God’s shaming of the wise is the negative side of the vindication of God in the face of the wisdom and strength of the world. “By this latter term Paul does not mean something subjective, the ‘feelings of shame’ that the wise are now to feel. Rather, he has here picked up an OT theme that expresses the vindication that is related to God’s righteous judgments (e.g., Ps. 6:10; 31:17; 35:4, 26-27). With Paul this vindication has become eschatological: in choosing the Corinthians God has already begun the final vindication over his enemies. He has already ‘disgraced’ them by overturning their warped perspective.” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 83.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 76.

world. But now we see God's ultimate purpose in choosing the weak and foolish things of this world; "so that no one can boast in His presence." God has primarily chosen those who have nothing earthy to offer Him. God has intentionally chosen individuals whom the world would regard as insignificant so that the message of salvation by grace and grace alone would ring clear.<sup>12</sup>

The riches of the rich, the wisdom of the wise, and strength of the strong do not make one more deserving of God's grace. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling!" There is nothing that we can do to make ourselves more savable. Salvation is God's work, not man's. We cannot even take credit for choosing Christ as if our salvation were first and foremost dependent upon our great discernment.<sup>13</sup> No, salvation is all of God. God chooses men, and only after God has given man new life and the gift of faith is man able to choose Christ.

Paul goes on in vs. 30 to explain that our salvation is all from God: "But from Him you are in Christ Jesus." Our salvation is "from Him." We are Christ's because of His work, His grace, and His love alone. And those of us who have come to know Jesus through God's work of salvation, Jesus has truly become all that we need for our complete salvation. He has become our "wisdom," our "righteousness"<sup>14</sup> (justification—right standing before God), our "sanctification,"<sup>15</sup> and our "redemption."<sup>16</sup> In Christ, God has given us everything we need for our complete salvation. There is nothing for us to add. And since there is nothing that we can add, there is nothing that we can take credit for. And since there is nothing that we can take credit for, there is no grounds for boasting. Jesus is our salvation. He is all we need and He is all we have.

Witherington has explained this reality in a most helpful way:

An adequate theology of grace undercuts any thought of earning salvation. Salvation in Christ is not a human self-help or self-improvement scheme, but a radical rescue from a form of slavery out of which one cannot earn or buy one's way. Paul must establish this

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<sup>12</sup> As N.T. Wright explains; "In this passage... he is talking about the classic pagan language that would be used when people wanted to give themselves airs, to become 'somebodies'. This was the kind of social and cultural status that the Christians in Corinth were now so eager to obtain. They are missing the point, he declares. No Christian can boast of the status he or she possesses, because from the first to the last it is God's work and gift." N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Shogren explains; "Paul's argument [in 1:26-31] rests on his belief that God has chosen individuals and has called them to faith—apart from this presupposition his argument falls apart. For then a Corinthian could claim that "my choice to believe is evidence of my superior discernment." No one could believe that about a gospel of the cross!" Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corintios*. Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forthcoming), 78.

<sup>14</sup> Witherington explains the cultural significance of the three terms that Paul uses in 1:30; "The three metaphors—a juridical metaphor (right standing), a religious metaphor (holiness, set apartness) and a slavery metaphor (redemption, the freeing of those in bondage, or ransoming by payment)—are different ways to speak of salvation. This whole section is basically about the means by which one is saved." Witherington, *Conflict in Community*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Or 'holiness' which is "a properly religious term that reflects the exclusive sphere to which we now belong." Carson, *Leadership Lessons*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Redemption is "a term drawn from the slave trade to reflect our newfound freedom from sin, corruption, and death." Ibid.

theology of grace at the very outset of his arguments because it is on the basis of that theology that he will undercut all factors that promote factionalism. Grace is not only the great unifier but also the great leveler in the Christian community, which if taken seriously nullifies the importance of all cultural devices used to create social stratification.<sup>17</sup>

And so Paul concludes the chapter by stating once again God's ultimate purpose in choosing nobodies: so that we might boast in Christ and Christ alone. This last verse is a quotation from Jeremiah 9:24. Look at the passage with me.

<sup>23</sup> This is what the Lord says: "The wise must not boast in his wisdom; the mighty must not boast in his might; the rich must not boast in his riches. <sup>24</sup> But the one who boasts should boast in this, that he understands and knows Me—that I am the Lord, showing faithful love, justice, and righteousness on the earth, for I delight in these things." This is the Lord's declaration.

God will not share His glory with anyone. Salvation is a work of God from beginning to end. He has chosen to save nobodies so that there will be no mistaking who is to be given the credit for salvation. Paul is not bashing the Corinthians for boasting period, but rather for boasting in the wrong person(s). We ought to boast about our great God and what He has done. This is, after all, what evangelism is all about—bragging on our great God and what He has done to forgive and save wretched sinners like ourselves through His Son. We ought to take pride in our great God and what He has done for underserving sinners like ourselves. Paul even says that he boasts only in the cross of Christ (Galatians 6:14). However, it is impossible to boast in oneself and in God at the same time.

### **Conclusion**

If we boast in the Lord alone, division will not find its way into the church. However, if we think of ourselves as being better than others, we will do all that we can to serve our own purposes and agendas (Philippians 2:3-4). Paul knocked the Corinthians down to size to show them how ridiculous it was for them to boast in themselves and in other men. God chooses nobodies, those who have nothing to offer or contribute, to demonstrate the plain truth that salvation is owing to God and God alone. Men are nothing more than recipients of the grace of God—so why boast in men? God alone is to be praised! He alone is to be worshipped! He alone is to be boasted in! He alone is worthy! Garland says, "The Corinthians can boast only in what God has accomplished among them. All other boasting based on comparing themselves favorably to others uses sham, mortal criteria."<sup>18</sup> Paul smashes their self-esteem so that they might esteem Christ and Christ alone. He alone is worthy!

<sup>17</sup> Witherington, *Conflict in Community*, 118.

<sup>18</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 80.