

Résumé of Those Called

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 25:1–15](#)

Background Scripture: [1 Corinthians 1:18–31](#)

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:

23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to con-

found the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

30 But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

31 That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

Key Text

Base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence.

—1 Corinthians 1:28–29

From Darkness to Light

Unit 3: God's Call

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify an appropriate context in which a first-century Christian

might boast.

2. Explain the difference between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom.

3. Share a personal example of worldly wisdom that he or she has rejected.

Lesson Outline

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B. Lesson Context

I. Word of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

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B. World's Foolishness (vv. 20–23)

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II. Calling of the Humble (1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

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B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Aegean	<i>A-jee-un.</i>
Aristotle	<i>Air-uh-staw-tul.</i>
Athenian	<i>Uh-thin-e-un.</i>
Athens	<i>Ath-unz.</i>
Corinth	<i>Kor-inth.</i>
Crispus	<i>Kris-pus.</i>
Diolkos	<i>Dih-awl-koss.</i>
Plato	<i>Play-tow.</i>
Socrates	<i>Saw-kruh-teez.</i>
Sosthenes	<i>Soss-thuh-nee-z.</i>

Introduction

A. Source of Sermons

Experienced preachers use many sources to develop sermons: their study of the Bible, illustrations from their readings, and personal experiences. The need to preach weekly can create a lot of pressure, causing preachers to “borrow” sermons from other preachers. The internet makes thousands of new sermons available on a weekly basis. A friend of mine has cynically hypothesized that it will not be long until there are only four or five preachers left who construct original sermons that all other preachers will copy!

The apostle Paul had no internet sources for his sermon preparation. He preached the best that he could, drawing on his great knowledge of Scripture, his observations of life, and his personal experience in encountering the risen Jesus. Paul did not consider himself to be a gifted

or highly trained public speaker, and apparently neither did others ([1 Corinthians 2:1–4](#); [2 Corinthians 10:10](#)). Even so, his preaching resulted in a church being planted in the city of Corinth, which impacted hundreds of lives for many years. The struggles of that church have much to teach us yet today.

B. Lesson Context

The city of Corinth lies about 50 miles west of Athens. That’s about a one-hour train ride today, but in the first century AD, the “distance” was much greater in terms of culture and history. Athens had been the Greek center for philosophy, religion, education, and government for centuries (compare [Acts 17:18–21](#)). Names of Athenian philosophers are still recognized, especially those of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Corinth, on the other hand, was an industrial, working-class city. Located strategically near the four-mile-wide Isthmus of Corinth, the city thrived because of its Diolkos, an ancient railway system that transported small boats and cargo overland between the Aegean Sea and the Gulf of Corinth. The fees for using it were high (making Corinth a wealthy city), but the railway saved merchants many days of sailing around the Peloponnesian Peninsula with its treacherous coastline and plentiful pirates. A modern canal cutting through the isthmus was not completed until 1893.

[Acts 18](#) records Paul’s first visit to Corinth, after a disappointing time in Athens. Historical clues in Acts allow us to date this time as an 18—month period in AD 51–52, not quite 20 years after Paul’s conversion ([Acts 9:1–31](#)).

Paul wrote the letters we call 1 and 2 Corinthians sometime between AD 54 and 57 while in Ephesus ([1 Corinthians 16:5–9](#)). Paul had received

reports of several issues troubling the Corinthian congregation (1:10–17).

In the section of verses preceding today’s lesson, Paul identified one of those problems: factions. Members of the congregation had been rallying around specific leaders in an unhealthy way (1 Corinthians 1:12). One of the factions had named Paul as its guiding light, and he objected, unwilling to countenance church divisions (1:13–16). He reminded his readers that he had come to Corinth to preach the gospel—period (1:17). This led him to recount the motives and actions of his initial visit to Corinth, today’s text.

I. Word of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

A. God’s Power (vv. 18–19)

18a. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.

The Greek word translated *preaching* is “logos,” often rendered as “word” (example: Matthew 12:32) or “Word” (John 1:1, 14). Paul was speaking of the word of *the cross*. The historical reality of Jesus’ death by Roman crucifixion had drawn different reactions, and Paul assessed people by their responses. Those who interpreted the message of Jesus’ death as *foolishness* (compare 1 Corinthians 1:21–23; 2:14; 3:19) are lost and perishing in their unforgiven sins (compare Romans 2:12; 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3). Paul had encountered this mindset in Athens (see Acts 17:32).

18b. But unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

On the other hand, those who see *the power of God* to forgive sins

through such a seemingly shameful event are the ones who *are saved*. This forms the centerpiece of Paul’s discussion: the culturally shameful execution of Jesus on the cross in fact demonstrated the power and wisdom of God.

What Do You Think?

How would you explain why the message of the cross is foolishness to the world, but power for the believer?

Digging Deeper

How can you help others understand this through your attitudes and actions?

19. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

Paul condemns human-based wisdom by drawing on [Isaiah 29:14](#). In its context, that verse reveals the Lord’s agenda: to show that those who believe that their human reasoning is impeccable will be devastated. Our greatest systems of human thought will collapse if they do not include the works and ways of the God of the Bible (compare [1 Corinthians 3:19](#)).

B. World’s Foolishness (vv. 20–23)

20a. Where is the wise?

This is the first of four rhetorical questions as Paul begins his salvo against the so-called wisdom of the world (see also [1 Corinthians 2:6; 3:18–20](#)). *The wise* likely referred to those steeped in the Greek philosophical tradition (see [Acts 17:18–21](#)). The word *philosopher* means “lover of wisdom” and is in view here (compare [Isaiah 19:11–12; Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21; Romans 1:22; Colossians 2:8](#)).

20b. Where is the scribe?

This question targets the Jewish scholars who often opposed Jesus (example: [Mark 11:18](#)).

20c. Where is the disputer of this world?

This question points to people who always seek to argue a point, to prove themselves right. Such an argumentative spirit resulted in condemnation from Jesus, who warned those who were scrupulous in their tithing but ignored the “weightier matters” ([Matthew 23:23](#)). The implied answer to the questions we have seen to this point is this: the wise, the scribes, and the disputers are among those who are perishing.

20d. Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

The lesson within this question is taught many times in the Old Testament. It is Job’s conclusion ([Job 12:17](#)). It is a conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes, which includes the pursuit of wisdom as meaningless if it does so without God ([Ecclesiastes 1:16–17](#)). It is the story line of several episodes in the book of Daniel, which teaches that true wisdom must come from God ([Daniel 1:17](#)).

21. For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

Paul contrasts *the wisdom of God* and the *wisdom of the world*. Although the same word *wisdom* is used, the gulf between the two concepts is great. God’s wisdom is perfect, and He knows “the end from the beginning” ([Isaiah 46:10](#)).

The wisdom of the world does not lead to a knowledge of God. Paul discusses this flaw in human attempts at wisdom in [Romans 1:18–23](#). There he declares that human ways of thinking that exclude God are futile and that such thinkers are “without excuse” ([Romans 1:20](#)).

We should not miss the irony in Paul’s tone here. Human “wisdom” that does not acknowledge God is not wisdom at all. It is the opposite. Paul extends the irony to say that the magnificent *preaching* of the cross seems like *foolishness* to the self-appointed wise of the world. The height of this foolishness, in their eyes, would be to proclaim a message of God’s salvation. How can they believe the message of salvation from God if they do not even acknowledge God, let alone any need to be saved?

22. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom.

Paul moves to more specific accusations, identifying two groups he interacted with in Corinth and elsewhere: *Jews* and *Greeks* ([Acts 18:4](#)), Greeks being the same as Gentiles. The desire of the Jewish people to see an undue amount of signs before they committed to believing in Jesus is well documented in the Gospels. Repeatedly, Jewish leaders came to Jesus and demanded that He show them a miraculous sign ([Matthew 12:38](#); [Mark 8:11](#); etc.).

However, even the miracles of Jesus were not sufficient for some, who remained unbelievers ([John 12:37](#)). Jesus provided signs to prove who He was ([20:30–31](#)); to have considered those signs inadequate or to interpret them wrongly (as in [Luke 11:14–15](#)) is the opposite of a move toward faith. The Greeks’ search for *wisdom*, like the Jewish demand for signs, was flawed from the start and unable to find faith if (or since) it denied God.

What Do You Think?

What are examples of modern wisdom that people pursue to find meaning and purpose apart from God?

Digging Deeper

How can you model God’s true wisdom for your unbelieving neighbors?

23a. But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block.

Paul returns to the simplicity of his appeal: *we preach Christ crucified* (also [1 Corinthians 2:2](#)). Those who cannot accept a crucified Savior will never come to saving faith. The idea that a Jewish peasant-teacher from the obscure village of Nazareth could have accomplished anything by dying on a Roman cross was a *stumblingblock* to Jews. They expected a powerful, military Messiah who would free Israel from its oppressors and usher in the Day of the Lord. Jesus was a failure in their eyes, no more than a populist preacher of an earlier decade. We get our English word *scandal* from the Greek word translated “stumblingblock.” The cross was scandalous because most Jews could not accept that God’s Messiah would be shamefully executed like a notorious criminal. Paul knew that this aspect of the Messiah was expected by God and prophesied (see [Isaiah 8:14](#); [Romans 9:33](#)).

23b. And unto the Greeks foolishness.

Paul characterizes the pagan Greek response to the message of the cross as cursory dismissal. *The Greeks* considered that message a waste of time and thought an execution in Jerusalem 20 years earlier was *foolishness*. Such an attitude is found today. Some refuse to consider the implications of the cross because it does not fit their preconceived notions of how God should act in history.

The Scandal of the Cross

I was reading my Bible on a park bench in Israel one day when a man stopped to talk to me. I didn’t speak Hebrew, so he switched to English. When I told him I was reading the Bible, he seemed interested. He even

showed me a certain verse in Exodus that contained his name.

As the conversation went on, it became clear that he did not hold traditional Jewish beliefs. He spoke of New Age philosophies and beliefs. Then he asked about my beliefs. When I mentioned Jesus dying on the cross to save us, he exploded in profanity. He forced himself to calm down before changing the subject, and he soon went on his way.

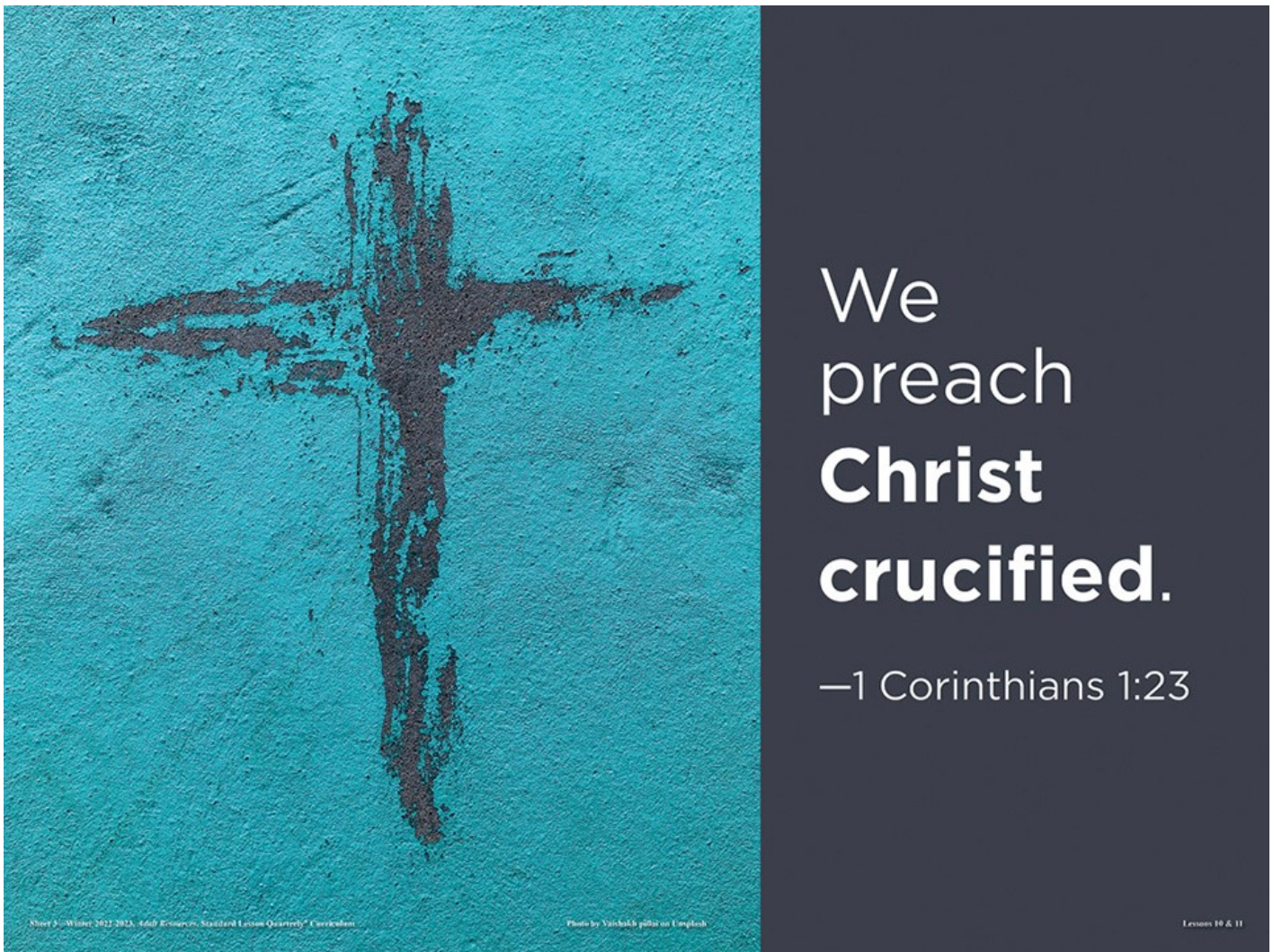
The conversation had been peaceful until I mentioned Jesus' death on a cross. If you never have had that kind of experience, how would you respond in such a moment?

—N. G.

C. God's Wisdom (vv. 24–25)

24. But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Various forms of the translation *called* occur hundreds of times in the Bible. But meaning often boils down to one of four usages, depending on context. In that regard, the word *call* and its derivatives can refer to (1) speaking out in prayer, as in [Jeremiah 33:3](#); (2) summoning, as in [2 Kings 4:36](#); (3) naming someone or something, as in [Genesis 1:5](#); and (4) indicating a summoning in terms of appointing by God, as in the text before us. The latter can be a summoning to salvation (example: [1 Corinthians 1:9](#)) or a calling to a specific task (example: [Acts 13:2](#)).



Visual for [Lessons 10 & 11](#). Show this visual as you discuss the lesson commentary associated with [1 Corinthians 1:23a](#).

The calling to receive salvation through Christ comes to everyone ([John 12:32](#); compare [Romans 1:6](#); [8:28–30](#); [9:24](#)) as the Holy Spirit confronts the world about sin through the proclaimed Word of God ([John 15:26](#); [16:8](#); [Romans 10:17](#); [2 Peter 1:21](#)). This call can be resisted, and indeed it often is ([Acts 7:51](#); compare [Isaiah 63:10](#); [Luke 13:34](#)).

Even so, Paul encountered *Jews* who embraced Jesus as *the power of God* beyond any sign-miracle they could expect. Paul also preached to *Greeks* (Gentiles) who abandoned their worldly philosophies and accepted Jesus as *the wisdom of God*. Faith sometimes comes to those

whom we least expect.

25. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Paul's irony now comes full circle in one of the most powerful verses in the New Testament. God is great and His greatness is not hidden. God's *foolishness*, what seems impossibly unwise to human observers, is *wiser* than anything philosophers have ever dreamed up. The plans of God exceed any human expectations.

Paul surely personalizes this. In his youth, he had sought to be the greatest of the Jewish scholars, studying at the feet of the finest teacher of his day ([Acts 22:3](#)). Paul's learning and mental capacity were well-known (see [26:24](#)). Paul understood that he could never compare with the divine wisdom of God displayed in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Paul's opponents would say that he did not recognize the death of Jesus as *weakness*, the failure to overcome His enemies. Paul's insight, though, is that if those who crucified Jesus had truly understood who He was, they would never have killed Him ([1 Corinthians 2:8](#)). Strength in weakness is a great paradox, one that Paul celebrates elsewhere (see [2 Corinthians 12:10](#)).

The Deceptive Plant

I bought a succulent plant for my wife on her birthday. Its cascading purple leaves looked lovely on the kitchen windowsill. But to her dismay, the leaves began falling off the very next day.

Had she overwatered or underwatered the plant? Did it need more or less sunlight?

I found myself questioning the wisdom of its Creator. Why create

something so fragile? How did this picky plant ever survive in the wild?

My wife did some research and laid out the fallen leaves on a damp paper towel. A few days later, tiny roots sprouted out of the base of each dismembered leaf. Then came perfect miniature succulent plants, each growing from a single leaf.

What I had dismissed as foolishness was actually an ingenious process of reproduction. How many “foolish” things that you see around you are actually God’s intricate designs?—N. G.

II. Calling of the Humble

(1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

A. Confounding the Wise (vv. 26–27)

26. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.

Paul asked the Corinthians to evaluate their own ranks. Did they see a church filled with recognized *wise men*—from the *mighty*, powerful people of the community; or with those who were *noble* (literally, “well-born”)—the aristocratic class of wealth and privilege? Maybe a few people in the Corinthian church could be described in this manner (see the example of Crispus, 1 Corinthians 1:14; Acts 18:8), but that was not the case of this church generally.

27. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.

The application of this verse defies logic. Wouldn’t God want a church full of the rich, powerful, and highly educated? Choosing the community’s humble serves *to confound* the elite citizens of Corinth.

Historically, we see this in Gallio, who served as the Roman deputy of the city and region. When Sosthenes was brought before Gallio to be judged, the governor brushed the matter aside as if it involved people not worthy of his time or consideration. When Sosthenes was savagely beaten in this Roman noble's presence, Gallio was unconcerned ([Acts 18:12–17](#)).

What Do You Think?

What beliefs of believers might some people consider to be foolish?

Digging Deeper

How might Jesus' acts of humility ([Philippians 2:5–11](#)) be considered foolish to the world?

B. Choosing the Despised (vv. 28–29)

28–29. And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence.

Paul insisted that *God*, rather than favoring the godless world's elite, had *chosen* the *base things of the world* to effect His plans. The word translated “base” is the opposite of the word in [1 Corinthians 1:26](#) that is translated “noble.” God does not recognize human traditions of noble birth to find His servants. Our Lord calls those who would be considered ignoble, the *despised* by worldly standards. Does this mean the church should not seek to add the influential members of its community? Of course not. But all must come to the cross in humility, recognizing their spiritual poverty. There is no place for anyone to claim personal *glory in his presence*. This is the great reversal, the upending of human expectations

and standards. God chooses those who are of no account in the world's reckoning and gives them importance and value. In so doing, God takes the world's estimation of greatness and brings it *to nought*.

The verb translated *glory* is also translated “boast” in [Romans 2:23](#); [2 Corinthians 9:2](#); etc. Boasting is a display of pride rather than humility. Our salvation through the cross of Jesus is a matter worked out without our prior approval. We had nothing to do with it, so we have no place for boasting about saving ourselves.

What Do You Think?

How can believers use earthly prestige, like wealth or education, in a way that glorifies God instead of themselves?

Digging Deeper

What might prevent believers from acting in this manner?

C. Focus of Boasting (vv. 30–31)

30–31. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

We do not boast pridefully about ourselves, but about our Lord. We *glory in the Lord* alone ([Galatians 6:14](#)) and leave behind personal claims. Paul sums this up by listing four things we gain by faith in Christ, none of which is our own accomplishment. Through Christ we learn true *wisdom*, the ways of God in our world ([1 Corinthians 2:6–16](#)). We find *righteousness*, being made right with God ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)). We enjoy *sanctification*, the cleansing of our sins by the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians](#)

6:11). And we experience *redemption*, being bought back from the power of sin ([Romans 3:24](#)).

Paul does not boast of his greatness but of his weakness and the power of God. This is a glorying based in humility, not seeking acclaim but offering thanksgiving and praise to the one who has saved us from the futility of human attempts to deny God.

What Do You Think?

How would you describe the doctrines of righteousness, sanctification, and redemption in your own words?

Digging Deeper

How do these doctrines fulfill God's "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" ([Colossians 2:3](#)) for the believer?

Conclusion

A. Doctrine of the Cross

Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, was inspired by this text in his doctrine of the cross. Luther found contrasts between this way ordained by God and the human way, the doctrine of glory. He argued that the human doctrine of glory is centered on human wisdom that leads to the blinding of hearts. However, he stated that the divine doctrine of the cross is centered on God's self-revelation of His suffering Son, which softens hearts.

The Christian message is still a scandalous stumbling block. The central historical fact is that Jesus of Nazareth was executed as a criminal would be: on a shameful cross. It was a brutal affair. It did not seem like a victory at the time, but a colossal defeat. Yet without the cross,

there is no salvation!

Today's church still confronts the dangers Paul warned about: the church may seek the world's approval. As Luther and Paul taught, the true way of salvation will seem foolish, weak, and shameful to the world. This Scripture text challenges us to examine how much we have accommodated our priorities to the world. What elements of the world's "doctrine of glory" have we adopted? Instead, we should look to God, who can be found in sufferings and the cross.

B. Prayer

Father, we bow our hearts before You. Your ways are far beyond the ways of human wisdom. May we rely on Your strength and wisdom as we put our trust in Your Son. It is in His name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's ways seem foolish to a world impressed by cleverness and success.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Begin class by reading the following statements. After each state-

ment, ask students to raise their hands if they agree with it; then ask students to raise their hands if they disagree with it. Ask volunteers to indicate why they answered so.

I'm wiser today than I was 10 years ago.

I've grown in wisdom by listening to others.

I'm wiser because of my chosen friends.

Wisdom is inherent, but foolishness is inherited.

Transition to Bible study by saying, “People have many opinions about the nature of wisdom and how people can become wise. Let’s look for a biblical solution to this dilemma as we learn what Paul has to say to a group of first-century believers.”

Into the Word

Distribute a handout (you prepare) with the following prompts or write the prompts on the board:

Wisdom is ...

Wisdom is not ...

Wisdom does ...

We need wisdom because ...

Divide the class into equal groups. Ask each group to read [1 Corinthians 1:18–31](#). Have students complete each prompt based on the Scripture reading. Explain that they may write similar phrases under more than one heading.

Option. Ask each group to complete one prompt. Ensure that every prompt is considered by at least one group.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Word Web” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete the activity as indicated.

After calling time for either activity, have groups present their findings in whole-class discussion. Conclude the activity by asking, “Why do the implications of the cross seem foolish to some people?”

Into Life

Have students gather in small groups. Distribute handouts (you create) of the prompts below for discussion. Ask each group to apply one of the verses from today’s Scripture to each statement.

Option. Assign multiple prompts to each group.

- 1—We’ve observed instances when the world’s wisdom was debunked.
- 2—We’ve interacted with people who do not accept the wisdom that comes from God.
- 3—We’ve experienced how God uses insignificant things to show His wisdom and strength.
- 4—We’ve experienced the futility of chasing after the world’s wisdom.
- 5—We’ve experienced how the gospel of Christ Jesus offers people help and strength in their moments of need.
- 6—We’ve experienced how God’s wisdom overcomes our own weaknesses.

After five minutes, have each group present their findings for whole-class discussion. If different groups discussed the same prompt, point out similarities and differences in the groups’ responses.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Praying for Wisdom” activity from the activity page. Have students complete the activity as indicated (in a minute or less) before sharing with a partner.

Close class with a guided prayer. Encourage students to pray aloud regarding their own short prayers after you state the following prayers:

God, help us know and understand the wisdom that comes from the gospel of Christ Jesus.

God, fill us with Your wisdom so that we might best love and serve our neighbors.

God, help our neighbors know and understand the wisdom that comes from the gospel of Christ Jesus.