

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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[0 : 0 0] I love stories. I always have. I was read a good many of them as a child, and I have read a good many of them to my own children. And one type of story that seemed to have early and endless fascination for me was that in which the character labored under some fatal flaw, some unfortunate quality that finally brought their undoing. There seemed to be lots of those kind of stories that I was read growing up. There was the very speedy but overconfident Hare, who in his race with plotting tortoise was so far out ahead, he was confident that he could even afford a brief nap and still beat tortoise. I could never lose to tortoise, but his overconfidence proved his undoing. He overslept, was passed by tortoise, and when he awoke could not catch him before the finish line.

His braggadocio was turned to humiliation by his fatal flaw. Or there was the greedy dog, ecstatic at the boon of a large bone in his mouth. That is, until crossing a bridge, he caught sight staring up at him of another dog with a bone. Could that bone be bigger than mine is? Not content with his, he greedily leapt at the other dog to get his bone too.

But the other dog was just his own reflection on the river. The river that carried away the one bone he had, robbed of his choice treat by his fatal flaw. Or there was the very clever turtle, who knew he was clever and so enjoyed that his great cleverness was well and widely known. So clever was he that he devised a means to fly. He directed two birds to hold the ends of a stick and soar aloft while he clung to the stick between them with his mouth. So singular was his success that the sight of it, much to the tortoise's delight, turtle's delight, garnered effusive praise from the earthbound animals below.

How clever turtle is to devise how to fly. But so high did he fly that it became hard to see who it was.

Who is that remarkable animal? Squinted one. Proud turtle, unwilling that it not be known that it was he who had done this great thing called out in response. It is I, turtle. But of course, when he opened his mouth to tell it, he lost his grip on the stick and plunged to his demise, victim to his fatal flaw.

[3 : 4 9] Well, whether or not you're familiar with these tales, certainly you know the reality of how such a fatal flaw can afflict us. Flaws not just unfortunate, but to our very undoing.

We seem poised for some happy ending, some salutary, even coveted outcome. Then the fatal flaw strikes, and those laurels of victory which seemed in reach wither.

The hand of bounty stretched out is suddenly withdrawn. So what is your fatal flaw? Are you conscious of any? Has it made its appearance as an early frost, blighting prospects, ambushing fair hopes?

Timidity that cost you that job opportunity. Perfectionism that cost you that prospective mate. Bluntness that cost you that once close friend.

Of course, it's quite possible that we are blind to our fatal flaw. Such a condition is common, and often a feature of these stories, isn't it?

[5 : 2 7] Adding a narrative tension. I loved to watch my girls' expressions when we got to the part where speedy hare, so confident that he, smiling smugly, lies down to take his nap.

You could read it all over their faces. They saw what was going to happen, even though the hair missed it. Oh, no. Well, whatever you think your fatal flaw is, and whatever you assess it has cost you, or whether perhaps you are blissfully unaware of any such flaw in operation, we find the Bible making a remarkable claim.

It identifies a fatal flaw that haunts all of us. Each one of us.

And one that costs us more than we could ever imagine. What is this fatal flaw?

And of what can it rob us? And is there any hope that it may be overcome? Well, this cluster of questions is the fascinating subject of the paragraph before us that we had just had read in Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

[7 : 00] It's in your pew Bibles. If you want to look on, you'll find it in page 952, chapter 1. The big numbers are the chapters, and then the littler numbers are the verses.

So let's consider it together to discover what disclosure it makes to us, and whether it does not offer us some word of hope in the face of its sobering disclosure.

So first, what is this fatal flaw the Bible speaks of, which afflicts all of us? Well, like a subterranean river, it flows beneath the surface.

Its presence runs all along our passage, but breaks out into view just beyond it in verse 29, little 29, little number 29, where the apostle finally identifies it and calls it by name.

Do you see it? I wonder if it comes as a surprise to you. Boasting before God. It rolls so quickly off the tongue.

[8 : 18] Boasting before God. But let's not hasten over its horror. Linger for a moment upon it and catch its enormity.

Boasting a swelling pride. And indeed, a swelling pride even in the presence of God.

Now, surely we must reckon this an extraordinary thing. That any being could maintain a posture of pride, a swelling self-boasting in the presence of an infinite, all-splendored creator.

Surely, the only rational, feasible disposition toward the God of unmatched majesty is that of the seraphim angels who hover in his presence, covering their unworthy eyes for the overwhelming splendor and crying out without waning or abatement, holy, holy, holy.

But to boast in the presence of God is beyond belief. It defies imagination.

[9 : 41] It strains credulity that such could be. And yet, the charge is that it is so. How could it be true of us?

And how came it to be? Here, the Bible unfolds for us a fascinating story, taking us back to the very opening of the drama of humanity and a fateful act with a fatal afterlife.

Scarcely had the creator fashioned woman and man placed them in an abundant garden and pronounced his benediction upon them than their paradise was poisoned.

Their freedom and joy in it was well nigh boundless. Eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden, granted their creator.

There was but one boundary he gave them. Only this one tree in the midst of the garden. Do not eat of that one tree.

[11 : 00] Then came the serpentine seduction. Has God told you what is right and good? You decide for yourself.

You are competent to judge and choose and appraise all things. You are fit for that role.

You take the scepter. You mount the throne. You be the ultimate arbiter of what is good, right, and desirable.

Those serpentine suggestions stirred and stoked a nascent pride. Yet it would not be the whole truth to say the serpent formed this pride, fashioning it ex nihilo, out of nothing.

No, he also found it. For these satanic seductions could only have appealed to a pride already present.

[12 : 16] The seducer breathed upon the embers, but they were already there, incipient, if dormant, in the human heart.

And what slept? Awoke. And nurtured on crafty flattery, grew. Yes.

Why should our creator tell us what is right? Why should not we decide? Yes. We shall judge for ourselves.

We shall determine what is desirable. We will be the arbiters of what is good. And so began, at our very birth, human boasting before God.

Ah, but that, you perhaps say, was long ago and far away. What does that have to do with you or me? Here, the Bible tells us that this act of Adam and Eve had an afterlife.

[13 : 40] It constituted a poisoning of the waters of humanity at its very fountainhead. This self-exalting posture of heart entered like a virus our very bloodstream and has been passed along our collective race ever since.

It is an assertion so remarkable it might strain our credulity, but for the fact that it seems everywhere in evidence.

So perfectly do we resemble our first parents in this trait of heart. To deny paternity would be to attempt to deny the seemingly obvious.

So ingrained has this characteristic self-exalting self-orientation become. We might warrantably call it our very nature.

Who can plausibly deny its pervasive presence? We are truly a self-centered lot even in relation to God.

[15 : 08] Who as creator and God ought rightfully to occupy the center of our lives? But we are usurpers of the throne.

We fancy we should wield the diadem. We are all deeply infected by a deity complex.

We would be our own God. Self-determining. And in the supporting stories we tell ourselves in which of course we feature as the heroes we stitch together a thick weave reinforcing our central place in our world.

Within our towering self-constructed cathedral buttressed by a thousand self-awarded accolades we carry on our accustomed and by now well-established self-worship.

Does this sound an overly harsh description? I don't know that it is. I know it's on the mark in my case.

[16 : 27] I find it so routine in my own life it has come to pass now almost wholly unnoticed but it's always there.

Why am I always more anxious that people will think too little of me than too much? For better or worse where does my eye first go in that group photo?

Ah there I am third from the left I was looking good or maybe oh no look at my hair I look like an idiot either way self-centered self-absorbed in any case the apostle in our passage refers to this whole complex of self-oriented self-exaltation as the wisdom of the world the phrase is in verse 20 of our text there in first Corinthians the wisdom of the world if you detect an irony in that phrase as Paul uses it you're probably on to something it of course crops up in innumerable guises Paul had been reflecting on some words of the prophet Isaiah describing the nation of Israel in his day and he saw it there it's where

Paul draws his quote from in verse 19 of our text it seems that Jerusalem of old was under threat by powerful menacing neighbors and God told them simply to trust him to keep them secure but like their first parents and ours they fancied they had a better plan no when it comes to power politics we are wise and discerning we'll handle this matter on our own and in our own way thank you very much but their own fancied better judgment would fail them as God pronounced I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart the verses from

Isaiah that immediately surround this one that Paul quotes in our text expound this wisdom of the world heart stance so if you're not there flip back to Isaiah 29 to just glance at this description it's page 590 590 in your pew bibles again big numbers the chapters 29 and little numbers the verses so in verse 15 you imagine you are free from God's oversight and so independent of him verse 16 you the creature the clay regard the creator the potter as in no way your superior shall the potter be regarded as the clay you deny

[20 : 08] God as your author the thing made say to its maker he did not make me and so in denying the author you sweep away his authority he has no understanding you in essence demote God and usurp his place the opening phrase of verse 16 sums it up well you turn things upside down this then according to the Bible is our fatal flaw the fault line that runs through humanity and indeed runs through each one of us a self orientation and self exaltation and that even in relation to our creator a boasting before God now it wouldn't surprise me if you find yourself thinking

I'm not so sure about that I don't think that heart stance toward God is true of me I don't see it well I confess I often don't see it either but then I disturbingly consider the possibility that it is indeed there alive and well but perhaps simply hidden from my awareness like so many of my flaws it lives and moves in my blind spot and is indeed all the more deadly like a hidden reef for its concealment from me if this indeed be our fatal flaw as the apostle here identifies it what makes it so fatal to us yeah yeah you keep calling it fatal why fatal can't we live with it can't we get along with it sure proud turtle took a pretty hard fall but speedy hair just lost a race and greedy dog just lost a bone

I mean how serious is this anyway it is serious the Bible tells us because not only has it alienated us from our creator and that proud usurpation of God's throne back in the garden is recapitulated every time we reject God's judgments preferring our own and strike off in our defiant or indifferent imagined independence for that reason it is serious but also and this is what the apostle points out in our text again page 952 so we're back in first Corinthians our flaw is so serious because it sabotages our prospects for reconciliation with our alienated creator and it thwarts our ability to know

God know God the apostle uses in a full sense of actually relating to God not merely some sort of theoretical knowledge of God by knowing God Paul means overcoming the alienation and restoring an intimacy with our creator and as the apostle states verse 21 the world did not know God through its wisdom that is to say humanity deploying all of the resources of its own sagacity and intelligence and instincts and intuitions and reason and mysticism and speculation and spirituality has failed to connect to God has failed to establish a reconciled relation to their alienated creator this is what

Paul is saying in that series of rhetorical questions in verse 20 where is the wise man where is the scribe where the debater of this age these were front runners of the world's wisdom the best and the brightest the top bracket if the world's wisdom could ever succeed if it could ever scale the heights and bridge the gap to a knowledge of God it would do so through them now these types are likely strange to us by wise Paul means the thoughtful articulate public thinkers who espouse some philosophy of life scribe adds a religious orientation and expertise we might think they would surely move the ball upfield on the issue of connecting with God as to debaters they held the special esteem of the culture kind of the rock stars of their day perhaps our equivalent would be our entertainment celebrities we parade in the media and so adore well the apostle parades this top tier of worldly wisdom and asks so how have they done on this score of connecting with God and the telling answer is they have not succeeded humanity has failed to connect with God by its wisdom now don't misunderstand the apostle here is not giving a blanket disparagement of all human wisdom no it's afforded us many treasures with which we fill books we fill libraries and by which the world has been made a much richer place no no no

[26 : 41] Paul's evaluation is narrow and specific as to the issue that surely matters supremely how can we know and relate to our creator and be reconciled to him on this all important matter worldly wisdom in all its best specimens has failed us why this signal failure on so vital a matter we might wonder because we are the victims of self inflicted sabotage our fatal flaw pushes us into a particular posture wholly unsuited for connecting with God we pridefully insist on being in the driver's seat in our encounter with God if our creator is to commend himself to us he must jump through our hoops commend himself to our sensibilities satisfy our demands as to how we would know him accommodate our scruples meet our expectations of him just how this plays out will vary from culture to culture even from person to person but as varied as is the expression the root is the same self exaltation in relation to

God we shall be the arbiters the apostle supplies two cultural expressions of this verse 22 these were prominent cultures in his time the Jewish culture he writes demands signs they will set the terms of the encounter if you God display yourself in this way we will grant you an audience do you see it the fatal flaw strikes again and as to the Greek culture Greeks seek wisdom this is our project what we are concerned about if you share our goal you're very welcome this is the job we are posting if you fit if you fit this job you're welcome to apply well for all their distinctiveness notice the self same root the self exaltation that insists that they be in the driver's seat we could say we even in relation to the creator but of course we cannot come to know

God that way not the true God merely at best one of our own making what an irony the creator makes mankind in his own image and we try to return the compliment by seeking to make him in ours so our fatal flaw sabotages our capacity to know and be reconciled to God now one might think this damage enough but the apostle tells us it has robbed us of even more for helpless in our self sabotage to connect with God God himself breaks through to us a word comes to us from him as to how to be reconciled to him what Paul here calls the word of the cross but tragically our fatal flaw again surfaces at this very word of rescue from

God in disposing us to receive it to grasp how this could be we need to understand something of this word of the cross you remember how we proudly put ourselves in God's place asserting we will be the ones to determine what is good and desirable ours shall be the godlike ultimacy we will do it our way of course declaring our independence from our creator the author and sustainer of life death becomes our portion inevitably for there is no life apart from God the creator and judicially for our scandalous defection rightfully brings upon us

God's judgment but if our fatal flaw proudly puts us in the place of almighty God the word of the cross tells us how God humbly puts himself in the place of criminal mankind in order that the creator might take our place he took on our humanity and with it in the person of Jesus took in our place the deadly judgment rightly ours that deadly price of our pride fully paid by Jesus death upon the cross the way is now open for us all to be reconciled with our creator this is the astonishing word of the cross the humble

[33 : 06] God substituting himself for proud humanity giving his life for those whose lives were forfeit that he might reconcile them to himself a more astonishing word from God could not be fathomed but how does this astonishing word of rescue strike those stricken by the fatal virus to those stricken by this deadly venom and of it perishing as the apostle describes them in verse 18 to them the word of the cross is folly the word of rescue from God strikes us as ridiculous it doesn't at all conform to our demands and sensibilities we have objections the objections will differ as it did the

Jew from the Greek a rescuer who dies at the hands of these nasty Roman Gentiles that he's supposed to save us from says the Jewish culture disparagingly not very powerful resurrection come on a rescuer who comes back in a body says the Greek dismissively not very philosophical and no doubt we could think of our own objections to the word of the cross but in the apostles mind they all spring from the same source we oppose it because perhaps first the cross challenges our proud self supremacy though in the cross we have the creator giving himself he is the creator and as such the sole rightful king and this cannot but cross our own pretensions to kingship much as the kingly pretensions of old king herod were threatened by the announcement of one born king herod didn't hate the thought of a baby he hated the thought of a rival and if we're honest so do we never shall a proud and self exalted race concede the throne without a sore conflict we shall fortify our battlements against such a claim you are mine

I have ransomed you dearly says the creator no I am my own we rebels respond furthermore the message of the cross inescapably challenges our own self flattering assessment of our own commendableness when God took our place that place was a cross the place of a condemned criminal and the cross is the most damning indictment imaginable for it tells us we have failed so signally in our relation to God that our life is forfeit before him things were so bad someone had to die that the creator himself had to take on humanity so he could give up his life in exchange to bring us back to

God does not gratify our proud penchant for self flattery the cross offers an account of our lives and the hopeless mess we have made of them that God put himself in our place and that that place was under sentence of death dramatically puts us in our place and it is not the exalted one of our liking and the message of the cross meets accordingly a bitter resistance our fatal flaw has worked up in us such an insatiable appetite for glory but the word of the cross starves it to death and leaves us with not a morsel not a shard to boast about we look in vain for even a single line in the credits not even at the very end in fine print we are says the cross a people in need of rescue and only the kindness of

God at great cost to himself can rescue us it's important to realize one need not be irreligious to take offense at the cross quite the contrary deep religiosity is perfectly compatible with offense at the cross indeed it appears religion is a natural habitat for self exaltation a boasting before God seemingly religious people are often most likely to regard their very religiosity or morality as grounds for boasting before God is this not God an impressive array of ritual or rule keeping so impressive can our own religion and morality appear to us that it is a puzzle to us why the cross is needed at all who needs rescuing certainly not

[39 : 20] I we smugly assure ourselves to such the word of the cross is gratuitous folly indeed okay okay so so the apostle is telling us that it is hard for us to receive the word of the cross whether Jew or Greek religious or irreligious our fatal flaw runs through all of us and makes it difficult for us even to stomach let alone embrace the cross but it seems like he's further saying that God makes it that way that it is so according to his wisdom verse 21 in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through their wisdom what's up with that he sets it up so we cannot get to him by our own resources what's the wisdom in that well what if

God arranged it so we could get to God and be reconciled to him by our own resources of our wisdom and our power would that not merely throw more fuel upon our pride it would simply give us one more thing and what a thing to boast about before God no no God designed his rescue in such a way that it would humble us break our inveterate pride and so it had to be for rescue is rescue from our fatal affliction the pride that is at the heart of our boasting before God there is no rescue that leaves our pride intact so there we have our impasse our only hope of rescue is the cross before which we must humbly bow but our fatal flaw has made our backs too stiff to bend what is to become of us is there any prospect of this fatal flaw being overcome what a grim account of the sorry state in which we are mired is there no word of hope held out oh friends there is and it is to these words of the apostle that

I have been eager to get if I have put you to sleep I am so sorry but please wake up just for a moment now while the word of the cross is foolishness to those perishing notice the apostle tells us there is an alternative but verse 18 but to us who are being saved this word of the cross is the power of God how is it the power of God because verse 21 through this word of the cross preached it pleases God to save those who believe yes it is a stumbling block to some and folly to others but glorious word verse 24 to those who are called to them Jesus becomes the power of

God and the wisdom of God for their rescue for those who are called what does it mean to be called well outwardly simply to hear the message of the cross is to be called to be told of God's provision and a savior and the offer to put your trust in him as savior it is a call to acknowledge I need rescuing and a call to take him Jesus and trust him as your rescuer all are called in this outward sense who have heard what the apostle calls verse 21 the preaching of the cross but there is another importantly different sense and the apostle uses it here to be called as he uses it in verse 24 is when hearing the outward call of the message of the cross something deeper happens within us instead of being repelled by the cross we find ourselves strangely drawn to it whereas before the cross seemed to us absurd or offensive or perhaps just nonsensical or simply irrelevant but then we begin to see in it something we had not seen before and our pride the very thing that denied the cross entrance begins to dissolve before it and melt away yielding to the cross access to our heart to hear the inward call of the cross is to begin to see it as wisdom not senselessness beauty not folly to have a sense of wonder engage our heart and begin to hold it if you have begun to see the cross in this way your rescue has begun wonder it's likely that this word wonder caught the apostle's eye in the scroll of

Isaiah for in the very sentence that Paul quotes from Isaiah in Corinthians that word occurred three times in the very sentence he quotes and we've commented on the context in Isaiah Isaiah 29 again a people swollen with pride and dismissive of God perhaps quite religious but utterly self absorbed a people ripe for judgment in short a people just like us they may draw near with their mouth says God but their hearts are far from me therefore continues God verse 14 of Isaiah 29 oh and we know what's coming next don't we and how the prophet Isaiah can thunder it too surely he will announce judgment after all it's well deserved but in this natural expectation we find ourselves astonished maybe you're looking at it there in the text therefore behold what fire and brimstone therefore behold

[47 : 13] I will again do wonderful things with this people with wonder upon wonder this is a wonder indeed instead of judging ruined rebels he rescues them taking their judgment upon himself on the cross that they might be reconciled when we begin to see the cross for what it truly is we begin to see it as wonderful thrice wonderful as says the Isaiah scroll wonder upon wonder upon wonder this is our hope in the face of our fatal flaw as strong as is our pride the cross can overcome it for the foolishness sorry as strong as is our pride the cross can overcome it for seemingly weak and foolish as it is for those who see it truly it is the power and wisdom of

God to save so let me ask you the word of the cross has gone out you hear it you hear its call its call to see your pride and need of rescue and to take Jesus and his cross work for your rescue the outer call that goes out to all of us but are you hearing the call within has the wonder of the cross begun to steal upon your heart and soften it have you begun to feel it dislodge and disarm your boasting in the presence of God your proud independence and indifference if so rejoice for the saving wisdom and power of God is at work in you you are on the road to rescue you are to use the words of the apostle in verse 18 being saved if this be your case

I would exhort you to a renewed sense of what the cross of Jesus has overcome and has had to overcome in your heart to bring you home to him and live in the fresh wonder of it but oh if it be not so with you if for you the cross of Christ remains a folly or an offense or dismissible do not lose hope yes our common fatal flaw has great blinding power but God can overcome it as the apostle himself well knew blinded as he once was as all of us are as he well knew and had experienced it in his own life and as he concludes our passage in verse 25 even the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men the word of the cross can prevail even with the likes of our proud race so put yourself under the outward call of the word of the cross listen listen to that call until you hear it within and begin to find it wonderful let's pray oh God we ask you to exercise your great power and wisdom ravishingly upon our stony hard hearts open our eyes for the first time or afresh to our need for you as savior rescue us from our fatal flaw let it not be our final state rather bend and break our pride and make us see the wonder of the cross amen amen you