

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 2: God's Wisdom Revealed by the Spirit -- 1 Corinthians 2:1-3:23

Picture Paul stepping off the road into Corinth for the first time. He has just come from Athens, where he stood on Mars Hill and matched wits with the philosophers, quoting their poets, reasoning with the brightest minds of the age. And by his own account, he arrives in Corinth not with his chest out but with his knees knocking. "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling," he later writes. He does not roll into this proud, sophisticated city with a polished act or a clever performance. He makes a deliberate decision before he opens his mouth: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

That is a stunning thing to say in a city like Corinth, where rival teachers drew crowds the way star athletes draw fans, where eloquence was a spectator sport and a smooth speaker could make a comfortable living. Paul could have played that game. Instead he stakes everything on a message the world calls foolish and a power the world cannot see. He wants the Corinthians' faith to rest not on the wisdom of men but on the power of God, because a faith built on a brilliant speaker will collapse the moment a more brilliant speaker comes along.

Then Paul opens a door onto something breathtaking. There is a wisdom, he says, that the rulers of this age never grasped, a wisdom God kept hidden and has now revealed. And he tells us how it comes to us: by the Spirit, who searches the depths of God and makes known the things freely given to us in Christ. The natural person, relying only on human insight, cannot receive these things; they seem like folly. But God has poured out his Spirit and given us his word, and in it we have "the mind of Christ."

And yet, having lifted them to the heights, Paul has to bring the Corinthians back down to earth with a sad word: they are still acting like spiritual infants. Jealousy and quarreling have broken out, the same old party spirit, "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos." Paul will not flatter them. He reminds them that he and Apollos are nothing more than servants in God's field, God's building, and that the only foundation worth building a life on is Jesus Christ. Read these two chapters and let them search you. Is your faith resting on God's revealed wisdom and God's power, or on something more impressive but far less able to hold your weight?

Group Discussion: Paul resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2), refusing to rely on lofty speech or human cleverness. Why do you think people are so drawn to impressive speakers and polished presentations, and what is the danger Paul sees in a faith that rests on "the wisdom of men" rather than "the power of God" (2:5)?

Personal Reflection: Paul tells the Corinthians they are still "of the flesh," still spiritual infants, because of the jealousy and quarreling among them (3:1-3). Where in your own life do you see signs of spiritual immaturity that you have grown comfortable with, areas where you have stopped growing up into Christ? Name one honestly.

Study Questions

1. Paul says he came to Corinth “in weakness and in fear and much trembling,” and that his message and preaching were “not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (2:3–5). Why was it so important to Paul that the Corinthians’ faith rest on God’s power rather than on human eloquence?
2. Paul deliberately set aside the kind of impressive presentation that would have won him a following in Corinth. Where are you tempted to build your faith, or your sense of a good worship service, around what is polished, entertaining, or impressive, rather than around the plain truth of Christ crucified? How might that leave your faith fragile?
3. Paul speaks of “a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory,” which “none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (2:7–8). What is this hidden wisdom, and how does the cross show that God’s wisdom is utterly different from the wisdom of the world?
4. Paul writes that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard ... what God has prepared for those who love him” (2:9). When you consider what God has prepared for those who love him, how does that hope reshape the way you are spending your one short life right now? Where are you living for what you can see rather than for what God has promised?
5. Paul explains that “the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God,” and that “no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God,” so that what we know of God’s wisdom comes by the Spirit’s revelation (2:10–13). How does this passage teach us where true knowledge of God comes from, and what does it mean that the apostles spoke “in words ... taught by the Spirit”?
6. Paul contrasts “the natural person,” who cannot accept the things of the Spirit and finds them folly, with the spiritual person, who has been given understanding (2:14–16). In what areas do you still find yourself thinking like “the natural person,” evaluating God’s ways by mere human reasoning? Where do you most need to submit your thinking to the revealed mind of Christ?
7. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their jealousy and quarreling and asks, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed.” He adds, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (3:4–7). What does this teach about the proper place of human leaders in the church and about who deserves the glory for any spiritual fruit?
8. Paul warns each builder to “take care how he builds” on the foundation, because the Day will test each one’s work with fire (3:10–15). When you think about how you are building your life on Christ, are you building with gold, silver, and precious stones, or with wood, hay, and straw? What is one area where you want your work to last?
9. Paul declares, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (3:16–17). What does it mean that the church is God’s holy temple?

where his Spirit dwells, and how seriously does this passage say God takes those who would damage his people through division and strife?

10. Look back across these two chapters. Paul moves from the foolishness of the cross, to the hidden wisdom revealed by the Spirit, to the warning against dividing God's temple, and ends with "all things are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (3:21-23). Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage. What is the single truth you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 64:4, the things God has prepared that no eye has seen; John 16:12-15, the Spirit guiding the apostles into all truth; 2 Timothy 3:16-17, all Scripture breathed out by God and sufficient for every good work; Ephesians 2:19-22, the church built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as cornerstone; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit