

# The Foolishness of God – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

CBC Ilderton

Andrew Hall

Good Friday, April 7, 2023

Today is the day of irony. Irony is that effect where the opposite is stated and it seems to provoke you. Canadian singer Alanis Morissette would sing, “Isn’t it ironic, don’t you think? It’s like rain on your wedding day. It’s the free ride when you’ve already paid. It’s the good advice you just can’t take; and who would’ve thought, it figures.” While that isn’t exactly irony, Christians around the world today are doing something ironic. Stop and think about it. What makes today good? We sing about the beauty of an execution device. We are calling the death of an innocent man good.

For Christians, celebrating the cross is deeply ironic. In the Roman world, a citizen of the Empire could not be crucified unless explicit orders were given by the Emperor. The cross was the execution device reserved for slaves, traitors, barbarians. It was not spoken of in public among Romans. It was considered too gruesome and was considered evil.

And yet here we are, celebrating the cross. And so we have to come to grips with this great divide. And on this Good Friday, as we have been seeking the wisdom of God in the book of Proverbs, it seems fitting to come to this passage and consider the message of the cross. What is the wisdom of God in the message of the cross that we need?

## Understand God’s Wisdom in the Cross (vv. 18-21)

Societies have a way of dividing people. In Paul’s day, it was Jew or Greek, slave or free, Roman or barbarian. But Paul says that there is one thing that truly divides the world: the cross. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (v. 18). And then he looks back to Isaiah 29:14 to make his point in v. 19 – that God will destroy the wisdom of the wise.

We love to think that we are wise. We love to think that we’ve got things figured out. We love to think that we can solve the biggest problems in the world with our ingenuity. We think that we can improve ourselves, do enough good to get to God, and find ways to make him happy. We use our methods. And in the end, what humans reveal is that we are lovers of ourselves and fool ourselves.

So Paul will ask: where is the wise, the scribe, the debater? Hasn’t God made the wisdom of the world foolishness?

During the invasion of Iraq, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said something quite astonishing and perplexing to the American people as he attempted to justify the US incursion into Iraq to find weapons of mass destruction:

“Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout

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the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones” (Feb. 12, 2002).

Rumsfeld was citing the risks that the US Intelligence services have to handle – the things they know and don’t know. This type of thinking reveals how much we depend on human wisdom to fix things. Martin Luther would assert that there is a type of theologian who thinks they know the unknowns. They see the unseen. They see ‘virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, etc...’ (Luther’s Works, 31:52). Because they see these things of God, they wrongly assume that they can discover the glory road to God. Theologians of glory operate under the assumption that they can know the unknowns.

The theologian of the cross, however, realizes that “the secret things belong to the Lord” (Deut. 29:29). God will always seem like he is a threat because he cannot be completely understood and contained. The first temptation in the Garden of Eden was not to eat the forbidden fruit, but to believe that God was withholding some goodness that would make Adam and Eve more God-like.

But God cannot be contained – his power is displayed most clearly by His Son who, though he was rich, became poor so that his riches might make the poor rich (2 Cor. 8:9). His power is seen in crucifixion and death. True greatness is not in being served but in serving (Mark 10:45). To be a theologian of the cross is not to claim that we see what is unseen nor to see through the divine masks to see divine majesty. To be a theologian of the cross is to be claimed by the cross and to cling to it as our only hope of assurance. Theologians of glory attempt to look past the cross to solve the divine mystery, to figure out how to be virtuous, godly, wise, just, and good. But in doing so, they become fools, futile in their thinking and darkened in their minds (Rom. 1:21-22). Theologians of the cross look at the cross and see it for what it is: our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). We must be taught where to look and what to see. What we need to know is that which has been made known through Jesus Christ.

And the cross is the dividing point. Since the world doesn’t know God through human wisdom, since humanity can’t save themselves, it pleased God to rescue people through the craziest message around: an innocent man died one Friday outside of Jerusalem so that people might live.

## Trust God’s Foolishness and Weakness of God in the Cross (vv. 22-25)

Since humanity is divided by the cross, the question then is this: what are you going to trust in for your wisdom and power? Paul describes those who trust in human wisdom and strength as being those who want religious signs or human wisdom.

“Jews demand signs” (v. 22). And here is human wisdom on display. We want God to show up and do awesome things for us. We want him to override our choices and our responsibilities. So

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we ask, “How could God allow that to happen?” We somehow think that if we were God, we would run the universe better.

And what kind of world would it be if humans could get away with being irresponsible because signs and wonders would come and rescue us? Would this make us better or worse? Would we be more or less responsible? If I demand signs from him, who is in control? The Jews had many signs – Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons. And how did they respond to him?

“Greeks seek wisdom” (v. 22). And here are the people who want to figure everything out. They think that if they could understand everything, they’d be able to be in control. “Knowledge is power” is their motto. And what does it produce? Does it produce people who are humble and kind?

Martin Luther would describe these people as “theologians of glory.” The glory they are seeking is not God’s, but their own. It’s the kind of glory that puts humanity in charge. And theologians of glory abound. People hear this talk of sin, damnation, and hell, and they judge these things to be too depressing, negative, and gloomy. Our complaints about the hard, negative things of God do not disprove them but illustrate how bound we are to loving self-glory. We want to be affirmed, encouraged, and supported, not rebuked, corrected, and trained in righteousness. If Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, one from whom men hid their faces and was despised and rejected (Isa. 53:2-3), we ought to pause and remember that we cannot judge by mere appearances, but by reality. And this is the reality – the way of God looks like foolishness to the natural man, but the way of the cross is the wisdom and power of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

Where is God seen most clearly? Is he seen and adored in the best arguments or the most amazing miracles? Do people flock to God when they’ve got things figured out or when all of their problems melt away? No! Here is where God is seen clearly: in the rejected, suffering, and crucified Christ. It is in the weak and lowly, the despised and rejected where God reveals himself. As Paul can say in vv. 23 & 24, this way causes people to either stumble or to be rescued.

God refuses to be seen in any other way. Theologians of the cross understand that if we were to see God in his glory, we would not live. Like Moses, we come to know God from the backside of suffering and the cross, not by seeing glory head-on. God destroys the wisdom of the wise (1 Cor. 1:19) by revealing himself in suffering, rejection, and in crucifixion for our protection and to make us into theologians of the cross. God hides himself (Isa. 45:15) to destroy the theologian of glory so that when we look upon Jesus, we see what God is truly like (John 14:8).

And in this destruction of the wisdom of the wise and the strength of the strong. Thus the cross becomes everything. By the cross of Christ we see and we find life. Why? Because at the cross, the power of God is seen in Christ defeating sin by death, not by reason or miracles. The wisdom of God is seen that humility is the way, the way of confession.

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There is no other possibility for life. We cannot look beyond the cross or through the cross. We see reality because of the cross. The cross says, "I oppose the proud, but I will show favour to the humble." The cross says, "By dying you may live." The cross says, "By admitting you don't know you will know."

The irony of the cross is seen like this: By death we live. By serving we are great. Thus we say with Luther, "The cross alone is our theology."

Lord, High and Holy, Meek and Lowly,  
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,  
where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;  
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox  
that the way down is the way up,  
that to be low is to be high,  
that the broken heart is the healed heart,  
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,  
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,  
that to have nothing is to possess all,  
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,  
that to give is to receive,  
that the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells,  
and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;  
Let me find thy light in my darkness,  
thy life in my death,  
thy joy in my sorrow,  
thy grace in my sin,  
thy riches in my poverty,  
thy glory in my valley.

- Arthur Bennett, from *The Valley of Vision*