

**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

**POWER & WISDOM TO SAVE**

As I ask you to picture a powerful animal, what image comes to you? Is it the sheer size and strength of an African bull elephant, the largest land animal on the planet? Is it a silverback gorilla, said to have the strength to tear a person in two? Do you think of the powerful jaws of a crocodile, or a rhinoceros with its speed, strength and ferocity hurtling towards you? The ultimate apex predator of a great white shark? Or, for you, is a powerful animal associated with the speed and agility of jumping kangaroo or a running antelope? Lots of options, aren't there? How many of you thought of a dung beetle in answer to that question? Sounds a bit strange, doesn't it? But for its size the dung beetle is the strongest animal in the world, able to pull along 1,141 times its own weight. That's like a human being able to drag along six double decker buses loaded with people! Incredible! True power isn't perhaps how we always think of it.

And what about the other quality our Bible reading talks about here; wisdom. In this case let's talk about wisdom in terms of what makes something a wise decision or action. Is it about what is best for me? Is it what is best for everyone? Is it coming up with an idea or solution which no one else has thought of so that everyone else goes 'wow!' in amazement? Is showing wisdom, or making a wise decision, about being logical and rational so that when people work through it they can say, 'oh yeh, now I get it!?' Let's be honest, how many times do we see someone make a decision, be it someone in our lives or one of our leaders, and we think to ourselves, 'how silly is that?', and then it works out well? Wisdom is also something which is very subjective. Wisdom, like power, isn't perhaps how we always think of it.

I tried to find a good quote to talk about both of these things, and to sum up the teaching we have here, but unfortunately I couldn't find one so I came up with this myself (but I am not claiming to be wise!): For only in what seems to be weakness can we find true strength, and only in what seems to be foolishness can we find true wisdom. Power and wisdom are both not always what we expect them to be.

Power in what seems to be weakness, and wisdom in what seems to be foolishness. That is not only the point which Paul makes in our reading here, but we could also use that as a subtitle for the whole Bible. Think about it: how many times does God use someone or do something which seems to be weak or foolish,

but then it turns out very well? A young shepherd boy is anointed as king of Israel. A teenage girl from the backwaters of the Roman Empire is chosen to be the mother of God's own Son. An impulsive and bad-tempered fisherman is selected as the rock on which Jesus will build His Church. And, thinking about the person who wrote our reading for today, God called a man who had fanatically killed many Christians to become one of the greatest missionaries ever! None of that seemed very wise. Much of it gave people an impression of weakness instead of strength.

But in Jesus, God even outdid Himself in going against how we think of these things. Again, He came into this world born to a very young lady. Being born in a place where animals slept and ate, and the birth of the long-awaited Messiah and Saviour being announced to lowly shepherds. The first 30 years of His life we basically know nothing about. And then for His three years of public ministry He lived as itinerant, and was ridiculed, betrayed, forced away from some areas; popular but not powerful, revered but not safe.

And then, the ultimate contradiction when it comes to how we expect to think of God and His wisdom and strength; the Son of God, our Saviour, the Promised One, is put to death as a common criminal on a cross. A cross: a symbol of power not for the one who dies on it, but for those who use it to enforce their rule. A cross: as someone is hanging and dying there the message screamed out to the world is, 'you lost, we won! We're smarter than you, we're stronger than you!' So, Paul quite rightly here calls God carrying out His plan to save all people by having Jesus die on the cross as an offence or scandal, 'stumbling block', for those who wanted to see God show His absolute power, and as foolishness to those who believed that God would come up with a smarter way to do things. If we want a great show of strength that we can point people to and boldly proclaim, so that they have no choice but to accept and follow Him, then yes, the cross is weak. If we want a saving act of God which makes sense, and is rational, and there is no choice but to believe it, then yes, the cross is foolish. But as He did throughout Jesus' life on earth, and throughout His whole history with His people, God showed us that it is in what seems to be weakness that we find strength, and in what seems to be foolishness that we really find wisdom.

The power and wisdom to save. As He did so many other times in the Bible, God did things in the way that we didn't expect, but in the way which is undoubtedly best for us. And now, as we look back, in

faith, we can see that. And that's the point, and that's in part why God did it like this; so that only those who believe in Him are able to see what is truly happening here. Faith in God's love for us gives us the eyes to see power and wisdom where the world sees weakness and foolishness.

But what does this message mean for us then, now, here today? First of all, it is about how we are saved. That God chose to save us by dying on a cross, that ultimate symbol of shame and weakness, shows us that the gift of forgiveness and new life which Jesus won for us there is for everyone; from who our world looks as being the greatest to the lowliest. God, in Jesus, gave up everything so we could be truly saved. The cross shows us that there is nothing which His act of sacrifice for us doesn't cover. Jesus giving up everything to die this weak and foolish death shows us there is now nothing we cannot now bring and lay at the foot of the cross, knowing that His death gives us total forgiveness also.

And as great as this Bible reading is, and it is one of my favourites, sometimes the message in these writings is as much in why they are written, as it is in what they actually say. We gather, from both letters Paul wrote to the young church in the Greek city of Corinth, that this Christian community had some power struggles over their leadership, that people disagreed on how things should be done, people weren't fully respecting one another, and even that some new Christians were leaving this faith community because it had become more about people fulfilling their own wants and desires, rather than looking at how they could serve and reach out to others. Hard to imagine a Christian community like that, isn't it? (*sarcasm*) People are people, and we know this is how we still act today in all groups and communities, including, sadly, the Church.

The message of this reading into that community, and into our community today, is about showing strength in what appears to be weakness, and wisdom in what seems to be foolishness. Paul is telling us here that God did things differently to how the world expects, and that that is our call too. How does that look for us, in all parts of our life? To show strength in what seems to be weakness, and wisdom in what seems to be foolishness? It can be about forgiving someone even if they don't apologise; being more willing to move forward than to bear a grudge. It can be being prepared to try to understand and consider the views of others when they are different to our own; not that we always have to come to agree with them, but we can understand and work with them. Finding ways to work together in our differences, not allowing them to

drive us apart. Be fair in how we consider people's actions and words, don't just always jump in to judge them negatively based on our prejudices or preconceived judgments. As one little example; when someone cuts in on us on the road, rather than letting them know what we think in one way or another, let it go. Don't look at it as being weak and letting that person walk over you, look at it as, 'ok, they need to get somewhere in a hurry, I hope that works out for them'. As we speak to others, live with others, think about others, remember how God in His love for us has not been afraid to seem weak, or foolish, in order to share His love with us. Pray that in response to what we receive from Him we can have the same attitude toward one another.

For only in what seems to be weakness can we find true strength, and only in what seems to be foolishness can we find true wisdom. That's the message of the Bible, the message of Jesus' life and death, and the message Paul is bringing us here today. God chose to show His power and wisdom not in the way the world expected, but in the weakness and shame of the cross. And yet, in doing that, He accomplished a saving act which brought us back to Him in a way which no other could. In that cross, see God's love for you, and see His power and wisdom at work for you. In that cross also, see God's call for each one of us to take that same seemingly weak and foolish road for others which He has taken for us. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- How do you define the two words we have been looking at today: power and wisdom? What examples can you come up with to illustrate what they mean for you?
- How do your examples compare with how we show God often showing His power and wisdom in the Bible, in the life of Jesus, in Jesus' death on the cross? What similarities and differences can you see?
- Think about the way God has chosen to show His love for us, especially in the ways He shows strength in what seems to us to be weakness, and wisdom in what seems to us to be foolishness. Can you see why has God things the way He has done them? Can you see that it has worked out better for us and for all people because it was done in God's way?
- As God has come to us in ways that seem to be weak and foolish, He also now calls us to follow this example in how we treat others. How does that look like for you? What hurts are you called to be strong enough to forgive? What compromises are you called to be wise enough to make? How can you apply God's call and Jesus' example to be humble and a servant of others to your life?

Pray: thank God for the power and wisdom He shows to us, especially in sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. Pray for His wisdom and strength to be able to treat others in the same way.

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