

# 1 CORINTHIANS

*for*

# EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.  
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE  
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

*Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*

*Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*

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*1 Corinthians for Everyone*

*2 Corinthians for Everyone*

*Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone*

*Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone*

*1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone*

*Hebrews for Everyone*

*James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone*

*Revelation for Everyone*

*For  
Monsignor Liam Bergin  
Rector of the Pontifical Irish College in Rome  
and his colleagues and students  
in the grounds of whose College  
this book was written*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright  
2022

## INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.



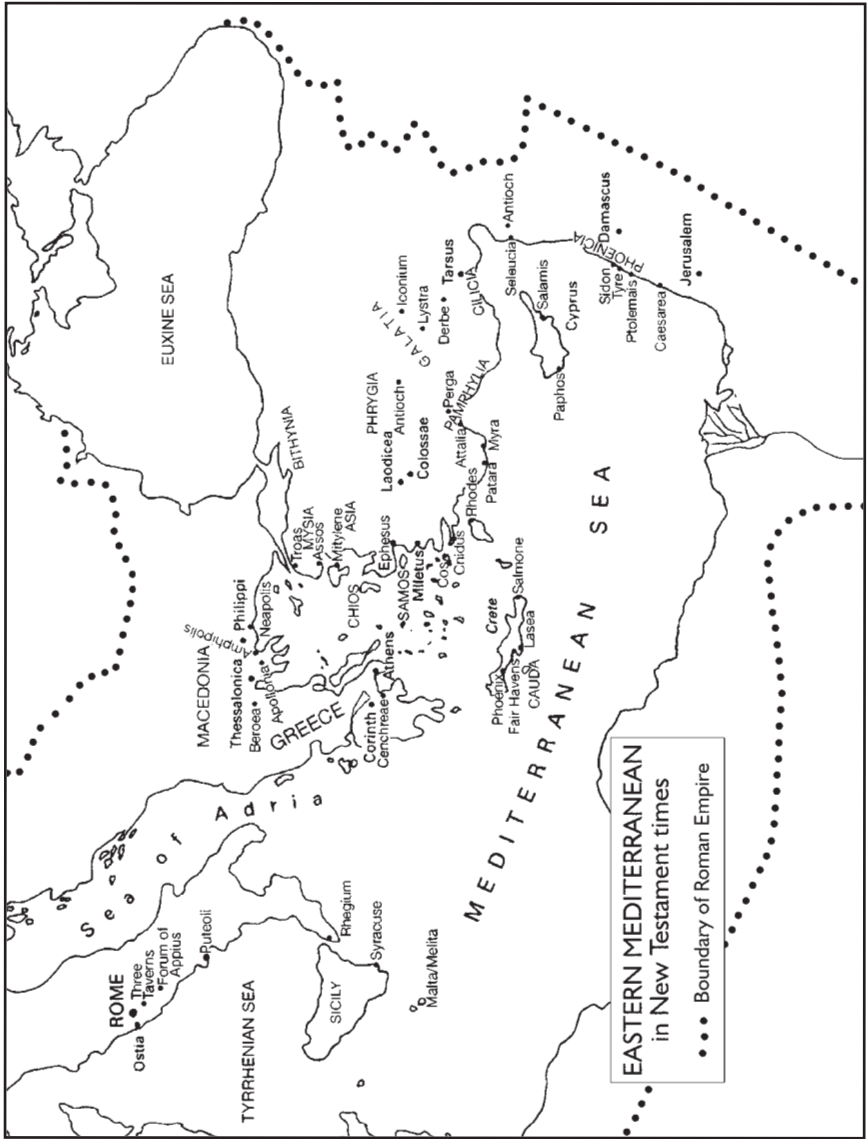
## INTRODUCTION

There are, of course, many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have tried, naturally, to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Paul's first letter to Corinth – a lively seaport where people and cultures of every sort jostled together, just like so many places in today's world – is full of wisdom and challenge. The young church there was as lively as the place itself, with as many questions and problems – and as much joy and excitement – as any growing church today. Paul's pastoral sensitivity and deep insight come together to make this letter one of his crowning achievements, full of good things for us to ponder and enjoy today. So here it is: Paul for everyone – 1 Corinthians!

Tom Wright



## 1 CORINTHIANS 1.1–9

### Thankful for God's Grace

<sup>1</sup>Paul, called by God's will to be an apostle of Messiah Jesus, and Sosthenes our brother; <sup>2</sup>to God's assembly at Corinth, made holy in Messiah Jesus, called to be holy, with everyone who calls on the name of our Lord, Messiah Jesus, in every place – their Lord, indeed, as well as ours! <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our father and Messiah Jesus the Lord.

<sup>4</sup>I always thank my God for you, for the grace of God that was given to you in Messiah Jesus. <sup>5</sup>You were enriched in him in everything, in every kind of speech and knowledge, <sup>6</sup>just as the messianic message was established among you, <sup>7</sup>so that you aren't missing out on any spiritual gift as you wait eagerly for our Lord, Messiah Jesus, to be revealed. <sup>8</sup>He will establish you right through to the end, so that you are blameless on the day of our Lord, Messiah Jesus. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful! And it is through God that you have been called into the fellowship of his son, Messiah Jesus, our Lord.

It wasn't long into the phone call before I noticed something different. It was the first time I'd spoken to this friend for some weeks, and whichever way the conversation turned, one name kept coming back. She and James had been talking over dinner last night . . . James was hoping to get promotion soon and would be working much closer to where she lived . . . perhaps I knew so-and-so who'd been at school with James? . . . and so on, and so on. There was a warmth, an excitement, and the conclusion was obvious; any minute now, she hoped, James would ask the key question, to which her answer was ready and waiting.

Well, it happened of course, and they are now married. But my point is to notice how people give themselves away by what they go on talking about, almost (it sometimes appears) to the point of obsession. It doesn't take long in someone's company, or even in a phone call, before you discover what's really exciting them, what is at the centre of their waking thoughts.

If we had any doubts about what Paul was excited about, what was at the centre of his thoughts and intentions, this first paragraph of one of his most varied and lengthy letters would soon put us straight. One name keeps coming up, over and over again, like a motif in an opera. It's good to remind ourselves where Paul's heart lay, because we can easily read the whole letter merely as an argumentative tract, almost bossy sometimes, setting the Corinthians right about this and that, as though his only concern was to lick them into shape.

It wasn't. His central concern, here and throughout his life and work, was quite simply Jesus. The name occurs eight times in these nine verses. Paul couldn't stop talking about Jesus, because without Jesus nothing else he said or did made any sense. And what he wants the Corinthians to get hold of most of all is what it means to have Jesus at the middle of your story, your life, your thoughts, your imagination. If they can do that, all the other issues that rush to and fro through the letter will sort themselves out.

In particular, he wants them to have Jesus at the centre of their understanding of the world and of history. Most of the Christians in Corinth had not been Jews, but ordinary 'pagans'. They had been **Gentiles**, believing in various gods and goddesses, but without any idea that history, the story of the world, was *going* anywhere, or that their own lives might be part of that forward movement. Again and again Paul wants them to learn this lesson: that they have been caught up into a great movement of the love and power of the one true God, the God of Israel, whose work for the whole world had now been unveiled through the events concerning his son. That's why Jesus is at the centre of the picture.

Look how, with a few deft strokes of the pen, he sketches a picture of the Christians in Corinth so that at every point their story is intertwined with Jesus' story. To begin with, God has set them aside for his own special purposes in King Jesus; that's what 'made holy' means (verse 2). I don't possess very many suits of clothes, but there is one which I keep for best, which only comes out on the most special of occasions. That's what being 'holy' means, from God's point of view; it means that he has set people aside for special purposes; and the people in question are expected to co-operate with this. That, indeed, is what quite a lot of the letter will be about.

But once they've been set aside as special, they discover that they are part of a large and growing worldwide family, brothers and sisters of everyone who 'calls on the name of our Lord King Jesus'. In fact, 'calling on' this name is the one and only sign of membership in this family, though people in Paul's day and ever since have tried to introduce other signs of membership as well. And the idea of 'calling on his name' links this worldwide family back to the earlier story of Israel, the people who 'called on the name of the Lord' in the sense of the Lord **YHWH**, Israel's God. Right from the start, Paul shows what's going on: in Jesus, Israel's true king, the world's true Lord, Israel's one God has become personally present in the world, summoning all people into his family. This is so central to his thinking, and to the life of the communities founded by his royal announcement of Jesus, that he has developed ways of talking about it that almost become formulae. Verse 3 is one such, praying that

grace and peace will come to them 'from God our father and King Jesus the Lord'.

As in most of his letters, Paul follows the opening greeting by telling them what he thanks God for when he thinks of them – using the opportunity, in the process, to hint at some of the things he's going to be talking about later on. Notice how he moves from what happened to them in the past, through the sort of people they are in the present, to the hope they have for the future, with Jesus at the centre at every stage. God gave them his 'grace' in King Jesus (verse 4). 'Grace' is one of those little words that contains a whole universe of meaning, summing up the fact that God loved them and acted decisively on their behalf even though they had done nothing whatever to deserve it, but rather the opposite.

The result of this 'grace' was that God's riches had enriched them (verses 5, 6). They had become a community of learners, growing eagerly in knowledge about God and his new **life**, able to teach one another, and so strengthening and confirming the original royal proclamation, 'the **messianic message**', that had been made to them. In fact, when it comes to 'spiritual gifts' (the special things God gives to people by the **holy spirit** to enable them to serve him and one another in ways they couldn't otherwise have done), the Christians in Corinth are as well equipped as anybody could wish. So much so that it has become something of a problem.

But Paul isn't talking about problems at the moment. God called them in the past, God equips them in the present, and God will complete the whole process in the future. World history, and the story of the Christian life, has a shape, and Jesus is its shaper at every point. Just as a runner sprinting along the track leans forward to go faster and to get to the finishing line quicker, so the Christian must always be leaning forwards towards God's finishing line, 'eagerly waiting for our Lord, King Jesus to be revealed'. There is coming a day – like 'the day of the Lord' in the Old Testament, only more so – when the hidden truth about the world will be unveiled; this truth will turn out to be a person, and the person will turn out to be Jesus. That's why it's the central Christian badge or sign to 'call on him', to pray to the father through him, to learn to love him, to know his friendship and love throughout our lives, to have his name always in our hearts and often on our lips.

When two or three people like that (or more!) get together, they have much to share, much in common. The early Christian word for that was 'fellowship' or 'partnership', and that's what Paul says they now enjoy: membership in the family that has God for its faithful father and Jesus, his unique son, as its older brother. This opening holds together a view of the whole world (God's world, with Jesus as its true Lord) and

of the individual (called to faithful holiness, equipped for God's service). It also brings together Paul's task (being responsible to God for the Christian fellowships that have come about through his work), and his gratitude to God for what he has already done and for what he will continue until all is completed. Writing this letter, in other words, is part of the process by which God intends to take these Christians from the one to the other, from God's past achievement to God's future finishing of the job. May God grant that it will have that effect on us, too.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1.10–17

### Beware of Divisions!

<sup>10</sup>Now I must appeal to you, my brothers and sisters, through the name of Messiah Jesus our Lord, that you should all be in agreement, and that there should be no divisions among you. Instead, you should be fully equipped with the same mind and the same opinion.

<sup>11</sup>You see, my dear family, Chloe's people have put me in the picture about you – about the fact that you are having quarrels. <sup>12</sup>What I'm talking about is this. Each one of you is saying, 'I'm with Paul!', 'I'm with Apollos!', 'I'm with Cephas!', 'I'm with the Messiah!'

<sup>13</sup>Well! Has the Messiah been cut up into pieces? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into Paul's name?! <sup>14</sup>I'm grateful to God that I didn't baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup>so that none of you could say that you were baptized into *my* name. (<sup>16</sup>All right, I did baptize Stephanas and his household as well. Apart from that, I don't know if I baptized anybody else.) <sup>17</sup>This is the point, you see: the Messiah didn't send me to baptize; he sent me to announce the gospel! Not with words of wisdom, either, otherwise the Messiah's cross would lose its power.

I was woken up early this morning by beautiful birdsong. Right outside my window some little fellow was chirruping, squeaking and whistling like a virtuoso musician showing off before an admiring crowd. Then others joined in. The trees around the garden seemed to be full of them. I hadn't intended to wake up quite that early, but I couldn't help admiring them and enjoying the morning symphony.

But as I put the coffee on, I reminded myself why they do it. The sound may be beautiful in its way, but what it means is: this is *my* bit of the garden, or the tree, and *you* don't belong here! It's a territorial claim, staking out a precarious identity in a potentially dangerous world. And as I thought of that, my mind went naturally to the problem Paul faced as messengers came from Corinth to tell him how things were getting on in the young Christian community. There was

plenty of noise, plenty of birdsong, plenty of squeaking and whistling, and it all meant the same thing: this is *my* vision of what Christianity is, and *you* don't belong here!

The way they were marking out different styles was in terms of different teachers. 'I'm Paul's man!' one would say, trumpeting his loyalty to the **apostle** himself, who had first told them the news about Jesus as king and Lord. But Paul hadn't been the only teacher they'd had in Corinth.

Not long after he'd gone, a wonderful speaker, greatly learned in scripture and able to explain it powerfully, had arrived. His name was Apollos, and we shall meet him quite a bit in the next few chapters. Apollos came from Alexandria in Egypt, where there was a strong Jewish community which included a great Jewish philosopher by the name of Philo. Apollos had been in Ephesus, where he had met some of Paul's colleagues (the story is told in Acts 18.24–28). They had helped him into a full understanding of the Christian **message**. He had then himself gone to Corinth (Acts 18.27–19.1), and was there when Paul came back to Ephesus (that's where Paul was while writing this letter). By this stage it seems that Apollos, too, had returned to Ephesus once more. In 16.12 Paul declares that he had urged him to visit Corinth again, but that it wasn't possible at the moment.

Anyway, we should not be surprised that there were some in Corinth who had decided that they preferred Apollos's teaching, style, methods and perhaps content, to Paul's. Go to any church where two preachers have worked side by side, or in quick succession, and you will find people comparing them. That's natural; but how easily it can pass into factions and rivalry. 'I'm with Apollos!'

But that wasn't all. Some in Corinth were saying they belonged to Peter. ('Peter' is the Greek word meaning 'rock'; the Aramaic equivalent was 'Cephas', and that's what the early church often called him.) We don't know whether Peter had visited Corinth himself, or whether some other travelling Christians had been to Corinth claiming to teach what Peter himself taught. But someone had made sufficient impact for another group in the church to say they belonged to Peter. 'I'm with Cephas!' (People have sometimes speculated about whether Peter and his followers represented a more Jewish type of Christianity, and Paul and his followers a version which had cast off Jewish restraints. This is almost certainly misleading.)

Meanwhile, there seems to have been a fourth 'party' – claiming that *they* were the real **Messiah**-people! Everyone else was following this leader or that leader, but they were simply following King Jesus! This, too, alas, is a well-known power-play in the church ('We've heard your opinions; now let me tell you what Our Lord thinks about it all!'). 'I'm with the Messiah!'

It's a sobering thought that the church faced such division in its very earliest years. People sometimes talk as if first-generation Christianity enjoyed a pure, untroubled honeymoon period, after which things became more difficult; but there's no evidence for this in the New Testament. Right from the start, Paul found himself not only announcing the **gospel** of Jesus but struggling to hold together in a single family those who had obeyed its summons.

But he doesn't just get stuck in and knock their heads together. There is a bit of that in verse 13, where he basically tells them not to be so silly: they are implying that the Messiah himself has been carved up into little pieces, or they are suggesting that Paul (and Apollos and Cephas, though he wisely doesn't say that here) is somehow on a level with the Messiah himself. But even these rhetorical questions ('Is the Messiah split up? Was Paul crucified for you?') make the main point, the point which from one angle is what the whole letter is about. The Messiah is the one who matters; and all others, from the most senior apostle to the youngest convert, are simply members in his body (see chapter 12).

In particular, Paul digs down underneath any suggestion that special significance was to be attached to the person who baptized a new Christian. He assumes that they have all been baptized, and he will from time to time return to this to make particular points. Paul took **baptism** extremely seriously. It was the formal, outward sign, before God, one's family, the wider community, and the whole church, that you were leaving your old identity behind and entering the new life of God's people in the Messiah. Baptism to the Christian was like crossing the Red Sea for Israel, at the time of the **Exodus**: it meant coming out of slavery into freedom – and responsibility (10.1–13). But the only name to be baptized into was the name of the Messiah. The person who did the baptizing was quite irrelevant.

The relevant fact – and here we get to the heart of it, as we shall see from now on – was the clash between the **good news**, the gospel, of Jesus, and the apparent power of human wisdom. Here we need to know something about Corinth and its public life, which will be important as we proceed. Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, and rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BC as a Roman colony. Since that time, about a hundred years before this letter was written, Corinth had prided itself on being a Roman city on Greek soil. It celebrated its Roman style of buildings, its Roman culture, its special links to the capital of a worldwide empire.

And it prided itself on its intellectual life. In our day, if a famous symphony orchestra visits a city, we might say that 'the whole town turned out to hear it' – not that every single person would go, but that



many would make it their business to hear the concert, and everybody would be talking about it and comparing it with other orchestras they'd heard. In Paul's day, a city like Corinth would do that with visiting intellectual teachers, men with a reputation as philosophers, instructors in the theory and practice of wisdom. 'The whole town', or a good many of them, would turn out to listen to them speak, and everyone would discuss what they had to say.

One of the words for such people was 'sophists'. That word has a bad sound to us, indicating someone who gives themselves airs, who is a bit puffed up with their own self-importance. And one of the reasons we think of sophists like that is because of this very letter. Paul is about to launch an attack on such 'wisdom', and to show that you have to make a choice between the world's wisdom and the power of the Messiah's cross.

But the key point here is this: the 'sophists' who travelled around the ancient world were keen on making **disciples** for themselves, and their followers often quarrelled and scrapped among themselves as to which teacher was the greatest. Paul has realized, with the report from the family of Chloe, visiting him in Ephesus, that the Christians in Corinth have begun to treat him, Apollos, Peter and even King Jesus himself, as a bunch of teachers to be played off against one another. And that is to miss the whole point. The church still (God help us!) sometimes makes the same mistake today.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1.18–25

### God's Folly

<sup>18</sup>The word of the cross, you see, is madness to people who are being destroyed. But to us – those who are being saved – it is God's power.

<sup>19</sup>This is what the Bible says, after all:

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
the shrewdness of the clever I'll abolish.

<sup>20</sup>Where is the wise person? Where is the educated person? Where is the debater of this present age? Don't you see that God has turned the world's wisdom into folly? <sup>21</sup>This is how it's happened: in God's wisdom, the world didn't know God through wisdom, so it gave God pleasure, through the folly of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>Jews look for signs, you see, and Greeks search for wisdom; <sup>23</sup>but we announce the crucified Messiah, a scandal to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, the Messiah – God's power and God's wisdom. <sup>25</sup> God's folly is wiser than humans, you see, and God's weakness is stronger than humans.

On 15 March 44 BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated in Rome, a mile or so away from where I am writing these words. His killers were a group of conservative Republicans who thought, with good reason, that Caesar was planning to make himself king of Rome – something the city had set its face against for hundreds of years.

Thousands of people who know little ancient history know about this incident because of Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. One of the most famous scenes in that play is when, after the murder, the leading conspirator, Marcus Brutus, steps forward to explain to the anxious crowd why it was necessary, for the good of the state, that Caesar should have been killed. He speaks in flat, straightforward, simple prose. His sentences plod along, clear enough in their way, but without life, energy or passion. The crowd are more or less convinced, but not excited.

Then there steps forward a very different man. Mark Antony was a friend of Caesar, and begins by saying he's come to bury Caesar, not to praise him; he isn't trying, he says, to argue against Brutus and what he and the others have done, just to do the decent thing by his friend. But already, in Shakespeare's magic lines, Antony's speech begins to move us. It is poetry. It dances, casts a spell, entrances the crowd. Antony, well aware of what he is doing, disclaims all such artistry: 'I am no orator, as Brutus is', he protests, even while charming the birds out of the trees in a way that poor, pedestrian Brutus could not have imagined. By the end of the speech the crowd has been pulled right round, ready to do whatever Antony suggests. It is the turning-point in the play, and, in a measure, in the actual history of Rome.

There are two moments in Paul's writings where (though with very different intent) he plays the same trick as Mark Antony. One is 2 Corinthians 11, where he constructs an upside-down list of his 'achievements', which only mentions his failures. The other is the section of the present letter which opens with the passage now before us.

He is contrasting 'the wisdom of the world' with 'the wisdom of God'. His basic claim is that the **message** about the **Messiah** and his cross carries a power of quite a different sort to the power of human rhetoric, with its showy style designed to entertain the ear and so gain an undeserved hearing for a merely human message. But, in making this point, he himself writes a paragraph of such wonderfully flowing and balanced rhetoric that one can only assume he was deliberately teasing them, perhaps hoping to make, by humour and irony, the deadly serious point underneath.

The point is that when Paul came into a pagan city that prided itself on its intellectual and cultural life, and stood up to speak about Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans but raised from the dead by God, and who was now the Lord of the world, summoning

people to faithful obedience, he knew what people would think. This was, and is, the craziest message anybody could imagine. This wasn't a smart new philosophy; it was madness. It wasn't an appeal to high culture. It was news of an executed criminal from a despised race.

Nor would the Jewish people themselves enjoy it. As Paul knew, it was a 'scandal' to them. (The word 'scandal', in his world, meant 'something that trips someone up'. No Jew of the time was expecting a Messiah who would be executed by Rome; a Messiah ought to be defeating the pagans, not being killed by them!) Paul had no illusions, then, about the **gospel** message, the royal announcement of King Jesus. Simply to make the announcement, to tell the story of Jesus and his cross, was to invite people to mock.

So when he announced it, when he stood up in the synagogue or the marketplace or the debating-chamber, he didn't use clever words to trick people into thinking they believed it because they enjoyed his speaking style. Now, writing this letter, looking back on his initial announcement, he can for a moment spin some good sentences together, to tease them into seeing the point. But he didn't do that when making the original proclamation. The cross had to do its own work. Simply telling the story released a power of quite a different sort from any power that human speech could have: God's power, beside which all human power looks weak; God's wisdom, beside which all human learning looks like folly.

Paul says it the other way round, to make the point with stunning rhetorical effect: God's folly is wiser than humans, and God's weakness is stronger than humans! Of course, it's very easy for humans, when they believe the gospel, to turn it into a way of inflating their own personal or political power, or showing off how clever they are. But to do so is to undermine the very point of the message. The Christian **good news** is all about God dying on a rubbish-heap at the wrong end of the Empire. It's all about God babbling nonsense to a room full of philosophers. It's all about the true God confronting the world of posturing, power and prestige, and overthrowing it in order to set up his own **kingdom**, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more so. Think back to Jesus himself, and the people he befriended, and ask yourself whether Paul is not being utterly loyal to his master.

In other words, as he says in Romans 1.16, the gospel, the royal announcement that Jesus is Lord, because God has raised him from the dead, is 'God's power for salvation to those who believe.' When this announcement is made, people discover to their astonishment that things change. Lives change. Human hearts change. Situations change. New communities come into being, consisting of people grasped by

the message, believing it's true despite everything, falling in love with the God they find to be alive in this Jesus, giving Jesus their supreme loyalty. That is the evidence Paul has in mind. 'To us who are being saved, it is God's power.' That is as true in the twenty-first century as it was in the first – however much people today, exactly as in Paul's day, defend their own power and prestige by declaring that it's all folly.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1.26–31

### Boasting in the Lord

<sup>26</sup>Think back to your own call, my brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise in human terms. Not many of you were powerful. Not many were nobly born. <sup>27</sup>But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup>God chose the insignificant and despised things of the world – yes, even things that don't exist! – to abolish the power of the things that do exist, <sup>29</sup>so that no creature could boast in God's presence. <sup>30</sup>Who and what you now are is a gift from God in Messiah Jesus, who has become for us God's wisdom – and righteousness, sanctification and redemption as well; <sup>31</sup>so that, as the Bible puts it, 'Anyone who boasts should boast in the Lord.'

There is a true but sad story about Cosmo Gordon Lang, who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1928 to 1942. In his day there was no compulsory retirement age for archbishops; but, when he reached his late seventies, realizing that he was becoming physically frail, he decided to leave office. But, in a revealing remark to a colleague, he showed his real fear, a fear which one might have hoped an archbishop would long since have outgrown: 'Having been Somebody,' he remarked, 'I shall now be Nobody.'

The world is full of 'somebodies' and 'nobodies', and it does neither of them any good. That's not the way God intended it to be. Every human being, man, woman, child and even unborn child, bears the image and likeness of God, and has neither more nor less dignity because some other people have heard of them, look up to them or think they're special. But in most parts of the world, at most periods of history – and, as the story shows, often enough in the church itself – people feel that it's better to be 'somebody'. The cult of fame has reached monstrous proportions in recent days, to the absurd point where many people are now famous for being famous. We know their names, we recognize their faces, but can't remember whether they are footballers, film stars or fashion models. Or perhaps even archbishops.

Corinth, as a proud Roman city, was exactly the sort of place where people would look up to the ‘somebodies’, and do their best to join them. Then, as now, there were the obvious routes to fame: political power, and royal or noble birth. And, as we’ve seen (though this doesn’t hold for all cultures), Corinth paid special attention to people who could speak well, public rhetoricians, lawyers and the like. The wise, the powerful, the noble: these were the ‘somebodies’ in Corinth.

And Paul reminds his readers that most of them were, on the same scale, ‘nobodies’. When he first came to town and announced the **gospel** of King Jesus as Lord, and they believed it, most of them weren’t among the ‘wise’ whom society looked up to. Most of them didn’t have any social power (though Erastus, the city treasurer, is mentioned as a Corinthian Christian in Romans 16.23). Most of them didn’t come from well-known, ‘noble’ families.

‘But God . . .’ Those are some of Paul’s favourite words. He often describes a human situation or problem and then takes delight in showing that God has stepped in and done something to change it drastically. They were ‘nobodies’, but God has made them ‘somebodies’. Not the sort of ‘somebodies’ the world would recognize as such, but the only sort that mattered. And what is important in this paragraph is the fact that God has taken the initiative in it all. The Christian gospel is a matter of grace from start to finish. God chose these Corinthian ‘nobodies’ (verses 27, 28); God ‘called’ them through Paul’s announcement of the crucified Jesus as Lord (verse 26; the word ‘call’ is Paul’s regular word for what we sometimes call ‘conversion’); God gave them the status in his eyes that the **Messiah** himself has (verse 30). They are who they are, as he says in a rather shorthand way, ‘from God in the Messiah’ (verse 30). This is the same sequence (chosen, called, justified) as Paul sketches in the famous summary in Romans 8.29–30, though there he extends the sequence backwards to God’s original plan and forwards to ultimate glorification as well.

The result of it all, of course, is that they have nothing to boast of. As he says later in the letter (4.7), they have nothing that they haven’t received as a gift; and if someone gives you a present you didn’t deserve, you haven’t got anything to boast about. This is essentially the same point that Paul makes in several other places, where he speaks of ‘boasting’ as being ruled out by the gospel, both the actual message (the foolish announcement of a crucified Lord) and the way it works (by the power of sheer grace to change the heart and produce **faith** and Christian life). In Romans 3.27–30 he speaks of the ‘boasting’ of Jewish people, including his own former self. They possessed God’s **law**, and that (so they thought) made them ‘somebodies’ over against the **Gentile** ‘nobodies’. He says the same thing in Ephesians 2.9. Later in our

present letter (3.21) he will apply the point to those who ‘boast’ about different teachers, himself, Apollos, or whoever.

In this passage, though, he is talking about the classic pagan language that would be used when people wanted to give themselves airs, to become ‘somebodies.’ This was the kind of social and cultural status that the Christians in Corinth were now so eager to obtain. They are missing the point, he declares. No Christian can boast of the status he or she possesses, because from first to last it is God’s work and gift.

In saying all this, Paul is alluding to two Old Testament passages and another biblical theme. In Deuteronomy, particularly chapter 7, the Israelites are reminded that they are God’s people, not because they are anything special in themselves, but despite the fact that they aren’t. They are called to love and serve the one true God out of gratitude for what he’s done for them, not least the ‘redemption’ from Egypt in the **Exodus**. Paul wants the new Christians to understand themselves as God’s new-Exodus people (see chapter 10), with the same understanding of God’s grace.

Then in Jeremiah 9, quoted in verse 31, the prophet warns against exactly that kind of ‘boasting’ which Paul is attacking in this passage. Paul only quotes verse 24, shortening it as he does so; but he clearly has in mind the whole of verses 23 and 24:

Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom;  
 don’t let the powerful boast in their power;  
 don’t let the wealthy boast in their riches;  
 but let those who boast, boast in this,  
 that they understand and know me, says YHWH;  
 I act with steadfast love, judgment, and righteousness  
 in the earth,  
 for in these things I delight, says YHWH.

Time and again, Paul quotes the phrase ‘the Lord’ from the Old Testament, where the word refers directly to **YHWH**, Israel’s God, and makes it refer to Jesus the Messiah. So it is here. He is the one ‘in whom’ Christians possess all the wisdom they need – and the status (‘righteousness’) of being his forgiven, **justified** people, and the extraordinary privilege of being set apart for his service (‘sanctification’) in virtue of his ‘redemption’ of them from the slavery of sin.

The biblical theme which Paul is drawing on here is the theme of ‘Wisdom.’ In the book of Proverbs, in particular in its great introduction (chapters 1–9), we find Wisdom as a person, the one through whom the world was made, inviting humans to discover who she is and so to

become the genuine human beings they were meant to be. Later Jewish writings like Ecclesiasticus ('The Wisdom of Ben Sirach, probably written about 200 BC) and 'The Wisdom of Solomon' (probably early first century AD) developed this idea into the notion that Wisdom is to be found in the Jewish law, or in the presence of YHWH in the **Temple**, and that by following this Wisdom people can be and do what God intended them to be and do in the world. For Paul, Jesus the Messiah is the true wisdom (see, e.g., Colossians 1.15–20 and 2.1–3). Having him – or rather, being 'in him' – means that you are a genuine human being at last, called to live by God's wisdom rather than that of the world.

Exploring what it means to be 'in the Messiah', so that what is true of him is true of you, is the Christian's basic strength and delight. God has vindicated Jesus in his **resurrection**; God set him apart for his own service; God accomplished in him the defeat of the great enslaving powers of sin and death. If you are 'in Christ', a member of the Messiah's family, this 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption' are yours too. And if that doesn't make you 'somebody', nothing ever will.

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