

## Prayer

Thank You Lord Jesus, for Your inspiration:  
I could not do the things I do without Your Word;  
I could not treat my friends as I ought without Your love;  
I could not run the race of life without Your energy;  
I could not defeat sin without Your salvation;  
In You, Lord Jesus, all is possible!  
AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Spend a few moments in worship, perhaps singing a song of faith, then pour out your heart to the Lord, and let out your feelings and thoughts with freedom. He will listen.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for your neighbourhood.** *Pray today for any of your neighbours that are well known to you; pray that true friendships will arise between people who live in the same street*
- *Give thanks to God for sport and for entertainment, and for all that excites and thrills the soul*
- *Pray for the press, that it may be guided by a genuine search for truth and a desire to report things correctly*

## Meditation

Aspire to the greatest achievements,  
For the Lord Your God has given you power  
Beyond your understanding.

Reach out to the highest goals,  
For the Lord your God has specific tasks for you  
That only you can do.

Believe that the impossible can be done,  
For the faith to grow the Kingdom of God  
Is yours to use, not lose.

Take hold of your covenant heritage now,  
For Your God has portioned out His blessings  
They are there for you, right now!

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## Bible passage - 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

<sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, fellow believers; 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 the foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak in the world to shame the strong.

<sup>28</sup> God chose things that are inferior and despised things in the world, things that have no meaning, to do away with what has, <sup>29</sup> so that no worldly person might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> Because of what He has done you are in Christ Jesus, for God made Him our wisdom, and also our righteousness, holiness and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written,

‘Whoever boasts should boast in the Lord.’

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## Bible Study

### Review

If we are to understand this marvellous passage of Scripture, then we must recall that it comes after these words, which we studied yesterday:

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles; but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:23-25)

This is a bold defence of the Gospel, and in our passage today, Paul defends his description of God's work as 'foolishness' and 'weakness'. Verses 26 and 27 discuss its foolishness and verses 28 and 29 discuss its weakness. The result is a wonderfully evocative passage of Scripture, which has much to teach us about the Gospel and the way God works within His world.

This part of 1 Corinthians 1 has been well used by preachers. It has a significant number of great texts, for example, '*God chose the foolish in the world to shame the wise ... the weak to shame the strong*' (1:27), and '*you are in Christ Jesus, for God made Him our wisdom ... righteousness, holiness and redemption.*' (1:30). Our passage also introduces a word that becomes common throughout Paul's first and second letters to the Corinthians; he speaks of '*boasting*' in the Lord (1:31). Now, it is difficult to follow exactly what Paul is saying unless we remember his basic thesis, which is that God works in a way that appears totally contradictory to the ways of the world. It is a message that God's people need to remember, and should be used with care.

Paul was concerned that the Corinthians had made mistakes in organising the church and understanding the Gospel. They had become slaves to what might be called a 'party spirit' (1:10-17), which denied the most basic Gospel message of unity in Christ (1:18-25). People were beginning to become assertive, and make claims about what was right or wrong according to the preachers they had heard. Paul's intent was to remind these people that the Gospel they first heard was a spiritual message of power, and not an appeal to philosophy or intellect.

All this was a dramatic change for one who was the scholar of the Old Testament, in which foolishness was considered sin (Proverbs 10:8-23, Psalm 14:1, 53:1). However, this is a message not for the Jews but for the Gentiles, who generally applauded human wisdom and intellect. If we look closely, we will find that Paul does not recommend foolishness, rather, after reminding the Corinthians of their beginnings (1:26) he tells them that human wisdom is folly in comparison to God's wisdom. His intention is to remind those who claim human wisdom of their limitations before God, and it was an important message for the Corinthian church whose 'party' claims were a denial of Christ and the Gospel.

Paul had spotted that underneath all the problems at Corinth lay a potent combination of superior attitudes towards others, and a presumption on the part of some lizards they had the truth where others had not. We can almost imagine the tense situation in the church. One party claimed one thing and another claimed something else, with each one boasting that it was closer to the truth of God's will. As far as Paul was concerned, all of this was mere boasting, and he decided to expose it. In verse 28 he places all human wisdom and presumption into perspective; God is in charge of the universe from its very beginning to the present time. His power is such that '*no worldly person might boast in the presence of God*' (1:29), for He makes the Universe out of nothing, and creates redemption out of faith. This is what Paul means in verse 28, and it not abstract philosophy it is spiritual common sense.

To bring his whole argument the climax, Paul turns it to Jesus Christ. He is God's wisdom (1:30), far above all earthly wisdom and intellect, far above all party spirit and strife. In one magnificent phrase that should be remembered by all Christians, he rounds on all those who presume upon their own intelligence and wisdom, saying '*whoever boasts should boast in the Lord*' (1:31). There can be no pride in intellectual status or in arguments that create party divisions within the church. Christians only have one thing in common, and it is completely sufficient for their unity; their salvation through Christ Jesus (1:23).

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Human standards and faith (1:26,27)
- God's power to create (1:28,29)

- The new life 'in Christ' (1:30,31)

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V26 'fellow believers'**

As in verses 10 and 11, this translates the Greek 'adelphoi', literally 'brothers' but meaning the fellowship of those who believe.

### **V26 "human standards"**

This translates the Greek words 'sarx' which is often translated 'flesh'. If the word 'flesh' was used here the sentence would not make straightforward sense. The phrase 'human standards' conveys the meaning of the word better.

### **V28 'God chose things that are inferior and despised by the world, things that have no meaning, to do away with what has.'**

The Greek is awkward and does not translate easily; a word for word transliteration would give; 'God chose the insignificant things of the world and the despised, things that are not, to render ineffective things that are.' The critical Greek word here is 'onta', which roughly translates as 'having meaning' or 'existence'. I prefer to use the idea of 'having meaning' because this is easily understood by people generally.

### **V29 'that no worldly person might boast ...'**

This translates the text 'that nothing of all flesh might boast' which I take as referring to people who are 'of the flesh', that is, worldly.

### **V30 'because of what He has done you are in Christ Jesus, for God made Him our wisdom ...'**

The NIV keeps close to the Greek by translating in this way; 'it is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus ...' Unfortunately, this is rather confusing unless you realise that 'Him' is God, and it still does not read very well. The Greek words at the beginning of the sentence, however, tell us that God is the one who has made the work of the Gospel possible. For this reason, I have used a phrase that differs from the literal meaning of the Greek, but conveys this idea in English more easily.

## Going Deeper

This passage is as much a call to return to faith as anything else; it asks the Corinthians to return to the source of their faith to heal their divisions. It also speaks enigmatically of God's power to create and recreate (1:28), and it describes the Christian life as one that is 'in Christ' (1: 30,31).

### **Human standards and faith (1:26,27)**

In the next chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks as if the people at Corinth truly valued wisdom, but had managed to get the wrong idea about it. This begins a theme within 1 Corinthians, for as we continue, the letter appears to address a number of important issues that the Corinthian church had failed to understand. These include marriage (ch7), spiritual gifts (ch12), worship (ch14), the Lord's Supper (ch11) and much more. The city of Corinth was an important Roman port, and it is probable that the people there had a high opinion of their city and their reputation whether in trade or in intellect. It seems that this characteristic of self importance and self-promotion had become their weakness.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that when they first responded to Christ they were not people who had much wisdom, power or worldly status (1:26). It may well be that having become Christians, and received the benefit of a supportive Christian community, some had flourished and become successful not simply as Christians but in other aspects of their lives such as in their work, or in trade and commerce. The Roman Empire was a two edged sword. On the one hand, many people were trapped in the social strata in which they were born, on the other hand, it's extraordinary vitality afforded opportunities for many for advancement. Early Christian annals suggests that many Christians were able to do the latter, and better themselves. The differing fortunes of individuals are likely to have been a factor in the church divisions (though we will have to wait until later in the letter to hear more of this –see especially chapters 2 and 11), and this was, of course, a tragedy.

In reminding the Corinthians of their origins, Paul was doing several things. Firstly, he directed them to remember his own preaching which had largely been responsible for their conversion; and secondly, he drew their attention to the church's common heritage in Christ (see verses 30, 31). However, it seems that in these two verses of our passage, Paul wanted to remind the Corinthians that it was God who had enabled

them to be successful and defeat the oppressions of the world that held too many people captive. It was Christ who had provided them with the route to better things, not the Empire! Speaking firstly of the Corinthians, Paul said 'God chose the foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong' (1:27).

These words spoke to the hearts of Corinthian Christians, but they also reflected the basic principles of the Gospel, and this was Paul's theme. At the end of yesterday's reading, Paul described God's salvation in virtually the same way; 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1:25)! It certainly seems that this contrast, which amplifies the power and authority of God, is at the heart of Paul's thoughts here. The point remains true to this day, of course, and we can see this at work where ever people of faith find that their lives are renewed by the strength of God.

### **God's power to create (1:28,29)**

In verse 28, Paul takes this principle further than we might expect, and in so doing creates some confusion about his intentions. In order to illustrate the difficulties, I quote below some of the translations of this verse found in well known Bible version:

*'and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something' (New American Standard - NAS)*

*'He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are' (New International Version - NIV)*

*God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are' (New Revised Standard Version - NRSV)*

I suggest that the NAS is wide of the mark in suggesting that Paul comments about things which exist or don't exist (see notes above) refer to specifically to people. However, the NIV and the NRSV make more sense, but are rather difficult to understand. At the heart of this verse (see notes above) is Paul's realisation that the principle of Godly folly being better than human wisdom could be taken one step further. He believed that it was of the very nature of God not just to be able to turn things on their heads and turn folly into wisdom, but to do the impossible and create new things from nothing!

I suggest that in Paul's mind, he believed that out of the folly of Judaism, God had brought salvation in Christ as an entirely new work. In Jesus Christ, salvation was possible where it could not be found through Judaism. Redeeming faith did not exist in Israel, so Jesus died on the Cross for the salvation of all who would believe! So something new was established as the route to salvation, that is, faith, something not known before in Israel! Being totally new, this faith did away with 'what existed', meaning the old Jewish system of religion!

### **The new life 'in Christ' (1:30,31)**

It was quite natural therefore for Paul to continue by explaining the true nature of Christian faith. He describes this as found exclusively 'in Christ Jesus' (1:30) as God's new creation through Jesus' death and resurrection, and having nothing to do with the 'wisdom of this world' (1:19f., 21f.).

There is one feature of this text however, which is very interesting, for Paul describes the new life 'in Christ' in a quite specific way. He says that in this new life, Christ is our 'wisdom, and also our righteousness, holiness and redemption.' By saying this, Paul placed wisdom alongside the other more famous words used to define the nature of salvation. We are used to the idea that by our salvation we are 'made right with God' (righteousness), and that Christ has paid the price on the Cross for our 'redemption'. We are also familiar with the idea that God alone is holy, but through faith, Jesus leads people on a path of holiness (sometimes called 'sanctification') to make them more like Him. We are not so used, even today, to the idea that we find our wisdom and intelligence, indeed the highest achievements of our minds, through Christ, and Christ alone! Why, most university departments of theology or religious studies now ask their students to put aside their faith for the purpose of proper 'independent' study! This, of course, is the reason why yesterday, I spoke very strongly about the need to study the things of God from the standpoint of faith, and for this to be accepted in the academic study of theology.

But this does not affect just people who study and work with their minds. If Christ is our 'wisdom', then all of us will find that when we are liberated through faith, He can lead us on to higher intellectual, cognitive and mental achievements. God knows us, and He is the one who can 'transform our minds' (see Romans 12:1-3).

There is one more interesting feature of this passage. It is possible that there is a connection between these four characteristics; 'wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption', and the earlier description by Paul of the Corinthians, when he said (summarising), 'not many of you were wise ... not many were powerful ... not many were of noble birth ... but God chose the inferior and despised things ...' (1:26-28). Some

commentators suggest that whilst the first link in the sequence is the same (wisdom), you can then equate the idea of righteousness with 'power' (the power of God), holiness with 'noble birth' (meaning high ranking, and in the estimation of some, 'set apart' or 'holy'), and redemption with God's choice of something the world despises (see verse 28). This offers some interesting observations, but nothing as important as Paul's main point, which is that the call of God and the new life 'in Christ' is God's new creation in the individual, and it is more important than anything else. Certainly, it is more important than any disagreements, divisions and human squabbling (1:11).

## Application

There are a number of interesting points that arise from this text, and the first of these is about growth in Christ. The Corinthians had grown in a worldly way, and Paul saw the faults that this created in the life of the church and called them to return to Christ, God's foolishness. It is possible for any of us to go wrong in this way, and we have to guard against it. This passage suggests that we do not allow ourselves to be dependent on our own intellect and resources, remembering that God's 'wisdom' is always greater than ours. Of course, we will always apply our minds to the life that is before us and try to do our best to understand and interpret what is before us. However, we need to be ready to accept that God's ways will sometimes appear to stand on our own reasoning on its head, and it will also tend to contradict the world's priorities and assumptions.

Paul tells us also to be very cautious about our 'boasting'. Any of us may feel that when we have discovered something, we want to tell others. We boast about our achievements in many different ways, and at the very least, we sometimes want to make sure that we get our word in because we feel that what we have to say is important. It only takes a little to overplay our words and be seen to be 'boasting'! Indeed, if we did not, then one essential part of the way we communicate with each other will be lost. The warning of this passage is not about everyday conversation and communication. It is a warning to God's people to tell them that within the church, they should stand back from boasting about anything except Christ. It is all too easy for some Christians to claim that their way of being a Christian is right and others are wrong; this is mere 'boasting', and we must surely stand back from it. God alone is judge of our faith and the way we put it into practice, and Christ alone is the source and object of our faith.

One small yet interesting feature of this passage is the way in which Paul puts wisdom alongside righteousness, holiness and redemption (1:30) in describing the 'new life in Christ'. We have been cautioned not to be fooled by human wisdom, but we have not been told to avoid being wise. We are to seek God's wisdom as one of the essential features of a life of faith. It is important.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach you about God's value and human values? How can we get to know what is valued by God in this world?
2. Discuss verse 28. Can you think of examples of things used by God that are of no value to the world?
3. Discuss the four qualities of faith; wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption. Are any of these more important than others?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I am constantly amazed by the Gospel, because it is so contrary to earthly wisdom. For this reason, I find it hard to place as much emphasis on the importance of academic learning as some do. It is not that I look down on academic achievement, but for too many it becomes a god, a means to an end of becoming 'an important person in the church', and this is so dangerous. For example, it might appear to the outsider that a Protestant church cannot properly be led except by someone with a post-graduate degree, preferably a doctorate! What rubbish! Such things can be of great benefit, but they are no indicator of spiritual wisdom.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to do:** Read through this passage again several times and check out that you understand it to your satisfaction. When you do, then read it to a friend and see how they react to it, and see if you can explain it to them.

- **Something to pray about:** *Fast and pray for the transformation of your minds, so that you live by God's wisdom not human wisdom. Think about this and pray about this until you feel that you have a good grasp of what this means for you.*
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## Final Prayer

We praise You, O God, for the wonder of Your Creation. Although we can never understand everything about Your great creative work, we know about Your love for us through Your Son Jesus. May we never turn away from Your love or exchange mere ideas for Your truth; O God, our Creator. AMEN

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