

STUDY 11

The Gospel and Wisdom

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Paul wrote that God, ‘is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God’ (1 Cor. 1:30).¹ As we have examined the matter of the wisdom of God, we have seen that such a statement as this by Paul carries far more weight than may first appear. It would certainly imply that all the wise purposes of God find their focus in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20). If we look at the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3, we would understand that the intention of God is to restore, through Abraham’s seed, the blessing which was forfeited through Adam’s sin. God’s wisdom, which appears so foolish when compared to human wisdom, is actually affirmed through the power of the gospel as men and women find that the wisdom of God was always with a view to our glory and that his wise purpose is truly being effected. So then, Paul wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3).

The phrase ‘every spiritual blessing’ could possibly be better translated as ‘*the whole* spiritual blessing’. While there is no definite article before ‘whole’, the entire context points to this being the intention:

The Greek can be translated by ‘all,’ ‘every,’ ‘every kind,’ ‘the whole’ spiritual blessing. When the Hebrew equivalent for ‘all’ is used in phrases similar to Eph 1:3 it gives the noun to which it belongs an intensive meaning. The same may be true of the use of ‘all’ in Ephesians: the interpretation has to avoid any shade of doubt that the blessing may be a composite of many parts. There is no hint that God’s one full blessing should be split up into several distinct parts. The blessing given ‘in Christ’ and described in the following eleven verses is an indivisible and perfect whole. If any of its many aspects or dimensions were missing, it would not only be incomplete but distinct from the ‘blessing [given] in Christ.’ Instead of expressing joy in but one, two, or three feats of God, the author praises the one Christ (4:5) whose oneness is matched by the singleness of the total blessing. The totality of God’s gracious manifestation is extolled in the blessing of 1:3–14. This part of Ephesians is a summary of the whole message the apostle wants to give.²

That would mean that the restoration of the blessing to the whole world is found fully in Christ in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and [that we] have come to fullness in him’ (Col. 2:9–10). The whole covenant blessing is given, is restored, in Christ.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, Anchor Bible, vol. 34, Doubleday, New York, 1974, p. 78.

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John records:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,*³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’³⁹ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37–39, emphasis mine).

This promise of the Spirit is part of the theme of John’s gospel; it is also the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:14). But there could be more in this passage: the offer of drink by Jesus may be more than a reflection of possible events at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. It may reflect the promise of Isaiah 55:1ff., but that in turn may also reflect the cry of Proverbs 9:1–6:

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.² She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.³ She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town,⁴ ‘You that are simple, turn in here!’ To those without sense she says,⁵ ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.⁶ Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight’ (Prov. 9:1–6).

Could it be that Jesus is there identifying himself with the wisdom of God?³ He identifies himself clearly with the wisdom of God elsewhere:

Jesus described Himself as the wisdom of God. In Luke 11:49 we read, ‘The wisdom of God [said], I will send to them prophets and apostles.’ Comparison of this passage with its parallel in Matthew 23:34 shows that Jesus was speaking of Himself.

A further example of our Lord’s self-identification as the wisdom of God is in Matthew 11:19 and its parallel in Luke 7:35. In these passages Jesus described the attitude of His generation who were rejecting the counsel of God. He compared them to children in the market-place. John the Baptist had called to them and they had taken no notice. Now Jesus called to them and they again took no notice. In Proverbs wisdom calls in the market-place to the passers-by, but her call is disregarded. ‘I have called and you refused. I have stretched out my hand and no man regarded, you have set at nought my counsel’ (Proverbs 1:20ff; 8:1; 9:3). Luke 7:30 states explicitly, ‘The Pharisees and the lawyers rejected for themselves the counsel of God’ and Jesus commented, ‘Wisdom is justified of all her children.’ In Matthew the same sentiment is put in different words: ‘Wisdom is justified by its works.’ Jesus, the Wisdom of God, saw that His ministry was rejected by the Jews, but nevertheless it is justified by what it accomplishes in those who are the children of wisdom.⁴

This is greater than just identifying the *logos* (Word) of John 1:1–18 with the ‘personified wisdom’ of Proverbs 8. It is one thing to have a theological (academic) construct, but quite another to have a dynamic revelation of the identity of Jesus (1 Cor. 12:3; cf. Acts 2:36).

BLIND TO THE TRUTH

It should also be kept in mind that the wisdom described in the book of Proverbs, and so forth, was evidently not prominent in Israel’s life (any more than it is today). If the

³ See D. B. Knox, *The Everlasting God*, Lancer, Homebush West, 1992, p. 47.

⁴ Knox, *The Everlasting God*, pp. 46f.

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fear of the Lord had indeed gripped them they would not have suffered the judgements they did, and even Solomon himself would not have ended as he did.

If Jesus is subtly presented as the Wisdom of God then such statements as Matthew 7:24 ('Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them . . .') corroborate it. Also, Barth insightfully saw Proverbs as essentially one with the prophetic:

Because it stands in this unity with the divine patience and therefore with all the other attributes of the God of Israel, because then it is really the wisdom of this God, it can and must appear as it actually does in Prov. 1:20f., and again 8:1f., not as a logical-ethical principle but as a person, and obviously indeed as a prophetic person: 'Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates; in the city she uttereth her words' (Prov. 1:20–21). And therefore it comes about that the content of what it cries, preaches and proclaims is clearly nothing other than the well-known preaching of repentance, judgment and salvation, and even the wording might easily be that of a prophet . . .⁵

Thus, Jesus, and what he said, was rejected in the same way as the prophets of old were rejected (Matt. 23:34–39; Luke 11:45–52). 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?' (John 8:48).

This prophetic element means that there is a clearly established reason why what Jesus says is rejected. He enunciated it himself but did so by quoting the prophet Isaiah, whose call was to speak a word which would be rejected:

And he said, 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand."¹⁰ 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' (Isa. 6:9–10).

To comprehend what Jesus is saying is impossible to fallen humanity.⁶ God has given 'them up to a debased mind' (Rom. 1:28): 'their senseless minds [are] darkened' (Rom. 1:21). The parable of the sower shows this. The word is proclaimed, by Jesus, and the responses vary, but only some hearers evidenced a positive response. Plainly not all have ears. The message is in parables, not because stories assist us to understand, but because they actually expose the unbelief of the hearers. To perceive the issues of the kingdom requires more than a good storyteller:

Then the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?'¹¹ He answered, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.¹² For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."¹⁴ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

"You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,

⁵ Karl Barth, *CD*. II. 1, p. 428. To my mind, Barth effectively demolishes the notion of a mere personification of wisdom. Wisdom is God himself.

⁶ Whilst we may be uncomfortable with the way Jesus is presented (misquoted, quoted out of context etc.) in our society, we should hardly be surprised.

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and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them”’ (Matt. 13:10–15).

‘The secrets of the kingdom’ are literally ‘the *mysteries* of the kingdom’. The blessing of God is on the eyes and ears that see and hear, but unless it is *given* to see and hear that will never take place. Wisdom is crying out, he comes to his own but his own people will not receive him. There are those who do receive him, but that involves a sword being wielded: ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword’ (Matt. 10:34).

A GREATER THAN SOLOMON

In 1 Kings 3:16–28 there is the story of the two women who each claimed that the baby was her own. The story is simple, and is presented as the clear evidence that God has indeed endowed Solomon with wisdom (1 Kings 3:12, 28). To our minds it is perhaps too simple; do we expect Solomon’s wisdom to be demonstrated in a more spectacular way? The story also seems to have been well known far beyond Israel or any knowledge of Solomon.⁷ In fact in the story in 1 Kings, Solomon is not named, while both before and after he is named. Why would this story be inserted here? Could it be that Solomon is being presented as the point of separation within Israel?

In fact it is the people of God who are being judged here. Two mothers, that is, two peoples, are secretly hidden and must again and again be distinguished in its midst. The one cherished a living, the other a dead hope. But which is the one, which the other people? This question and the divine answer to it is the red thread which runs through the whole of the history of Israel. Does not the people with the dead hope constantly lay claim to have a living hope? Does it not stealthily creep into the possession of this hope, self-confidently refusing to renounce its claim and passing itself off as the true people of God? And how does the other stand, which is the true people of the living hope, but cannot prove its possession? Well, God knows, and King Solomon, endowed by Him with wisdom, will declare, what is good and evil!⁸

This ‘red thread’ at least started at Genesis 3:15, where the two seeds are set in conflict. The two women are always in conflict, the one pure and the other hideous in her true being. But it requires that a sword should be wielded before they can be discerned. The two women of Proverbs 7–9 have been calling, though their true identities are hidden to the fools.

When Jesus came the sword is wielded. Unbelieving Israel is exposed, the leaders actually accusing Jesus of doing his works by the power of evil. Satan’s kingdom, which they claimed as the kingdom of God, stands against the true work of the Holy Spirit. This proves to faith, that the kingdom of God has come to them (Matt. 12:22–32). The opportunity for forgiveness has almost passed (Matt. 12:32; 3:2; cf. Luke 3:3, where John’s baptism is with a view to the forgiveness of sins). The division within Israel is now focused on the person of Jesus and nowhere else (John 3:17–21). The

⁷ John Gray, *I and II Kings*, SCM, London, 1977, p. 127.

⁸ Karl Barth *CD*. II. 1, p. 434.

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demand for a sign, evidently such a wise move on the part of the scribes and Pharisees who would never want the chosen people to be led astray by a false Messiah, is actually evidence of an evil and adulterous generation. Nineveh repented when Jonah preached, and the Queen of the South came to hear and marvel at Solomon's wisdom. Now a greater than Solomon is here and they do not respond (Matt. 12:42). God's true wisdom is here and it seems utterly foolish to fools. It is a mystery. Ultimately the sword is turned against the shepherd himself (Zech. 13:7-9).

WISDOM AND THE GOSPEL

Luke 16:19-31 is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man appeals to father Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to the five brothers of the rich man to warn them of coming judgement. Abraham's reply is that 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead' (Luke 16:31). Not even a display of the miraculous will cause people to respond, even in the face of total and irrevocable judgement.

Only the proclamation of the gospel effects a transformation from death to life. In the face of coming judgement it is only the proclamation of the cross which will save. And it only saves those who have faith in the word of the cross, as the only way by which we can be saved. Yet the proclamation seems unutterably stupid. Take the way the Saviour appears in Revelation 5; the one who can take the scroll and open the seals, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, stands there as a Lamb having been slaughtered (Rev. 5:5-6). His appearance is marred beyond human semblance and he has no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him (Isa. 52:14; 53:2).

It is notable, even in the first century churches, how quickly that gospel is replaced by 'another' gospel (see Gal. 1:6ff.), one more acceptable. To the Galatians the change was to a gospel that could be measured by conformity to the Jewish law. To the Corinthians it was to a gospel that could boast a human pedigree (Apollos, Cephas?) and which would appeal to the humanly wise around them. But there is no 'other' gospel, no alternative word which can bring salvation in a more acceptable fashion, nothing that will immediately be accepted as 'relevant' to modern man and still give life. There are only counterfeits. And Paul declares the curse on those who preach a counterfeit gospel.

Paul strongly repudiated any view that identified salvation with the one who baptised the converts. It was not his business to gain personal adherents, since he was sent to proclaim the gospel and, what was more, he was sent to do it without attempting to make it attractive to the hearers. True power did not lie in the style of the presentation. It is the cross of Christ which is full and for us to attempt to do what only the cross can do is to empty it,⁹ to render it ineffective (1 Cor. 1:17). There may be responses but they will not be what God has determined for the salvation of the world.

The problem for preachers is that 'the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing' (1 Cor. 1:18, lit. trans.). And there is a constant pressure for preachers to give credence to the opinions of the unbelievers and to want to impress the audience.

⁹ The words 'of its power' are not in the Greek.

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But the intention of God is to destroy the wisdom of the wise and to frustrate all human discernment (1 Cor. 1:19). The humanly wise are left in their foolishness. They chose their own wisdom and were given up to it, conspicuously unable to relieve, far less remove, the guilt of even one human being. Over against them, God established his 'method': by the seemingly foolish proclamation of a crucified Messiah he saves those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). Let Jews demand signs from us to validate our gospel and let Greeks pursue their wisdom, we will continue to proclaim Christ crucified, even if it does cause reactions of shocked horror or amusement, since those called through that gospel, whether Jews or Greeks, know that Christ is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22–24). From the vantage point of faith it is abundantly plain that God's 'foolishness' is wiser than human wisdom, and God's 'weakness' is stronger than human strength (1 Cor. 1:25).

Testimonies by celebrities may be good, and stories of success may be true, but that is not what God is about. A simple look at the company of the redeemed will show that not many have any claim to fame on any level. According to the flesh ('human standards') our salvation is even now unimpressive (1 Cor. 1:26). It is not hard to see those who recognise that and who thus attempt to make up the deficiency. Advertising speakers as if they were impressive is common, but it is still an appeal to 'the flesh'. On the other hand:

... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:27–29).

By that which is foolish in the world, which is weak and despised and which has no being, God chose to do his work. And that is by Christ on the Roman cross, dying the abject death of a criminal. So it is God alone who is the source of our life in Christ Jesus. It is Jesus alone who is our wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption. The wisdom of God is in Christ Jesus. All of history climaxes in him on the cross and what is yet to appear flows from him. If this is humanly foolish, we still boast in the Lord (Jer. 9:23–24).

The Greek world knew the techniques and how to use them as much as does the world of today. The rhetorical arts were taught and could produce certain responses. But they were manipulative and they still are. However, this is not a criticism of technology. Technology is a tool, when it is appropriate. The issue is not that; the issue is whether we expect the techniques to bring results.¹⁰ If we do then we will focus on them and not on the apostolic gospel, indeed the apostolic gospel which constantly confronts us. Lofty words and wisdom may impress but they cannot convert. Only the mystery of God can do that, only God can bear witness to the truth of his own being (1 Cor. 2:1).¹¹

We should not think that by preaching *about* the cross we will accomplish anything either. There is a vast divide between knowing our subject matter and knowing Jesus

¹⁰ There is the danger that the technology, of whatever age in history, becomes a technique in *our* hands, rather than us being *God's* 'means'.

¹¹ It is not certain whether 1 Cor. 2:1 should read 'mystery' or 'testimony'. The two words are similar in Greek: mystery is μυστήριον (*mustērion*) and testimony is μαρτύριον (*marturion*). It could be that *marturion* draws from 1 Cor. 2:6 or that *mustērion* anticipates 1 Cor. 2:7. In the long run both lead to the same point.

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Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). To know Jesus Christ and him crucified is to know as one who has been gripped by him, as one who has been co-crucified with him, as one who knows the mystery and who is consumed by a passion to proclaim it. It is to speak as one who knows the word given at each moment and lives in constant anticipation that it will again be given and will do its (his) work. Hence Paul's request to the Ephesians:

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel . . . (Eph. 6:19).

The sword of the Spirit is the utterance of God himself (Eph. 6:17) and not, finally, of the preacher. That is in itself a cause to put no trust in our own abilities or powers, and they may indeed be considerable—or minimal. So coming in weakness, fear and much trembling, is not of great consequence. And not using persuasive techniques is no hindrance either, since the gospel of Christ crucified carries the affirmation of God himself, a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Faith based on human techniques, or humanly devised methodologies cannot last (1 Cor. 2:3–5).

No one rightly enjoys looking foolish before others, but knowing ourselves 'as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries' means that 'it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court' (1 Cor. 4:1, 3). Nor do we enjoy pain, especially when it is the pain of persecution by those you long to see respond to the gospel. But Paul also would not compromise the gospel by advocating submission to Jewish law, even though he could have escaped physical suffering by doing so (Gal. 5:11). The marks he bore were the marks of Jesus branded on his body (Gal. 6:17). He knew he could avoid persecution, as did others, by advocating circumcision. It would have gained him points with the still powerful Jewish section of the church and possibly with the Jewish establishment in general. But that could not be:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.¹⁵ For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! (Gal. 6:14–15).

The wisdom of God is in Christ alone and Christ can only be proclaimed as crucified, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, because he is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. So, yes, there is wisdom and it is for the mature, but it is not the wisdom of this age or its rulers. God's wisdom is a mystery which is hidden; it is a wisdom which God purposed before the ages for our glory. Obviously the rulers of this age knew nothing of this wisdom, for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of that (coming) glory (see Rom. 8:18ff.). They would hardly cooperate in the eternal wisdom of God. They did not know the things God has prepared for those who love him, since their eyes, ears and hearts can never penetrate those things. But we can know them, since God revealed them to us through the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6–10). And knowing them, knowing the wisdom of God, we speak only of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:20):

We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of

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everyone in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:2–6).