

Christ Crucified: The only Wisdom and Power that Stand the Test of Time
I Corinthians 1:18-25

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

If the study of history demonstrates anything it is this: the lifespan of what is considered true wisdom and who is truly powerful is remarkably brief. Want some examples? In the 50's and 60's it was discovered that cholesterol was a factor in heart disease. It was also known that eggs are high in cholesterol. Health experts disparaged eggs as one of the worst foods you could eat for a good ten years until the mid-1990's when rigorous studies showed that there are different types of cholesterol and that merely ingesting cholesterol doesn't necessarily produce it in your blood vessels, and that on the whole, eggs are one of the healthiest foods you can eat. Or consider this: until the mid-1990's, the vast majority of child rearing experts advised having babies sleep on their stomachs. Then it was discovered that stomach sleeping was the top contributing factor leading to SIDS. Today parents are taught the ABC acronym – have your baby sleep Alone, on their Back in a Crib. Here's another one: in 1966 Time magazine boldly predicted, "Remote shopping, while entirely feasible, will flop because women like to get out of the house, like to handle merchandise, like to be able to change their minds." Today Time Warner is worth about \$38 million, and Amazon is valued at over \$1.7 trillion. Such is the fickle nature of most wisdom.

And power? In just the past 100 years, Great Britain has gone from the undisputed most powerful empire on the planet to a second-tier military power. The USA has gone from a navy of under 30 ships to world superpower. Japan and Germany have receded from dominant world powers to second- and third-tier powers. The Soviet Union, once the second superpower has disintegrated and China has risen to take its place. For some of you all of this has happened in your lifetime. Such is the brevity of earthly power and might. Yet consider how closely we pay attention to the newest and latest wisdom. Self-help books fly off the shelves. Vloggers on YouTube attract millions of viewers. "Experts" on this and that are constantly quoted. "Follow science," is the rally cry even though science-based conclusions are constantly changing. If you want proof, just pick up a science textbook from the 70's.

Or consider how much time and money and effort is spent trying to attain power, or keep this or that person in power, or take power away from them – with the thought that if only the right people, if only the right nation is more powerful, then everything will be OK. It's almost as if all of that history had never happened. And what happens when our time and attention are fixed on the wisdom and power of today? We push God into the background. That's something to get around to some other time. I'll get around to it before I die. Well, there is a historical precedent for that too! Today we are confronted with just such an attitude all the way back in the first century. And we listen as God – often ignored – teaches us a history lesson and at the same time, a spiritual lesson, when it come to power and wisdom. **I Corinthians 1:18-25 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.** ¹⁹ For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." ²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

So, a little bit of context: Paul is alive during the time of the early Roman empire right on the heels of the mighty Greek empire. Both empires placed a high value on power and wisdom. You think of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Mighty warriors like Alexander the great, Julius Ceasar. Great literary works like the Iliad and the Odyssey the Aeneid. In cities like Athens, you could go to a place called the Areopagus and debate philosophy with the great minds in the city. Think of it as the Ivy Leage of its day. Paul did just that, and shared with them the message of Christ crucified. Most thought it completely foolish. Why? Who wants a hero who suffers and dies? Who wants a life philosophy where I am not the one in control? Who wants to admit, "I've made such a mess of things that I need someone to come and be tortured and die for me"? Who would believe that you don't have to do anything, cooperate in any way to receive a place in the afterlife. No, Paul, this just goes against our better judgement. Who would follow a philosopher or religion, whose adherents don't have much if any power in this world? Isn't that the proof that their god, that their philosophy is not legitimate? Why would I follow a god who doesn't promise to make me richer and more powerful than my enemies? What's the point?!

And what did they chase after instead? Philosophies that promised reward through hard work – power and pleasure to those who did things correctly, or sacrifice now that earned them favor with the gods who would reward them later. So, did any of those philosophies, religions, and political leaders deliver? Well, how many people do you know today that would tell you, "Oh I follow Aristotle." "I'm a platonic adherent." No? Oh sure, people use bits and pieces, yes, but by and large – gone. How many people worship Jupiter, Zues, Mercury, Aphrodite, and the hundreds of other Greco

Roman gods today? Almost none, they are relegated to Disney movie cartoons and B- movies. How powerful is the leader of Italy today? Is anyone looking to Greece to intervene in major world conflicts? Are not these words of God though Paul spot on? **“For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”**²⁰ **Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”** Those words are undeniable, yet how many in Paul’s day did cling to the wisdom and the power of the day? The majority! And what would they have said, “Well, everyone else does!” And why – the wisdom and power of the day promised the good life now or the promise of earning a better life to come. Do your duty to Artemas and Zeus and they will reward you – your business will thrive; your family will grow. Follow the philosophy of Plato, everything will click and if we put in place his republic, everything will be fair, everyone will be taken care of. Did it ever work that way? Not even close. Just as the Greek empire collapsed, so did Rome and in spectacular fashion – it collapsed from within! Yet the wise and powerful of the day ridiculed the teaching of Christ because it couldn’t deliver a just, fair, and perfect society, or the power to create one, in spite of the fact that it never promised to do that – at least not here.

You see, the problem was not that Christ crucified didn’t deliver. The problem was they were looking for the wrong thing. They were looking for heaven here on earth – blindly hoping that the next philosophy, the next empire would finally bring perfect fairness, perfect living conditions, perfect harmony right here on earth. Despite thousands of years of history that showed just the opposite. Despite God’s words that it never could because as the result of the sinful condition passed down from the first people, Adam and Eve to all of their descendants – this world is cursed! That means that perfection is impossible. We have a sickness that we cannot cure by ourselves, and one that is never fully cured while we walk this earth. Humbling as it is to hear, it is true. We need rescue – not from those bad people over there, not from the evil empire over there, but from ourselves. So long as we look for salvation, so long as we look for perfection here Christ crucified will be to us what he was to so many in Paul’s day: **Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,**²³ **but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...**

So what would be said of our culture – our society? What do Americans look for? Proof maybe? Just do a miracle, if Jesus would show us he is real by giving power to the Christians and taking it away from (fill in the blank). How about emotional validation. “I really feel like Jesus is here living in my heart!” “I really feel like Jesus is working.” “I can feel Jesus’ presence here.” Maybe we look for results: if Christ is legit, my marriage should be awesome, my wages should be good, my friendships should be growing, I shouldn’t have much stress. If that’s what you are looking for, then Christ crucified will be a stumbling block to you too. Why? He doesn’t promise you proof in the way of signs or miracles like his disciples saw. He doesn’t promise that following him will leave you on cloud nine emotionally. In fact, he says that it may cause you great pain and sorrow. He never promises perfect results in this life – you might still struggle with relationships, you might be fired from your job, you might lose a good chunk of your life savings and have to move to a smaller house. You might be treated unfairly or get the bad end of business deal. And if you are looking for that which Christ never promises, he will surely be a stumbling block for you.

So does he promise me anything? He surely does. He promises rescue from sin, a cure for death, and utopia – not here, but in the perfect endless life to come. How does he do it? With the power he displayed when he willingly gave his life and then took it up again. With the power he displayed when even during his torture here, he did not sin. With the wisdom he displayed when he put on himself everything we needed to be rid of and gave us everything we need. And what he gives us though that power and wisdom is far better than what the powers of this world and the wise of this world promise, because unlike the wisdom of this world, his power and his wisdom stand the test of time.

Aristotle is dead, the true followers of his philosophy are no more. Christ and his Church live on. Julius Caesar is dead, his empire fizzled long ago. Christ and his Church live on. Zeus and Artemis are relegated to folk lore. Their true followers are no more. Christ and his Church live on. The British empire is no more. Christ and his Church live on. The Soviets are no more. Christ and his Church live on. The philosophers of the renaissance are no more. Christ and his Church live on. The age of enlightenment is over. Christ and his Church live on. The modernists are in their twilight. Christ and his Church live on. The post modernists are in their heyday. YouTube vloggers and podcasting philosophers and self-help book writers are in their heyday. The United States is at or near the height of its power. But like all the rest, these too will fall – God says so, **“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”**

But Christ and his Church will live on. And one day soon, we will enjoy perfect fairness, perfect living conditions, perfect peace, perfect health, not here but in heaven, and not because of the wisdom of philosophy of the moment, but because Christ in his wisdom removed the problem – sin. So, have you been called a fool lately, or made to feel a fool be a friend, family member, professor? Did you read the barb or vicious insult? Well, remember what Christ said, **For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.** Hold fast – don’t panic. Their foolishness will become clear, it’s only a matter of time. Christ crucified: the only wisdom and power that stand the test of time. **AMEN.**