



## 1 Corinthians - Chapter One

### Summary of Chapter One

Paul identifies himself as the writer of this letter to the church in Corinth and the opening serves as a preface to the whole letter, setting the tone for what is to come. That is, Jesus is the focus and Paul is thankful for the Corinthians despite the issues he feels it necessary to address.

Paul had received a verbal report of divisions in the church, especially with regard to people dividing their loyalties and aligning themselves with their different human teachers rather than remaining true to the Gospel that they had been taught.

Corinth was a society where power, wealth, and status were everything. People looked up to those of higher social status and aspired to be among them. Paul demonstrates that this is contrary to the teaching of the Gospel, where God has shown that his own greater wisdom and strength is to be seen in what he has done through those who are often drawn from the lower echelons of society. Even the death and resurrection of Jesus was seen by some to be foolishness, for they misunderstood the strength and power of God's actions in offering salvation in this way.

### I. 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 - Salutation

The opening verses can be divided into an initial greeting (vv.1-3), and a report to the letter's recipients on how Paul prays for them (vv.4-9). Both parts use language that anticipates some of the letter's key themes.

#### I.a 1 Corinthians 1:1-3 - Greeting: apostleship, sanctity, and unity

Paul's apostleship and the Corinthians' sanctity and unity are among the letter's most important themes.

<sup>1</sup> Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

## 1 Corinthians 1:1

Apostle is the Greek *apostolos* and describes those commissioned to be Jesus' special representatives, while disciples is used more broadly to refer to anyone who believed in Jesus. The use of this word by Paul emphasises that his authority is equal to that of the twelve apostles chosen by Christ. The word occurs 10 times in 1 Corinthians, more often than in any other Pauline epistle.

Christ Jesus. It is clear what motivated Paul in his life's work and just how passionate he was with regard to his Lord who had called him to service. His excitement just at the Name is clear, for he writes of him eight times in just the first nine verses. Paul wanted the Corinthians to feel this way too. In particular, he wanted them to have Jesus at the centre of their understanding of the world and of history. Most of the Christians in Corinth had not been Jews, but ordinary pagans. They had been Gentiles, believing in various gods and goddesses, but without any idea that history, the story of the world, was going anywhere, or that their own lives might be part of that forward movement.

Paul frequently acknowledges that his apostleship is by the will of God: <<Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God>> (2 Corinthians 1:1a), <<Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus>> (Ephesians 1:1), <<Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother>> (Colossians 1:1), and: <<Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus>> (2 Timothy 1:1).

Sosthenes was probably the same Jewish leader who was responsible for bringing Paul before the Roman proconsul in Corinth during Paul's time in the city. Paul was acquitted and the other Jews turned on Sosthenes: <<Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things>> (Acts 18:17). If he is the same man, then he had evidently come to faith and had travelled to Ephesus to work with Paul there.

<sup>2</sup> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

## 1 Corinthians 1:2

Corinth was described in the Introduction under the heading The Ancient City of Corinth, with a map showing the structure of the city at that time.

Sanctified, saints. These two words are closely related in Greek, one a verb *hagiazō* meaning 'make holy' and the other an adjective *hagios* meaning holy. Here the adjective is used as a noun and means 'holy people'. Something holy is set apart from evil and dedicated to God's service; in this case, the Corinthians were separated from the pagan traditions of their culture. In the OT, God set Israel apart from all other nations: <<Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the

*peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites>> (Exodus 19:5-6). He also gave Israel his law so that they might reveal the holiness of the God who chose them by the way they lived: <<For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy>> (Leviticus 11:44-45).*

Paul reminds the Corinthians that, because they are sanctified in Christ Jesus, God has set them apart to be his holy people (v.30), <<*And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*>> (1 Corinthians 6:11). Refer also to 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. Because they are God's people they should reflect his holiness: <<*Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*>> (Leviticus 19:2).

Because the Corinthians have a tendency toward self-centeredness and disunity, Paul reminds them that in Christ they are spiritually united to all Christians in every place. This is reflected elsewhere in the letter; refer to 1 Corinthians 4:17, 7:17, 11:16 and 14:33-36.

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

### 1 Corinthians 1:3

Grace to you and peace is a favoured method of greeting used by Paul: <<*To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Romans 1:7), <<*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (2 Thessalonians 1:2), and: <<*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Philemon 3). It appears in other letters, including: <<*May grace and peace be yours in abundance*>> (1 Peter 1:2b), <<*May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*>> (2 Peter 1:2), and: <<*Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love*>> (2 John 3).

Grace means God's unmerited favour. Peace is not just the absence of conflict but echoes the OT concept of *shalom*, where a person's life with God and with everything else is in ordered harmony, both physically and spiritually, and 'all is well'. It was Paul's prayer that the people of Corinth would receive this special gift and blessing from God.

From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was fully aware that Jesus and God are one and the same in essence. However, his theology also acknowledges that the three persons of the trinity are individual and unique.

I.b 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 -  
Thanksgiving: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts

Paul is thankful that God has richly blessed the Corinthians with speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts. Despite some problems with these blessings, refer to 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Chapter 14, Paul considers them gifts from God.

<sup>4</sup> I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,

1 Corinthians 1:4

I give thanks to my God. Paul typically follows the greeting in his letters with a thanksgiving, as can be found in the opening verses of Romans, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy and Philemon. He is thankful, not for any personal benefit, but because he sees here the fulfilment of his goal in life, which was for the Kingdom of God to advance throughout the entire world.

The grace of God that has been given you is a clear indication of how much God loves people and is willing to act decisively on their behalf even though they have done nothing to deserve it – quite the opposite in fact: *<<since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>>* (Romans 3:23).

<sup>5</sup> for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind –

1 Corinthians 1:5

Enriched in him. In 1 Corinthians 4:8 Paul states that the Corinthians' spiritual riches have led to an inappropriate pride. Paul's thankfulness here shows that the problem lay not with the gifts God had given them but with the way the Corinthians perceived and used those gifts. The cure is found in a healthy dose of gratitude: *<<For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?>>* (1 Corinthians 4:7).

The Corinthians valued especially the gifts of speech and knowledge: *<<For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?>>* (1 Corinthians 8:10), this is a key theme of Chapter 14, and was driven by the culture they lived in. However, because they had used these gifts in wrong and improper ways, the exercise of the gifts led to disunity: *<<Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?>>* (1 Corinthians 12:29-30), and: *<<Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church>>* (1 Corinthians 14:4).

<sup>6</sup> just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you –

<sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 1 Corinthians 1:6-7

The testimony of Christ. The Gospel message is based on eye-witness testimony that can be relied upon: <<*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed*>> (Luke 1:1-4), <<*This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true*>> (John 21:24), and: <<*These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed*>> (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

When Paul tells them: <<*you have been enriched*>> in Christ: <<*in speech and knowledge*>> (v.5), so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, he is implying that many spiritual gifts are enrichments of speaking abilities, knowledge, or skills that people had before they became Christians.

As you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ implies that spiritual gifts are given as a temporary provision until Christ returns: <<*For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end*>> (1 Corinthians 13:9-10), and: <<*while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ*>> (Titus 2:13).

<sup>8</sup> He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## 1 Corinthians 1:8-9

He will also strengthen you to the end. In these first few verses Paul has reminded them of what had happened to them in the past, through the type of people they had become and looking forward to what God still had in store for their future through Jesus.

Blameless on the day of our Lord. There will be no condemnation on the final day for those who, like the Corinthians, are in Christ Jesus: <<*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*>> (Romans 8:1), <<*And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints*>> (1 Thessalonians 3:13). They already have been justified and, in a sense, even sanctified: <<*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*>> (Romans 5:1), <<*And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*>> (1 Corinthians 6:11), so no one will be able to bring a charge against them at the

judgment: <<Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies>> (Romans 8:33).

The day of our Lord was something that had long been foretold in Scripture, and was feared by many for they knew that judgement would come upon those who had transgressed God's laws: <<Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty!>> (Isaiah 13:6), <<That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of retribution, to gain vindication from his foes. The sword shall devour and be sated, and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord God of hosts holds a sacrifice in the land of the north by the river Euphrates>> (Jeremiah 46:10), <<For a day is near, the day of the Lord is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations>> (Ezekiel 30:3), <<Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes>> (Joel 1:15), <<Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light>> (Amos 5:18), <<For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head>> (Obadiah 15), and: <<The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there>> (Zephaniah 1:14). However, it is a time to both dread and herald in with joy: <<The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!>> (Revelation 22:20).

The Corinthians had a long way to go before their behaviour matched their status before God: <<I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh>> (1 Corinthians 3:2-3a), but Paul was confident that God, who is faithful, will make them what they should be.

God is faithful and he can be relied upon to keep his promises: <<Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations>> (Deuteronomy 7:9).

The fellowship of his Son. The apostle John explains the importance of this fellowship further for it identifies the reality of Jesus as the Christ: <<We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete>> (1 John 1:1-4).

## **II 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21 - Divisions over Christian Preachers**

Paul now states one of the letter's primary concerns: the Corinthians' pride has led them to value outward appearance and eloquence over the genuine work of the Spirit. This manifested itself in the way they had aligned themselves to individual human teachers.

## II.a 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 - Division of the church

Paul begins with a description of the problem of division as reported it to him by Chloe's people. The Corinthians were exhibiting a haughty devotion to one or another of three itinerant Christian preachers.

<sup>10</sup> Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

### 1 Corinthians 1:10

All of you should be in agreement is not so much to do with the day to day running of the church or even the vision for its direction. It is about agreeing with the principles of God that are set out in scripture; it is about doing God's will: <<*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother*>> (Mark 3:35), <<*Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own*>> (John 7:17), <<*And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever*>> (1 John 2:17).

There should be no divisions among you continues the call for church unity, i.e. you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. That purpose is to remain in relationship with God through his Son.

<sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

### 1 Corinthians 1:11

Reported, Greek *dēloō*, means to show, make clear, or reveal something.

Chloe's people, Greek *tōn Chloēs*, literally 'the ones of Chloe', may have done this by an oral report: <<*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife*>> (1 Corinthians 5:1), and: <<*For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it*>> (1 Corinthians 11:18). Chloe's identity and her location - Ephesus? Corinth? - are unknown, as well as whether these people are friends, business associates, family or from her household.

My brothers and sisters. The original address, as was seen in v.10 and elsewhere, is masculine reflecting that men dominated in the culture. However, modern translations reflect that Jesus was counter-cultural and inclusive of all people irrespective of race, gender or any other differences. The use of my indicates the passion and love that Paul felt for the people in the churches he had planted and indeed for all the people of God, including those who had remained as Jews: <<*Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them*>> (Romans 11:13-14).

<sup>12</sup> 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.'

### 1 Corinthians 1:12

I belong to Paul. Apparently the Corinthian Christians were divided into factions on the basis of who had baptised them (vv.14-17), or who they thought had the most suitable teaching style. Later in the letter Paul will speak of the travelling philosophers, who were a great draw on the local populations, who shared a so-called 'wisdom', and were often interested in drawing disciples to themselves in order to spread their own version of wisdom further. This is probably what the Corinthians had in mind when they choose whom to follow.

Paul knew Apollos well: <<*Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. He will come when he has the opportunity*>> (1 Corinthians 16:12). His rhetorical skills were impressive, and the Corinthian Christians had received him gladly after Paul's departure as recorded in Acts 18:24-19:1.

Apollos came from Alexandria in Egypt, where there was a strong Jewish community which included the great Jewish philosopher Philo. He had the reputation as a wonderful speaker, had excellent knowledge of scripture and was able to explain it powerfully.

Cephas is the Aramaic equivalent of the name Peter, a name given to him by the Lord: <<*He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)*>> (John 1:42), and both names refer to Simon Peter the apostle: <<*and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve*>> (1 Corinthians 15:4-5), and: <<*Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days*>> (Galatians 1:18). Unlike Paul: <<*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am*>> (1 Corinthians 7:8), Cephas was married and had travelled to Corinth with his wife: <<*Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*>> (1 Corinthians 9:5). Apparently one faction in Corinth, claiming to be above it all, took the slogan I belong to Christ. It may even indicate that someone falsely claiming to be the Messiah was in their midst. As one of the men who had known Jesus so intimately during his earthly ministry, Peter would have been a natural draw to anyone who had come to faith.

When we read just how hard it was for the early church to remain united when being taught by people who had been so close to Jesus then it is easy to understand how we have come to the point where there are so many different denominations around the world, all shaped by the human interpretations of the original message.

<sup>13</sup> Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptise also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else.)

### 1 Corinthians 1:13-16

Has Christ been divided? In this context it refers to the idea that Jesus could in some way be segmented, split up into sections, with each being spoken of by a different person. Paul recognised that it was human weakness to follow individual leaders rather than Jesus. This has been seen as a common problem throughout the ages, with some leaders getting caught up in their own image rather than following the example of Paul, who was undoubtedly a great man yet he retained his humility in realising his dependence on God, and that he was there because of God's grace and will alone.

Was Paul crucified for you? This was the most forceful way Paul could state that none of the teachers whom the church held so dearly could ever be compared with their Lord Jesus Christ.

I baptised none of you. Again, Paul had identified the potential problem of people becoming the trophies of the individual human teacher rather than being baptised into Christ alone. Jesus himself was baptised by John the Baptist: <<*John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.'* Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him>> (Matthew 3:14-16), then after that he had his disciples perform all the baptisms of new converts: <<*Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptising more disciples than John' – although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised – he left Judæa and started back to Galilee>> (John 4:1-3).*

Crispus was probably the senior Jewish leader who had clearly come to faith: <<*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 baptised>> (Acts 18:8).*

Gaius may have been one of Paul's colleagues mentioned elsewhere: <<*The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travelling-companions>> (Acts 19:29), or: <<*He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, by Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, by Gaius from Derbe, and by Timothy, as well as by Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia>> (Acts 20:4). He may have been a friend of the apostle John: <<*The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth>> (3 John 1), or he may have been someone else.***

<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

### 1 Corinthians 1:17

For Christ did not send me to baptise. While Paul considers baptism important: <<*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?*>> (Romans 6:3), and: <<*when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead*>> (Colossians 2:12), it is subordinate to the proclamation of the Gospel. Hearing and believing the Gospel, unlike baptism, is essential to salvation: <<*So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ*>> (Romans 10:17), and: <<*In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*>> (Ephesians 1:13). The Corinthians needed to centre their lives on the Gospel, not on the various preachers in whom they can take pride.

Words spoken with eloquent wisdom. The art of rhetorical persuasion was highly valued in the Greco-Roman world, and professional orators frequented large cities like Corinth, giving impressive displays of their ability to entertain and instruct. Paul's proclamation of the Gospel failed to measure up to these standards. This failure, however, served to place the spotlight on the power of the message itself: <<*When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God*>> (1 Corinthians 2:1-5), for the Holy Spirit so empowered Paul's words that they awakened faith in Christ: <<*In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures*>> (James 1:18), and: <<*You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures for ever.'* That word is the good news that was announced to you>> (1 Peter 1:23-25), and changed people's very hearts and lives.

### II.b 1 Corinthians 1:18-4:21 - God's wisdom answers the problem

The divisions in Corinth can be healed if the Corinthians see the distinction between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom.

#### II.b.i 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16 - The nature of God's wisdom

God's wisdom is displayed in the message of the Cross, the calling of the Corinthians, the preaching of Paul, and the wisdom from the Spirit.

## II.b.i.1 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 - Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

Here, Paul is contrasting ‘the wisdom of the world’ with ‘the wisdom of God’. His basic claim is that the message about the Messiah and his Cross carries a power of quite a different sort to the power of human rhetoric, with its showy style designed to entertain the ear and so gain an undeserved hearing for a merely human message.

However, in making this point, he himself writes a paragraph of such wonderfully flowing and balanced rhetoric that one can only assume he was deliberately teasing them, perhaps hoping to make, by humour and irony, the deadly serious point underneath.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

### 1 Corinthians 1:18

**The Cross.** Crucifixion was widely practiced by the Romans, and the early Jewish historian Josephus mentions thousands of people crucified in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, mostly during rebellions against Rome. There are accounts of Roman soldiers cruelly playing with different postures for crucified victims, (Josephus, Jewish War 5.449-551), although the use of nails and a crossbar appear to have been common. Modern medical explanations for the cause of death on a cross have focused on either asphyxiation or shock. Crucifixion was widely believed to be the worst form of execution, due to the excruciating pain and public shame. Hanging suspended by one’s arms eventually caused great difficulty in breathing, which could be alleviated only by pushing up with one’s feet to take the weight off the arms. However, that motion itself would cause severe pain in the feet, arms, legs and back, causing the exhausted victim to slump down again, only to be nearly unable to breathe once more. Eventually, the victim would succumb to suffocation, if they had not already died as a result of the cumulative effect of the physical trauma inflicted on them.

**Foolishness** or folly. Paul’s preaching in Corinth focused on the saving fact of Christ’s crucifixion, a method of execution considered so crude it was not even mentioned in polite company. The Jews had never foreseen a Messiah who would be executed by the Romans, neither had anyone else for that matter. The Corinthians’ fascination with the rhetorical ability of the ministers rather than their message demonstrated that they were living contrary to the power of the Cross.

Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel that hinged on the death and resurrection of the Christ, frequently met with a range of opinions from acceptance to derision and mocking. All these viewpoints were seen when Paul first brought the message to a key audience, the Areopagus, in nearby Athens: <<***When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them***>> (Acts 17:32-34). It was not foolishness for it was delivered in accordance with the power of God. It is all about the true God confronting the world of posturing, power and prestige, and overthrowing it in

order to set up his own kingdom, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more so.

<sup>19</sup> For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

### 1 Corinthians 1:19

Paul quotes the prophet from Isaiah 29:14. There were many people who considered they had wisdom, knowledge and discernment. What Isaiah spoke of and foresaw, and the point Paul wants to make, is that the bible is a closed book and the Gospel message a mystery until people come to it with a simple, open heart and mind, for it is revealed through the Spirit.

<sup>20</sup> 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? <sup>21</sup> 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.

### 1 Corinthians 1:20-21

Where is the one who is wise? Paul continues his argument to make the point that, although there were many intelligent people, true wisdom only comes to those who recognise its source as God.

The debater of this age is a reference to the many philosophers that were greatly admired by the Greeks during Paul’s time, some of whom he had personally encountered in Athens: <<*Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbling want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection)*>> (Acts 17:18).

In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. It was God’s desire from the outset that mankind should live in innocence for he knew that knowledge could corrupt. The devil used this as a tool to corrupt Adam and Eve by deceitfully twisting God’s wisdom to make an apparent attractive proposition: <<*But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’*>> (Genesis 3:4-5).

<sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

## 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Jesus' hostile opponents had kept demanding more miraculous signs to prove his claims: <<*The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.'* Then he left them and went away>> (Matthew 16:1-4), <<*The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation'*>> (Mark 8:11-12), <<*Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven*>> (Luke 11:16), <<*The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'* Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?>> (John 2:18-20), and: <<*Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe'*>> (John 4:48), but they were doing this just to manipulate him, for the signs he had already given were sufficient to leave them without excuse for their unbelief: <<*He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God'*>> (John 3:2), <<*When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus*>> (John 12:9-11), <<*Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him*>> (John 12:37), and: <<*Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves*>> (John 14:11).

Greeks were viewed in antiquity, in contrast to barbarians, as a cultured people and therefore interested in wisdom: <<*Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new*>> (Acts 17:21), and: <<*I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish*>> (Romans 1:14). A crucified Messiah was offensive to an unbelieving Jew: <<*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you'*>> (Matthew 16:22), <<*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'*>> (Galatians 3:13), and: <<*But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed*>> (Galatians 5:11), and nonsensical to an unbelieving Greek.

God's power to call forth his people, however, works through a deeper wisdom than human beings can recognise unless God grants them faith. Paul writes that the Gospel is preached to all (v.23), but God calls some effectively to salvation from among both Jews and Greeks (v.24).

Christ as a stumbling-block is something that was in the Scriptures: <<*He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken*>> (Isaiah 8:14-15), and: <<*therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: ‘One who trusts will not panic’*>> (Isaiah 28:16). God deeply impressed upon Isaiah a surprising message. The holy God, who is the sanctuary for frightened human beings, is also the snare for those who do not fear him. Judah and Jerusalem wring their hands over surface-level crises, with little awareness of the grandeur of God. By disregarding God, they find him to be an obstacle they cannot evade. Christ is the stone, both providing a foundation to those who trust in him and becoming a cause of stumbling to those who reject him.

Both Jews and Greeks. Although God had personally chosen the Jews to be his people, he never intended salvation to be for them alone but that they would be a beacon to the world in proclaiming his oracles to all. The Jews had misunderstood this intention, even though God had spoken: <<*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him*>> (Psalm 22:27), <<*And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, ‘You are my people’; and he shall say, ‘You are my God’*>> (Hosea 2:23). Through the Gospel God had now made it clear that salvation was indeed for all

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’

### 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own call. History, and indeed current times, both indicate that some people become rich, famous and powerful, whereas the majority are mainly insignificant, outside of their own family at least. Yet everyone is made in the spiritual image of God: <<*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*>> (Genesis 1:27). With this in mind, Paul calls on the church to realise the importance of the task God has created each one to undertake. This should be sufficient for everyone without the need to feel they need to be somebody in worldly terms.

Just as the message and its messenger Paul were foolish by the world’s standards, so too most of those in Corinth who believed the message was foolish by those

same standards. God's transformation of them into his people, by choosing them to be saved in spite of their humanly unimpressive pedigree, excludes all boasting in ancestry, accomplishment, or affiliation with one preacher or another: <<*So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you*>> (1 Corinthians 3:21-22).

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. The themes of the lifting up of the downtrodden and the reversal of human status were prophesied in the OT: <<*The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up*>> (1 Samuel 2:6), <<*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners*>> (Isaiah 61:1), <<*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly*>> (Luke 1:52), and: <<*Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'*>> (John 9:39).

So that no one might boast in the presence of God. Those who receive a free gift they do not deserve and could never earn have nothing to boast about, as Paul will state again later in this epistle: <<*For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*>> (1 Corinthians 4:7). The Jews had often boasted as being special people as they alone had the laws and oracles of God: <<*Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith*>> (Romans 3:27-30).

The gift of God's grace is there to be accepted, not to be boasted about: <<*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast*>> (Ephesians 2:8-9), with the exception of let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord that is repeated in 2 Corinthians 10:17, and is based on: <<*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; 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*>> (Jeremiah 9:23-24). No Christian can boast of the status he or she possesses, because from first to last it is God's work and gift.

Wisdom was a key part of OT teaching that appeared in the proverbs of King Solomon, such as: <<*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity*>> (Proverbs 1:1-3). King Solomon had asked God to give him the wisdom and discernment to become a good ruler of God's people. This God did, making him the wisest man ever: <<*I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and*

*discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both wealth and honour – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings>>* (1 Kings 3:12-14 NIV). There are many other examples, including: *<<Is wisdom with the aged, and understanding in length of days? 'With God are wisdom and strength; he has counsel and understanding'>>* (Job 12:12-13), and: *<<The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak justice>>* (Psalm 37:30). Later Jewish writings like Ecclesiasticus, 'The Wisdom of Ben Sirach', probably written about 200BC, and 'The Wisdom of Solomon', probably from early in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, developed this idea into the notion that Wisdom is to be found in the Jewish law, or in the presence of God in the Temple, and that by following this Wisdom people can be and do what God intended them to be and do in the world. For Paul, Jesus the Messiah is the true wisdom: *<<He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross>>* (Colossians 1:15-20), and: *<<For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge>>* (Colossians 2:1-3).

He is the source of your life. This refers to God although Paul makes it clear that God's gift of this life was through the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the source of righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

The Lord uses the Greek word that identifies Paul's thought as being to God the Father, i.e. the equivalent of *Yahweh*, yet in context he makes it clear that it also refers to Jesus as Lord and Saviour.