

The Getting of Wisdom

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. I encourage you to open the Bibles again at page 927 to our second reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 2.

This is part of a sermon series that we began two weeks ago on the early chapters, 1 to 6, I think, of 1 Corinthians. Let's pray. O God, your scriptures are for us to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

And we pray now that your spirit will reveal your wisdom for salvation through your word. And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. There's a best-selling book in the bookshops, indeed not only here but in other places of the world that I've noticed in the last few weeks, simply called The Secret. I haven't read the book. Some of you may have. I assume it's rubbish, so I haven't bothered. But the title is clever because the title plays on our element of curiosity.

We like to know secrets. And so there's part of me that's been tempted to pick up the book to say, well, what secret is it telling me? Now, I'm sure it's rubbish.

[1 : 19] I remember speaking to someone a few weeks ago who'd read this book, and that put me off it forever. But we like to know secrets. It's one reason why The Da Vinci Code was such a popular book three or four years ago and the film that followed it, because it pretends to tell us the secret of the things of God and Jesus and the Bible.

I mean, it's rubbish and made-up fiction. But part of its appeal is its attraction to what is meant to be a secret code and a long-hidden mystery about Jesus and the future after the Gospels of the Bible were written.

We're often frustrated when somebody we know has a secret, but we haven't been let in on the secret. And we feel a bit left out by that sort of secret. Sometimes when we're given secrets, we like to tell others because we like to gossip about a secret that we've heard about something.

Of course, children go mad trying to find out secrets. My sister, who's not much younger than me as a child, and she hates secrets, so she goes hunting for her birthday and Christmas presents through her house because she doesn't like secrets.

Even when the presents get hidden at my mother's house, she sometimes goes there looking as well. Advertisers, of course. Advertisers try to attract people to their products by telling us that they have secrets in them.

[2 : 44] For example, KFC has the secret formula of herbs and spices, which I wish would ever remain secret and nobody ever knew. And cosmetics say they've got secret ingredients to stop the ageing process and all that sort of stuff as well.

Perhaps the greatest secret is the secret of wisdom. The secret of wisdom, the meaning of our universe. There are myths, legends, religious books and traditions, religious stories, cultural stories from virtually every culture of our world that try to tell us about the quest for the secret of wisdom.

Where do we find that secret? That's what Paul is addressing in this section of chapter 2 today, building on his argument that we've seen in the last two Sundays as well.

What he's showing us today is that human wisdom and God's wisdom don't match. They don't even overlap. They're virtually polar opposites.

And indeed we find in this passage today a polar distinction and contrast between God's wisdom and human wisdom. Those who follow human wisdom, this age, the rulers of this age, who are perishing, natural people, compared to spiritual people, the mature, those who have God's wisdom.

[4 : 10] How do we come to be let in on the secret of God's wisdom? How do we get there? Well, let's see what Paul says about the getting of wisdom.

The beginning of chapter 2 he said, Now he says in verse 6, Now it looks on the surface as though Paul may be contradicting himself that he didn't come speaking wisdom and yet he did speak

wisdom.

Probably the contrast is dealing with style and content. Paul, when he said, I did not come speaking to you in lofty words or wisdom, is contrasting himself with the style of the philosophers, the rhetoricians and the orators of his age, who had all sorts of particular devices to proclaim wisdom, often going around, in effect, charging people to hear their message of wisdom.

Paul says, That wasn't me. My message is plain and straightforward. It's not full of wisdom style like the Greek philosophy of his time. But I did speak wisdom.

I spoke God's wisdom, as he says in verse 6 and 7. It is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to perish.

[5 : 43] But we speak God's wisdom. But then notice what he says about God's wisdom. Secret and hidden.

Literally a mystery and hidden. Which God decreed before the ages for our glory. Paul actually is using language of those of his day.

For the philosophers of his day would often speak about mystery religions or secret religions and so on. Paul says, Yes, God's wisdom has been a secret.

It has been hidden. But not so now. Not so anymore. Paul contrasts this wisdom with human wisdom in verse 8.

When he says, None of the rulers of this age understood this. For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

[6 : 44] The rulers of this age were the Roman leaders, the Jewish leaders, Pilate, Caiaphas and others. Who put Jesus to death. Often when Paul uses this sort of expression, he's talking about spiritual powers being the rulers of this age.

Here though, it's the human people who put Jesus to death as he makes clear at the end of verse 8. But they're part and parcel of the society. If Jesus had been here today, we may not crucify him on a cross, but he would be treated the same.

That is, the spirit of our age, the rulers of our age, the thinking, the wisdom of our age, this passing age, this fleeting world, is unchanged today as it was then.

And opposed to the Lord of glory. That is, if the human wisdom had realized that Jesus Christ was the Lord of glory, they wouldn't have crucified him. But they didn't see that.

And so they did. Well, what is this wisdom? What is this secret, hidden wisdom? Well, Paul is implying, at least, that it's to do with Jesus and his crucifixion.

[7 : 49] And he made that clear, as we saw last week at the end of chapter 1, verse 23 and 4. We proclaim Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

That is, non-Jews. But to those who are called both Jew and Greek, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. In sum, the wisdom of God is Christ crucified.

All through the ages, the Old Testament had looked forward to and prophesied about that event, but in a veiled way, in many respects.

The exact means of salvation was not revealed until the time had come for Jesus to be crucified.

We're so familiar with this message. We're so familiar with the heart of the Christian faith being the death of Jesus that we fail to see it surprise in the days of Paul.

[8 : 54] Paul is saying that when the Lord of glory would come, when the key of human, of God's wisdom would come, we might expect triumph and victory.

We might expect trains of angels and heavenly armies to overthrow the evil of our world. But we see Jesus Christ crucified on a cross.

Apparent defeat. Apparent humiliation. Apparent shame and disgrace and failure. But in reality, that's God's wisdom.

In the world's eyes, it's foolishness. In the world's eyes, it's stupidity. Failure. Failure. But in God's eyes, it's wisdom. The Lord of glory crucified?

Yes, indeed. God's wisdom. That salvation and victory for the whole world should come from a traitor's execution? Yes, indeed.

[9 : 58] That's God's wisdom. That a glorious and mighty and sovereign God would become a human being to die on a cross. Yes, indeed.

That's God's wisdom. It's not human wisdom. In human eyes, it's folly. The rulers of our age, of Paul's age, of every age in between and thereafter.

It's stupidity. Nonsense. Something to ridicule and mock. But in God's extraordinary plan, decreed before the ages, it's his wisdom.

That is, even before God said, let there be light. Even before this world was made at all. Even before the dry land and the waters were separated at the very beginning of history.

Even before all of that, God had decreed that the heart of his wisdom was Christ crucified. That is, God knew that what he would make would sin and need salvation.

[11 : 03] And before he even made, Christ crucified is the key to his wisdom. We often think that God made the world, saw it fall, and then began to think, well, how do I rescue it?

And eventually, after centuries of failure through the Old Testament, he hits on the idea of Jesus. Not so. It was decreed before the ages began. Before the foundation of the world, Christians were chosen in Christ.

And so this is God's wisdom. It's an extraordinary plan, really. We might think, well, why didn't God make it perfect and keep it perfect? Why didn't he have some other rescue means?

But God decreed that the wisest thing was Christ crucified. God's wisdom. Folly to the human wisdom.

But in God's eyes, wise. And from before eternity, he decreed it, as verse 7 says, for our glory in eternity in the future.

[12 : 07] From the very beginning to the very end is this plan of wisdom. For our glory. Our glory, not in and of ourselves, but our glory because it's derivative of the Lord of glory who was crucified for us.

That's God's wisdom. Far from human wisdom. In themselves, the human eye, the human ear, the human heart or mind cannot comprehend this.

We cannot discover in our own ability by seeing, hearing, listening, thinking, reflecting. We cannot discover this wisdom of God.

It's beyond us. That's what Paul's saying in verse 9. What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him. It's an odd quote.

It's a bit of Isaiah 64 and 65. It's not really an exact quote. But the theme is there through the scriptures. But the human heart, human ear, human eye cannot conceive of God's wisdom.

[13 : 13] When Isaiah had the vision in the temple of the holiness of God, his train filling the temple, and Isaiah was then called by God to be a prophet, he's given these remarkable words when he's called.

It's a terrible call in one sense. Isaiah is told to say to the people of Israel, make the mind of this people dull and stop their ears and shut their eyes so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed.

That is, the human ear, heart, eye is unable to comprehend and see the wisdom of God. Even earlier in the Old Testament, through Moses, God said to the people of Israel, to this day, God has not given you a heart to understand, eyes to see, or ears to hear.

That is, human ability cannot plumb into the secret of God's wisdom. Something that Jesus affirmed when he quoted that Isaiah passage, when he explained why he spoke in parables.

Our eyes, our ears, our hearts are unable to comprehend the wisdom of Almighty God. So how do we do that?

[14 : 30] How do we access? How do we find the key to God's wisdom? How do we solve the secret? How do we discover this hidden mystery? Well, it's simple, really.

It's not about our cleverness. It's not about our intellect or ability at all. God reveals it to us. Paul says in this passage in verse 10.

Sorry, verse... Yes, verse 10. These things, the wisdom of God in Christ crucified, God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. Unless God reveals to us by His Holy Spirit, we don't grasp it. We don't understand Christ crucified.

It's not an issue of our cleverness. It's not an issue of how religious we are. It's not an issue of how good we are. It's not our brilliance in solving a mystery like a mystery novel.

[15 : 36] It's rather simply a revelation to us by the Spirit of God. Revealed notice at the end of verse 9. For those who love Him.

Our response. The revelation by God's Spirit. Why? We say sometimes, or use the expression, it takes one to know one.

And that's Paul's argument here. The human mind doesn't know God's mind. What is needed to know God's mind is something like God.

Namely, the Spirit of God who is God. Part of the Trinity. The Spirit of God knows the depths of God's mind. And reveals the wisdom of God to us.

It takes one to know one. The human mind cannot do it. The Spirit of God can do it. That's Paul's argument in the next verses. For what human being knows what is truly human, except the human spirit within.

[16 : 35] That is, some form of human spirit knows what the human mind's about. But, in the same way, Paul says, no one comprehends what is truly God's, except the Spirit of God.

The only thing that can reveal God's mind to us is the Spirit of God Himself. The Corinthian church boasted in their spirituality.

But, as we read 1 Corinthians, we realize that their spirituality, their experience of God's Spirit, they claimed, led them into a maturity of ecstasy, of speaking in tongues, of rather exotic spiritual practices and experiences.

Paul, throughout this letter, challenges that view of spirituality. Not that those experiences are necessarily invalid, but they're not the essential or even the main work of the Holy Spirit.

As what Paul says here, similar to what he says later in this letter as well. The work of the Spirit of God is to reveal to us the wisdom of Christ crucified.

[17 : 47] I meet many people who are Christians, who wonder or doubt or fear that they don't have God's Spirit, have never had or don't experience God's Spirit.

But God's Spirit consistently is pointing us to Christ crucified. If you know that your salvation comes through the cross of Jesus Christ, then God's Spirit has revealed that to you.

That's a spiritual experience that you've had. Fundamentally important one, in fact. That God's Spirit has done that for you. It's not necessarily that having God's Spirit means some strange phenomena or experience.

Sometimes that is the case. But if you know and understand and believe that your salvation is secured for you through the cross of Jesus Christ, God's Spirit has revealed that to you.

You've received God's Spirit. God's Spirit dwells in you still, if that is what you know and believe. That's the spiritual experience that counts.

[18 : 59] That we appreciate, comprehend, because of God's Spirit, the wisdom of Christ crucified. Paul goes on to say, now speaking about himself and the Corinthians, we, including you Corinthians, have received the Spirit, not of the world, but the Spirit that is from God.

So that we may understand, and literally he says, what has been given by God. Not the gifts, which is this translation meaning spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues or something, but literally what has been given by God, namely Christ crucified.

You see, the purpose of the Spirit is not to confuse or bamboozle. The purpose of the Spirit is to reveal with clarity for our understanding, Christ crucified.

And that's the central issue. A person is a spiritual person if they understand the wisdom of Christ crucified. And no amount of spiritual experience will ever compensate for that knowledge.

As a result of the revelation of God's Spirit, Paul speaks. We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit. He doesn't mean they're a strange language.

[20 : 18] He doesn't mean speaking in tongues. He means simply that God's Spirit revealed the truth of Christ crucified, and therefore he speaks about it. He speaks the wisdom of God because of the revelation from God, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

That is, they understand because they too have had the revelation of God's Spirit and understand the wisdom of Christ crucified. The contrast then is those who are literally natural, unspiritual is this translation, but literally those who are natural do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit.

for their foolishness to them. They're unable to understand them because they're spiritually discerned. But in contrast, those who are spiritual discern all things. Not that they mean that they know everything, but that they understand the gospel of Christ crucified.

And they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. That's where you divide humanity, spiritual and natural. But not spiritual like our world defines it.

Our world defines spiritual people who do what they think are spiritual things, who maybe meditate or chant or wear saffron robes or something like that. No, that's not the distinction Paul is making.

[21 : 32] The spiritual are those who receive the Spirit of God, those who understand and comprehend and trust in Christ crucified. And no matter what spiritual experiences or practices or religious virtues that other people have, it counts for nothing unless the Spirit of God has revealed the wisdom of Christ crucified.

The role of the Spirit, you see, is full of clarity. It leads to knowledge and understanding. It leads to clear speaking, clear communication. It's not about something that's impossible to understand, not about something that's inexplicable.

The Spirit of God is revealing truth of the gospel. It's leading into truth. And remember again the surprise of this, that a crucified Palestinian Jew of 2,000 years ago, hanging on a cross can bring you or me or any person in the world now, before or after, into an eternal relationship with Almighty God.

It is madness when you think of it. Millions of people have died in world history, probably hundreds on a cross in Palestine, and yet this one man, his death, is so powerful that you and I, thousands of years later and thousands of miles away, by trusting in that event, are brought into an eternal relationship with God.

It is folly, when you think of it, in human eyes. You'd think somehow, you know, the cause of salvation would be vast victory armies from heaven, or some way that we become so good or moral or religious, but no.

[23 : 39] It's Christ crucified. It's not about our intelligence or our ability. The revelation of God's Spirit is available for any who ask.

Last Sunday I was preaching in a couple of churches, but one in the afternoon. There were eight people baptized. It was in a part of Yangon called Insane, which is a nice and appropriate way to describe Burma.

The event happened in a particular church that's meant to be illegal in that country. It was in the downstairs living room of the pastor's house, jam-packed with 60 adults.

Others couldn't even fit into the room, so were in a kitchen or sitting outside listening. When I arrived, I had to, the taxi drove right up to the door so that I wasn't seen by neighbours coming as a white person into that person's house.

Eight people were baptized. Very old lady, a young man, maybe 18, people in between. Extremely poor and uneducated people.

[24 : 57] For many of them in that church, Cyclone Nargis blew their houses apart. They live in bamboo huts. So the church got together and rebuilt them. It doesn't take long, I suppose, to rebuild a bamboo hut.

It's not the sort of place we would like to even live on a holiday. The church actually gives people bus money to get home on a Sunday because they cannot afford a bus, which costs five or ten cents equivalent.

Why were these people being baptized? Because the Spirit of God had revealed to them the wisdom of God that their life found meaning for eternity in Christ crucified.

One man I caught up with in India, but a Burmese man from the faculty of the college I was teaching at in Burma.

He's doing his PhD in India. For some years, Peter was a Buddhist monk. Shaved head. Not quite saffron robes in Burma.

[26 : 03] Why is he now a Christian? A pastor? A church planter? A theological educator? Not because he's clever, though he is, but because the Spirit of God revealed to him, while he was a Buddhist monk, the wisdom, not of Buddhism, of chanting, of spiritual discipline, but of Christ crucified.

One of my students from two years ago in India, who I spent time with again there as well, some of you here have helped fund his fees the last couple of years, and I mentioned him in the newsletter. Moya was orphaned when he was very young, brought up by an uncle, but he fell away. He didn't hardly know his sister, because the two children were separated when the parents died.

He ended up in drugs, four times in prison. Now he's studying theology. Not because he's clever, he has a good mind, but it's a bit affected by drugs.

But because the Spirit of God revealed to him the wisdom of Christ crucified, from a very rural and poor part of very northeastern India. And all around the world, these stories are multiplied.

[27 : 19] And you and I here sitting here today, why are we here? Because the Spirit of God has revealed to us the wisdom of Christ crucified.

That's powerful. You've seen a picture at the beginning of a former student of mine in China, who's one of the Olympic chaplains this week. He's quite a clever guy, in a way.

He wants to teach the Bible in a seminary in China, but very poor. Why is he a believer? Because the Spirit of God revealed to him when he was a teenager, after his mother had died, the wisdom of Christ crucified.

Stories abound through world history, since the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. It looks so stupid that we should follow a person who died on a cross.

It looks crazy that we give up much of our time, our effort, our money, our devotion in serving and following Jesus Christ.

[28 : 23] But it's the wisdom of God to turn Paul's life around on the road to Damascus. The same. The secret of the universe is no longer hidden and secret.

It's revealed in the wisdom of Christ crucified. And notice how God as the Trinity is all part of this. It's the wisdom of God demonstrated in his son's death on a cross and made accessible to us by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, unlocked for us.

not for us whose hearts or minds are clever, not for us whose whole way of life is religious and pious and devout, not for us who are good or earn it in any way, not at all.

It is simply God's gift giving us his son and giving us his spirit so that we comprehend the wisdom of his son crucified on a cross.

Have you received God's wisdom? May not mean that you've had some extraordinary spiritual experience but if you are somebody who trusts that Jesus' death on the cross is sufficient for your salvation for eternity with God, God's Spirit has revealed that to you.

[29 : 45] God's Spirit is still in you. You can be sure of that. The Spirit is not drawing attention to himself but always to Jesus and always to the cross. But what if you're not?

What if this seems a little bit of gobbledygook? What if you think this is wacky to think that this Jesus of 2,000 years on a cross really is the key to salvation? Ask God.

Ask God to reveal the truth to you. God promises time and again ask and you will receive. God is a good Father who will give gifts especially his Holy Spirit to those who ask.

So if you're not a believer trust God and ask him for the revelation of his Spirit. Ask him to reveal to you his wisdom which he will do because his wisdom is Christ crucified for our glory because he is the Lord of glory.

let's pray. Let's pray. Oh God our Father we thank you that our salvation that our meaning and purpose is not found in our own effort or drive our own intelligence or spiritual ingenuity but we thank you that you have given to us the key of your wisdom by giving us your Spirit and by giving us your Son to die for us.

[31 : 30] Help us Lord God to live lives that honour you that glorify Jesus and we pray this for Jesus' sake.

Amen.