

# Weak and Foolish, Strong and Wise?

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Date: 10 August 2008

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's a great pleasure to be with you.

I'd like to thank you for your kind invitation and welcome. It's warmer in Parkville than it is in Doncaster, I can tell you today. I was out at 6 o'clock. It was lovely. And here I come. There's snow and ice everywhere. It's just amazing.

And I'm also pleased to be in the archive if you'd like to do that. I think that's a very good place for me to live. Well, I'm preaching this morning from 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

If you'd like to have your Bible open, that's page 926. And there's also, as Wayne said, a sermon outline in the news sheet.

It's one of the ironies of human life that when we think we're at our most wise, we are often at our most foolish.

[ 1 : 15 ] And when we think we are being strong, we are in fact being weak. What I've just described is actually one of the themes of the book of Proverbs.

Because in the book of Proverbs, God delights in punching holes in human arrogance and pride. And humans are so often arrogant and proud about their wisdom and their strength when in fact they are living foolish and weak lives.

Answer fools according to their folly, or they'll be wise in their own eyes. It's like cutting off one's foot and drinking down violence to send message by a fool.

Like a thorn bush brandished by the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of a fool. Like an archer who wounds everybody is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard.

[ 2 : 35 ] Or, this is the favorite verse of my dog George. Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who returns to his folly. My dog George points out that verse is repeated in the New Testament in 2 Peter as well.

Because what the book of Proverbs does is to point out the foolishness of folly and to warn us against living as fools and to encourage us to live as wise people. The book of Proverbs makes it very clear that those who think they are wise are the most foolish.

Whereas those who know they need more wisdom from God and receive it every day, they are the true wise people in this world. It's not those who think they're wise who are wise.

It's those who are humble enough to learn and particularly to learn from God. And if we get wisdom and foolishness wrong, the book of Proverbs tells us, we're also likely to get weakness and strength wrong.

Here it is from Proverbs chapter 30. Proverbs chapter 30. Proverbs chapter 30. Proverbs chapter 30. Four things on earth are small, yet they're exceedingly wise. The answer are people without strength, yet they provide their food in the summer.

[ 3 : 46 ] The badgers are a people without power, yet they make their homes in the rocks. The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank.

A lizard can be grasped in the hand, yet it's found in king's palaces. So while we turn ourselves and give our attention to our wisdom and our strength, what we fail to see is the foolishness and the weakness of our lives.

And Paul makes exactly the same point in the first part of 1 Corinthians in chapter 1. The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being said it is the power of God.

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being said it is the power of God. Paul is writing not to unbelievers, as a matter of fact, but to Christians who are confused, to a church which is confused, which is immature.

And he wants to point out to them the power of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. He says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being said it is the power of God.

[ 5 : 01 ] See, if I did a little quiz this morning and I said, now I want you to tell me when in the Bible is God powerful? You might give the following answers. You might say, well, when God raised the son of the widow of Nain, that is power, when Jesus raised him from the dead.

Or you might say, well, when Moses went through the Red Sea and God parted the sea both sides and Moses took the people through and then when Moses got through the other side, the seas came back and drowned the Egyptians.

There is the great power of God. Or you might say, no, it was when Jesus fed 5,000 people, more than 5,000 people with a bit of bread and a few sardines. Or you might say, no, the power of God was seen when God raised Jesus from the dead.

There is the great power of God. Well, Paul tells us you've seen nothing until you've seen the power of God in the death of Jesus. I want you to imagine you're going back 2,000 years.

You're outside Jerusalem. It's Passover time. Someone says to you, come and look at the latest crucifixion. You go out and there, between two other men crucified is the Lord Jesus, on the cross.

[ 6 : 15 ] Would you bow down and say, there's the power of God? You'd be more likely to say, something's gone wrong. Injustice has triumphed.

God has failed. The innocent are suffering. Where is God when we need him? You're more likely to say, why, there's the weakness of God, the failure of God, rather than saying, no, there is the power of God, seen at its most clearly, seen most clearly in the death of Jesus Christ.

To us who are being saved, Paul says, the cross is the power of God. And why does God choose to show his power in this way, in the death of a Galilean carpenter?

Well, Paul tells us he does that, because it's written, I'll destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning, I will thwart. See, one of the things which makes it most difficult, most difficult for unbelievers to become Christians, or for Christians to live wise lives, is because we think we know better.

And we have in our day, of course, so many scientists who get in the newspapers, because they think their science has disproved God. Or we have people who've been around the world for a while, and they know better than you young people today, and they know that there's no such thing as God.

[ 7 : 51 ] Or we have people who think they're very discerning and sophisticated people, they have very clear minds, and they know there could be nothing like the existence of God. Or we have religious people, who think they know better, and want to bypass the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The quotation which Paul gives us in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 comes from Isaiah chapter 29. The Lord said, Because these people draw near with their mouths, honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and they worship of me as a human commandment learned by rote, so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing.

The wisdom of their wise shall perish, the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden. For one of the tragedies of sin is that it blinds us. Sin blinds us to its reality.

Sin blinds us to God. Sin blinds us to the gospel. Sin blinds us to the way in which God is working in our world. Sin blinds us, most of all, to the power of God in the death of Christ.

To us who are being saved, it is, the cross is the power of God, for it's written, I'll destroy the wisdom of the wise, the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. So Paul continues, Well, where is the one who is wise?

[ 9 : 11 ] Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? And here Paul is saying, Well, where are all these wise people produced by our world? Where is the wise man of the Greeks? Where is the scribe, the educated Jewish teacher?

Where is the debater of this age? The answer is, Not in church. And why not? Because God made foolish the wisdom of this world.

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. A friend of mine was planting a church in Perth, and a Chinese woman became a Christian.

And then her husband was going to come out from China, and she brought her husband along to meet the minister. And her husband was a very, very intelligent, very able, very powerful person. And my friend said, Well, his heart sank. He thought, This person will never become a Christian. Eighteen months later, the husband arrived in his study, and he said, I know nothing. Please teach me.

[10:28] What an amazing thing for someone to say. I know nothing. Please teach me. But those who claim they know everything, those who claim to be wiser than God, of course, know nothing.

Even if they don't know, they know nothing. So in our Bible reading, we need to not think, Oh, I know this passage. I know what this means. We need to say every time, God, please teach me from your word.

Please be gracious to me. And I need to know. No. And I love seeing old Christians who are still reading their Bible and discovering things, as it were, for the first time.

Because that shows they have a humble heart. And if you don't have a humble heart, you can't learn anything. Where is the one who is wise?

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, why didn't the world know God through wisdom?

[11:27] Because only clever people would know God then, you see. God decided through the foolishness of our preaching to save those who believe.

Verse 22, For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified. Yes, it was part of the pressure on Jesus that his Jewish contemporaries demanded signs. Some people are convinced by miracles. Some people are convinced by brilliant arguments. Greeks desire wisdom. And in our day, I think in our world, we are so convinced of the scientific analysis and interpretation of the world that if someone does a miracle, we'll immediately believe them.

Not realizing, of course, that even Satan can produce miracles and does so to deceive even the elect. We've produced a generation who are suckers for the supernatural.

We think that a sign means something. A miracle must mean something. And I'm quite sure that if an angel appeared in church in about 30 seconds time, telling you about a gospel other than that of Jesus Christ, you'd listen to the angel rather than to me.

[12:41] You'd think, why listen to him? There's an angel with real feathers. Let's believe it. Paul is underlining the fact that if you get the cross wrong, you get everything wrong.

If you fail to understand the cross, you've missed the power and the wisdom of God. You've missed all the power and all the wisdom of God. But let me tell you, lots of people inside, even inside the church, get the cross wrong.

And I'm sorry to say, even here in Melbourne, lots of people inside the church get the cross wrong and don't see it as the power of God. Let me tell you how it works. Somebody will say, well, let's take this Galilee and carpenter Jesus very seriously.

They'll say, he was a victim of injustice and of political oppression. So what that teaches us is that God is on the side of those who are treated unjustly and who are oppressed politically.

That's what the meaning of the cross is. And you say, well, no, there's more to the cross than that. Oh, somebody else says, I know what the cross is.

[14:13] It's a sign that we should all suffer patiently, even under injustice. And we should all model ourselves in the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus and his patience.

Yes, you can say, that is true, but the cross is more than that. Well, somebody else will say, well, what the cross actually does is to show us how loving God is all the time. It doesn't actually achieve anything itself.

What it does is to reveal what God is like all the time. And we have to say, well, you're nearly right, but you're wrong. Because the cross does something because the death of Jesus is the power of God.

The great massive power of God is portrayed and expressed and achieved through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. What does the death of Jesus achieve? It achieves the power of God in the forgiveness of your sins, in rescuing you from the wrath and judgment of God.

The power of God in the death of Jesus achieves this. It delivers you from the power of sin. And it delivers you from the power of Satan. It is a powerful death, not a weak death.

[ 15 : 22 ] It is a wise death, not a foolish death. And only those who have been born again by the Spirit of God see in the death of Jesus the power of God.

And if the power of God is not in the death of Jesus, then you and I have no hope. Because Jesus may teach us with words of wisdom. Jesus may do miracles which heal many people. But none of that will help us unless the power of God is in the death of Christ. Remember, Paul here is teaching Christians what is true.

He isn't here evangelizing unbelievers. He's trying to help the Corinthian church to grow to maturity from immaturity. And he says, in this part of 1 Corinthians, if you get the cross wrong, you get God wrong.

If you get the cross wrong, you get the church wrong. If you get the cross wrong, you get Christian ministry wrong. And you might go on to say, though he doesn't, if you get the cross wrong, you get everything wrong.

[ 16 : 37 ] Because here is the truest revelation of the power of God and of the wisdom of God. And to miss the power of God and the wisdom of God in the death of Christ must be the greatest mistake anybody could ever make.

Such an important message for our world, isn't it? When we worship people who are powerful. Or even more foolishly, we worship people who are beautiful. We worship people who are clever. That little triad, power and beauty and cleverness, power and beauty and cleverness, of course, it epitomizes, doesn't it, the kind of people our society worship and want to be like.

That's exactly what we want to be. And that's exactly the mentality which God destroys through the death of Jesus Christ. But to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

And I love verse 25. For even God on a bad day is cleverer than we are. Even God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

That's how God works. This is a painful message for our world. A friend of mine was on mission to a church in the north of England in Cheshire.

[ 17 : 55 ] A very upmarket, snooty kind of church. And the church was most embarrassed because they had a working class vicar. And in that part of Cheshire there was a big gap between the snooty class and the working class.

And the church warden said to my friend, well, our church won't go very well until we get a vicar of our own class. She meant a snooty vicar. My friend said, well, if you won't receive the ministry of a working class vicar, you certainly wouldn't receive salvation from a Galilean carpenter.

It's true. Jesus made the same point in his teaching, didn't he? Matthew 11.

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you've hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father. Father, no one knows the Son except the Father, no one knows the Father except the Son, anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. It's because that is true, because God hides things from people who are too clever for their own good, that Jesus can say, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I'll give you rest.

[ 19 : 12 ] Take my yoke upon you, learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you'll find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Why is Paul teaching about the cross of Christ?

Because the church in Corinth got things wrong. What have they got wrong? Why they were following human leaders and not trusting in the power of God. Some say, I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Kephass, or I belong to Christ.

And I'm sure, from this book, that Paul was frustrated that people were saying, I'm on Paul's side, not on Apollos' side. It's a sign of an empty and vacant mind that people follow human leaders rather than trusting in the power of God.

It's the sign of silly minds that people want to follow Christian leaders and put all their trust in them. It's a sign that they're trusting human leadership and not the power of God. And Paul's remedy for that stupidity is to preach the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Paul here is not trying to convert unbelievers, he's trying to educate believers so they become mature rather than immature. And if that's the way God works in Christ, then Paul goes on to say in verses 26 to the end of the chapter, that's how God works in the church.

[ 20 : 34 ] For consider your call, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, 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. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not to reduce to nothing, things that are so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Why does Paul have to say to the Corinthians, not many of you were wise, not many powerful, not many of noble birth? Because of course the Corinthians were arrogant people. They were Christians, but they were arrogant about themselves and their gifts and their ability, their personality and their strength.

Paul is saying, get real, just look at yourselves. You're a bunch of nobodies. And God chooses nobodies to bring to nothing things that are powerful and strong.

See, how does God decide to convert places like India and Pakistan? The answer is, he doesn't start with the powerful people, he starts with the weakest people, the untouchables.

[ 21 : 40 ] He converts the sweeper class. Because one thing that the Indians have to do and the Pakistanis have to learn is that from the humblest people they have to learn the wisdom of God.

If they can't learn from humble people, from weak people, from people they despise, they'll never bow their knee to Jesus Christ. Christians often make a big fuss about influential and powerful people who become Christians.

Exactly the opposite policy to that of Paul and of God. I was very moved a couple of years ago in New Zealand and I was staying with a very successful businessman and his wife.

I was speaking at a Christian conference. So I asked them on the first night, how did you become Christians? And they said, well, it was a remarkable thing, you know. We had two daughters, they were nine and eleven.

And they came home from school one day and they said, mum and dad, we've got something to tell you. The two girls had been converted and by their witness and by their words they brought their parents to faith in Jesus Christ.

[ 23 : 00 ] That was a marvellous sign, parents who were humble enough to learn from their children. Isn't that a miracle? And so often the messengers of the gospel appear weak and feeble from a worldly perspective.

But in them is the true message of the power of God. Why does God do this thing? This thing, Paul explains in verse 29, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Or verse 31, so that let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. For if we trusted in people's wisdom or strength, we might boast in them.

But no, all we can boast in is God and his grace for us in Jesus Christ. For who could boast in the very presence of God?

For God himself is the source of your life in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. In order that, as it's written, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

[ 24 : 06 ] If you understand how God has worked in Jesus Christ, then you'll understand how God is working in the church.

And lastly, in chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, you'll understand how God works in ministry. 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 in human wisdom, but on the power of God.

Why did Paul have to say that to the Corinthians? The answer is that the Corinthians had a great tendency to arrogance and pride. They were boasting about their human leaders in chapter 1.

In chapter 8, Paul tells them, reminds them, that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. He's saying, you know, you think you know things so you're so arrogant. And you find that in church today, don't you?

[ 25 : 19 ] People think they know more than other Christians. I know more than you do. I know more than they do. And that kind of arrogance, that kind of self-seeking, self-promotion is so destructive, Paul says.

We only know things because God has revealed them to us. We can't say, I know this, I know this, therefore I'm better than those other Christians over there because I know better. And then the Corinthians were also very excited about their gifts.

Exciting gifts, wonderful gifts, spectacular gifts. Here's the gift that I have. You haven't got it, I have, therefore I'm more important than you. And Paul says in chapter 4, well, you've only got what God's given you.

Don't get too excited about it. And you see, we, like the Corinthians, get gifts wrong, don't we? If I say to somebody, you're very gifted, they say, oh, thank you. Oh, you shouldn't say that.

As if it's a compliment. Because of course, in the Bible, we're told, well, what a gift is, is actually something God gives you for the benefit of somebody else. And they're given not to make you feel stronger or better or more important, but so you can serve somebody else.

[ 26 : 26 ] And the gifts aren't actually about what you have, they're about gifts given for the common good, that is the good of the church. So in our society, we get gifts exactly wrong.

We think they affirm me and my ability. I'm a wonderful scone maker. Aren't I a splendid person or something? I don't make scones, by the way. But, you know, that's how we take gifts.

We get them exactly wrong, according to Paul, because gifts are for the benefit of others and for the common good. And the great tragedy in worshipping people with gifts is that if we have them, we feel wonderful, and if we don't, we feel a failure.

And it's dangerous to feel wonderful because we have gifts and dangerous to feel a failure if we don't. No, Paul says, the key to ministry is not our power, but our weakness.

I came to you in weakness and in fear and much trembling that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

[ 27 : 34 ] You see, you look at somebody who is gifted and you think they feel powerful. Let me tell you, gifts aren't like that at all. You ask one of those Olympic athletes, do you feel powerful with your gift?

They say, no, I have to keep practicing every day and when I'm about to jump or swim or whatever I'm going to do, I feel weak. That's exactly what gifts feel like.

I came to you, Paul said, in weakness and fear and trembling. From the outside, you look at Paul and think, what a great evangelist. He converted the world. Paul tells you what he feels like on the inside, weakness and fear and trembling.

So important to know that because when you're asked to do something in the church, you say, oh, I couldn't do that. I don't feel strong enough. Just right, says Paul. You shouldn't feel strong enough. You should trust in God's power to enable you to do it.

Feeling weak is no excuse for not doing something for God. Paul felt weak but he went on and did his job using the gifts that God has given him.

[ 28 : 37 ] Now, I must say, I feel a bit sorry for Apollos at this stage because Apollos is described in Acts 18.24 as eloquent and well-versed in the scriptures. What's Apollos going to do?

He's an eloquent person, a person with great gifts with words. What are you going to do if he has to be weak? The answer is, of course, he won't trust in his power but in God's power to work through him.

He'll know his gift is a gift from God, that he's sustained by God, that he needs God's power to work. Otherwise, his eloquence will achieve nothing at all. Back in the 1970s, God decided to convert some students at Cambridge University.

They were students in a college. If you were God, how would you convert some students at a university? Well, I'll tell you what I'd do.

I'd convert one of the professors. Then he'd get up and give his testimony and all the students would say, here is a wise person, I'll become a Christian. Or you might convert perhaps the chap who rose the boat, you know, in the college boating team or something like that.

[ 29 : 52 ] The great hero of this college will get him converted, marvelously converted, and then students will become Christians. Do you know what God did instead of both those things? He converted the porter, actually he was the assistant porter who lived in the lodge of the college.

Now, a college porter is the person whose job it is to open the gate, let students in or out, and hand out the mail. Not a very responsible job. But God converted the porter who then chatted away with the gospel to the students.

And lots of them were converted. A revival broke out, not by a strong leader, but by a humble porter who believed in Jesus and told all the students he met about the Lord Jesus Christ.

How typical of God to work through someone who is weak. Well, I hope this church is full of weak people. I hope this church is full of weak people.

Gifted? Yeah? Able? All of those things. Hard-working, no doubt, but before God, weak. Knowing that your only boast is in God and his mercy towards you in Jesus Christ.

[ 31 : 02 ] And the only good you can do in this world is by God and by his mercy towards us in Jesus Christ. The message is clear.

Powerful people and people who think they're wise find it very hard to be Christians. Powerful people and people who think they're wise find it very hard to honour Jesus Christ and the power of God in his atoning death.

Powerful people and people who think they're wise are likely to despise the church of God and the ministers of God. And that's why proud people and people who think they're very wise need to be humbled by a gracious God.

Paul says if we get the cross wrong we get everything wrong. Therefore if we get the cross right if we understand in all humility what God has done for us in Christ if we see in the cross of Christ the great power of God and the wisdom of God then we'll understand God and understand Jesus Christ and understand the church and understand ministry and understand how God works in this world. May God humble proud hearts in our world and may God encourage the weak and the humble and those who trust in his mercy in his son Jesus Christ.

[ 32 : 44 ] let us pray. Dear Heavenly Father please forgive us when we get the world wrong and you wrong and Jesus wrong and the church wrong and ministry wrong and ourselves wrong.

We thank you that you've promised wisdom to those who ask so we ask for ourselves as individuals and for us as a church that you would give us your true wisdom that we might see in the death of Jesus Christ your power and your wisdom and boast not in ourselves but in you.

We ask this prayer in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.