

1.2 Weak By Design

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now, and Josh is going to be leading us through a portion of 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We've been in and out of this letter with Josh on and off for some time.

And we're now going back to the beginning, and we're back into chapter 1. I'm going to read from chapter 1, verse 18, right through to chapter 2, verse 5.

1 Corinthians then, chapter 1, verse 18. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.

But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it's written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

[1 : 10] For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, to Greeks.

But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many powerful. Not many of noble birth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world.

[2 : 20] Even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. So that in no human being, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom. Our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

And when I came to you, brothers, I didn't come to you proclaiming the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to do nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling. And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom. But in demonstration of the spirit and of power.

That your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men. But in the power of God. Amen.

[3 : 29] May God bless to us his word. Well, good evening. Do open your Bibles again to 1 Corinthians.

One of the fixtures of our holidays is spending a lot of energy and a lot of thought around where we are going to eat.

You can get all kinds of ratings and rankings online now. And so you can see how many five-star ratings there are. And you can also see how many one-star ratings there are. And to see what disasters have happened to prompt such a poor review.

Of course, often the reviews tell us a lot more about the people making them than the actual restaurants. But we discovered a restaurant a couple of years ago that is worth checking out on TripAdvisor.

For nothing other than the incredible replies that the owner dishes out to those who give him a one-star rating. Pages and pages of replies that show a man who painstakingly goes through CCTV footage to see if there's anything at all to the complaints.

[4 : 41] And commonly he defends himself to the hilt. No sense of the customer being right. He doles out the insults, the favorite of which, my favorite of which is, you're a proper little Pinocchio, aren't you?

For this owner, a one-star rating is a disaster. And it's right, isn't it? Who on earth is going to choose a restaurant that ranks 547th in the village?

Average rating, 1.1 out of 5. People would think that you're nuts for choosing such a restaurant. Well, what does this have to do with Corinthians?

The Corinthians think that they are five-star Christians and a five-star church. And Paul, in the early chapters of the letter, is beginning to pull the carpet out from under their feet.

And the first part of his argument, our passage this evening, is Paul basically saying, Corinth, bad news for you. God chooses the duds.

[5 : 49] God's modus operandi for his mission to the world is the equivalent of eating at the dive, the 547th ranked restaurant in the village. God doesn't go with all its looks and sounds and is strong in this world.

Quite the opposite. And so Paul makes clear in our passage this evening that we have a weak-looking gospel. We have a weak-looking church.

And surprise, surprise, we have a weak-looking apostle. But before we get into these, let's remember that last time we were beginning to see that Corinth is riddled with lots of different-looking issues.

But undergirding them all is the same fundamental problem. They thought that they were a mighty church. A church that didn't need Paul anymore. They'd gone beyond him.

They weren't held back by his apparent limitations anymore. And so the Corinthians liked to divide the church up. The strong and the weak. The wise and the foolish.

[6 : 55] The glorious and the shameful. The five-star and the rest. They wanted a crown, not a cross.

And so wherever you turn the tap on in Corinth, out spews the same spoiled water. Whatever the issue, whether it be leaders or sex or food offered to idols, whatever the issue, out flows their so-called might.

But Paul is having none of it. All Christians are made rich, he says, but made rich only through Jesus. And so now he begins to unpick their ideas.

And he does so by pointing out that we have a weak-looking gospel, verses 18 to 24. A weak-looking gospel. Jesus has turned wisdom and power completely upside down.

The world, on its own steam, will only ever be bewildered by the gospel. Now, I'm sure that many of us who hear and read that pause and think, there must be something wrong with that.

[8 : 06] How can that be the best design? No, no, we need to take this back to the shop and explain to them, something's gone wrong. Let's exchange it for a gospel that's properly designed. But we haven't misunderstood.

By design, the gospel looks absurd to the world. Look at verse 18. The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.

But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Look back at verse 17. What Paul contrasts that with. Paul was sent to preach, not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

See the contrast? Words of wisdom, eloquence, oratorical flourishes. No real power. Of course, it sounds good. It can lure people in.

It can be attractive. But ideas and sermons that impress the world, what are they? All froth and new substance. But the word of the cross, with all of its weakness, with all of its foolishness, we see in verse 18 as the power of God.

[9 : 21] The great divide in this world is not centered on politics or ideologies or referendums. It's not to do with which football team you support. It's not the battle of the sexes.

It's not about race. The great divide is verse 18. Upon being confronted with the cross of Christ, with the word of the gospel, are we appalled, apathetic, agnostic, and averse?

Or do we see in it salvation, succor, satisfaction, and security? The reality is always going to be that those who belong to Jesus are in awe of the cross.

Whereas those who don't just think it's awful. Unpalatable, stupid, cruel, unrealistic, naive. It's even been attacked by so-called preachers as cosmic child abuse.

But verse 19, since all the way back in the days of Isaiah, God has declared that he would destroy worldly wisdom.

[10 : 26] The cross confounds the world's categories. It confounds the world's understanding. Salvation will never come from a big brain or an elite education.

In fact, it appears here that God is saying that the more that it's sought through those kinds of things, the further away it will be. Verse 20, where's the one who is wise?

Where's the scribe? Where's the debater of this age? Where did all the learning get them? It got them nowhere. Certainly nowhere of any eternal significance.

Human wisdom has failed. Intellect, no matter how great it is, will not lead us to the cross. No academic discipline ends with people bowing down at the cross of the Lord Jesus.

Notice the Corinthians in verse 20. The wise and foolish. The Corinthians want to be wise. But God has made foolish the wisdom of the world.

[11 : 33] Because you could spend your whole life reading every book by every philosopher. And in the end, when you finally end up in the ground, and you will finally end up in the ground, what will it have gotten you?

Then it will be seen by all to be folly. Paul says, verse 21, It is God's wisdom that means people can know him, not through brilliant minds here on earth, but they can know him by the folly of what Paul and the apostles preach.

Don't look to the sky, or the tea leaves, or the horoscopes, looking for signs like the Jews, verse 22. Don't look to the scientists, the lecture halls, and the textbooks like the Gentiles.

Don't look to the latest cultural shibboleth of the media. If you want to see true wisdom, if you want to see how this world can be made new, if you're desperate for some sense of hope and purpose in the midst of all that's broken in this world, Paul says there's only one place to look.

Look to the cross. It and it alone is the power of God. God has turned wisdom and strength upside down.

[12 : 55] What the world knows as strength is made weak. What the world knows as wisdom is made foolish by what Christ has done on the cross. Because the cross of Christ looks to all the world like utter folly, like defeat.

How can an innocent man dying achieve anything? How can a crucified criminal be a king? Or be a king that's any use at all? How can rescue come to anyone through a man dying?

It is a pathetic looking message. But that is what God will use to draw people from all nations and tribes and tongues to him.

It is because of the cross that we have 20 people from all over the world and all ages prepared to stand up at the front this evening to become members and make vows to serve God for the rest of their lives.

The world doesn't want the cross. The cross doesn't leave any room for our own accomplishments or wisdom. The cross spells out for us that not only are we morally deficient, but we're also intellectually deficient.

[14 : 11] Even God's foolishness is wiser than men. Even God's weakness is stronger than men. The cross doesn't honor us.

That's why the Corinthians don't like it. It humbles us. And as a church, this is our truth. Let's not shy away from it.

Dressing the gospel up to be appealing, more palatable to the world is a path presenting a gospel devoid of power. A gospel that's no gospel at all. If you're met with scoffing and sniggering and sneering, that is not a sign that you're doing something wrong.

In one instance, we can articulate the gospel and it can be met with something, scoffing along the lines of, well, let's bring the conversation back down to earth. But that same articulation can be met with the saving power of God bringing life to the dead.

Those are the two responses. We don't need to make the gospel more than it is. We don't need to make it powerful or make it work.

[15 : 27] We don't need to hope that the Sunday our friend comes to church is a Sunday where everything goes well, there's no blips for the sound, the welcome team are on top form, the passage has nothing too controversial in it, the preacher doesn't ruffle any politically correct feathers.

No. God has designed it that his gospel will alienate those who wish to be wise and mighty. But he has designed it that even the outcasts, the plebs, the morons of this world can be enriched through it.

And God has also designed things so that his people can't even be superior with each other. Paul continues, it is God's wisdom that we have a weak-looking church, verses 25 to 31.

It is God's design that the church is made up of every kind of ordinary person with the odd, truly remarkable person thrown in. I wonder if you or I were to design a church, would we be likely to have plenty of celebrities and politicians and academics and billionaires in it?

Pfft, how wonderful would that church as witness be? Look at all these significant people in my church, don't you want to come along and believe what they believe? But it's not a mistake that that's not the case.

[16 : 52] I hope you don't think me rude in saying this, but if we look around at our own church, we aren't the creme de la creme. We aren't the pinnacle of human accomplishment.

And with all our new members joining this evening, I hope that's not a surprise to you. We're not nationally and internationally recognized as major personalities. And if you bristle at that a little bit, all I'd say is that the paparazzi aren't exactly outside every week, making it hard to get in.

But that isn't bad news. After all, look at how pointed Paul is about this to the mighty Corinthians. Verse 26, he says, for consider your calling, brothers.

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. Ouch. For a church that thinks itself mighty.

Ouch. But that isn't an accident. The church's very DNA means that verse 26 is the expected experience of any true church.

[17 : 59] Paul would be confused by the description of someone being the pastor to the stars. Countess Huntingdon, who largely funded the ministry of George Whitefield, used to say that she was saved by the letter M.

She was an impressive person by worldly standards. A wealthy countess. So she was delighted to read verse 26 because while she was impressive by worldly standards, God's design is that very few in the church will be like that.

The M that saved the countess is that Paul says, not many instead of not any. You see, God's plan for the church is that it would be made up of the unimpressive.

Those who generally fail to stand out, but there'd be the odd impressive person thrown into. Because God's design shows that there is no place for human pride in the church.

His church shows that you don't need to meet a qualifying standard to make it in. I'm relieved at that if you're not. Because the church is made up of people who largely cannot boast in their achievements.

[19 : 14] The church is full of the average with the odd exceptional person there to show that actually God's grace extends to all. It's open to the wise man who'll humble himself. It's open to the rich man who holds his wealth loosely.

But it is full of people who obviously haven't earned salvation, who haven't won their way into God's special people because they couldn't.

Verse 27, God choose what is foolish to shame the wise, what is weak to shame the strong, what is low and despised to bring to nothing the things that are.

We would go for the five-star restaurant every time. God fills his church with lots of one-star people. I'm borrowing an illustration here, but it's a good one.

We've all been there at school picking teams for whatever sport it is. Two captains, usually the two standout people. And they each take it in turn to pick people for their team.

[20 : 23] And they pick the next best person and the next best person all the way down to the last two weedy, unfit-looking kids.

Paul's point is that God builds his church with the last two kids. And more than that, he does that to upset all the others.

He says, the foolish shame the wise. The weak shame the strong in God's design. So Paul is saying to the Corinthians, be careful what you wish for.

If you want to be wise and strong, then those feeble fools over there will soon be making your shame clear to you. Because, verse 30, it is Jesus who changes things.

we don't change. We can't possibly change ourselves when we become Christians. It is all and only through Jesus. Verse 30, he becomes wisdom for us.

[21 : 29] He is the source of all that is good about us when we've gained righteousness, redemption, sanctification. It's all through him. God doesn't need us to have a certain moral quality to join his church.

He doesn't need us to have a certain IQ. We don't need to have the right lineage or the right references because all that changes when we come to him changes as we're joined to Jesus.

All that we are as Christians, all that shines about us comes to us only through the Lord Jesus being present with us. God draws together all kinds of nobodies into his church so that it will be seen clearly that the only reason they are so esteemed and belonging to God is because of the gospel.

It's because of all that the Lord Jesus has done. Nothing else. Paul is illustrating his first point in these verses. He's taking what he said in verses 18 to 25 about the weak-looking gospel and he's putting flesh on it.

So he uses as a first example in verses 26 to 31 the weak-looking church and shortly he's going to use himself in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 2.

[22 : 47] And in both of these examples he shows the implications of each. So notice he uses he ends them both with the phrase so that.

So in chapter 1 verse 29 and verse 31 he says so that so that. And then in chapter 2 verse 5 he says the same again. So firstly God has designed his church to be weak-looking so that verse 29 no human being might boast.

Verse 31 so that any boasting is boasting in Jesus. The Corinthians hate that.

They want to boast in themselves. But true wisdom true power as God has designed it leaves us with nothing to boast in except the Lord Jesus.

God knows what we're like. Who doesn't like to get credit for stuff? Who doesn't like to have titles and recognition? But God is clear.

[23 : 54] His church is to be distinct from the ways of the world. There isn't space for superiority in a church family among churches, among Christians. it is God's church.

He has built it. He's the one who gave us life when we were dead. He is the one who has transformed us and he is the one who continues to work in and through his people. The only thing about our church that's worthy of boasting in is verse 29 the presence of God.

That God is in our midst. That God is working. And verse 31 boasting that Jesus is our Lord.

And that is why Paul's pattern of ministry to the Corinthians was intentionally unimpressive because he needed to leave them with nothing to boast in but Jesus.

And so we see him turn his eyes to himself in chapter 2 verses 1 to 5. We have a weak looking apostle God's design for his gospel his church and his ministers means that we can have utter confidence that it is God's power at work and nothing else.

[25 : 17] In a church that is seemingly full of impressive leaders here in Corinth Paul might have been tempted to play to the crowd to persuade people of his pattern by ministry pattern of ministry by being impressive himself by playing up with his big bulging brain.

Paul no doubt could have been an engaging and impressive orator. He's a megawatt brain as we can see from reading the New Testament. But that would not have done any good.

Paul has to win the Corinthians to his message to his pattern of ministry not just to himself. If he puts his message across in a way that was impressive was exciting and actually captivating then he's only serving to foster the Corinthian problem all the more.

But because God's purpose was that human wisdom and strength be flattened Paul has to convince them of the truth on its own terms.

So get this there is nothing more important for the Corinthian church than to have an apostle of whom they are utterly ashamed. That's the intention.

[26 : 30] That is an important point. It is far better to have a minister who's hated by the world and derided in the mainstream media. One who may well make our friends uncomfortable.

It is far better to have a minister like that than one who's loved by all of them. Ministers who look shameful are far more likely to be faithful in the right ways.

That was Paul's example. So he says chapter 2 verse 1 I didn't come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. I didn't play up to what you wanted.

He opted against chapter 117 the words of eloquent wisdom and instead he opted for the word of the cross. That's what he says in verse 2 his sole focus for the Corinthians was on Jesus and his cross.

A simple gospel and a weak looking one. But Paul didn't stop there. He didn't just announce the word of the cross.

[27 : 36] He adopted the way of the cross. So verse 3 Paul was even with this church in weakness and fear and in much trembling.

Paul didn't hide his weakness from them. Quite the opposite. He didn't hide it then and even now he's holding it up to show them again to remind them you have an apostle who looks just like your savior.

Weak, trembling, losing. A few years ago I was at a graduation and after we spent a long time tapping every possible variation of degree that you could think of after that there was an address for the graduates.

It went something like this. You are part of a special community full of world class academics and scholars. You have sat in the seats of people who have caused ripples all throughout the world.

This is your community. You've had the elite education. You belong to this world class world changing institution. You have a degree from a world leader in education.

[28 : 53] I live up to it. Change the world. Cause ripples across the globe. Take your place in history. Inspiring. Here's what Paul says about the institution he belongs to.

After this you'll definitely want to give him a job in a marketing department. He says come and follow a savior who was mocked beaten and crucified as a criminal.

Take up your weapon against the world the flesh and the devil. This astonishing weapon for such a grand fight is the word of the cross. Join the church.

It's mainly made up of the average a real ragtag bunch. Oh and your leaders, your ministers, they will irk your friends, they'll say things publicly that make most of the population squirm. But don't worry, you'll know that you're at home because you'll be scoffed at, treated as fools, looked at as feeble and failing.

Oh and you'll have to give up your life. You'll have to climb up on your own cross. Which institution do you want to join?

[30 : 04] The whole thing is a weak looking business. You might think that this all plays into the hands of the atheists and those who hate Christianity, those who say Christians are not thinkers.

The whole thing seems to play into their hands and the hands of people who work with us and live beside us who just think they were utterly silly. If you had the choice between a university, something that majors in the wisdom of the world, that wonderful speech, the graduation, a church that looks foolish, there'd be seemingly new contest.

But look at what Paul says, verse 4, my speech and my message were not implausible words of wisdom, they were not impressive, but they were in demonstration of the spirit and of power.

They may not have sounded impressive, but Paul knew his words carried the true power of God, the spirit working to win people to Jesus. Pause for a minute and think about those two institutions I just described.

One mighty and impressive, the other utterly unappealing in every way. Then look around, we're here in a church of hundreds of people who say, yes, too right, I'm having myself some of that.

[31 : 27] The worst marketing in the world, the gospel and the church are the opposite of what this world cherishes and strives for, and yet here alone, hundreds of people who say, yes, yes, yes, I want that.

And 20 more people about to join. Millions of people throughout the world have said, I will take the cross. I don't need the world's crown.

Paul consciously shows his weakness. He decidedly emphasizes the cross. He determinedly doesn't try to beautify his ministry for the sake of the world.

because verse four, the gospel's powerful just as it is. He might look weak, he might look weak, but a faithful ministry that proclaims and patterns and is patterned after the cross is utterly powerful.

Verse five, Paul is weak, so that, there's the so that again, the church might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

[32 : 38] So every time you think, we look like a weak, this is a weak thing that happens on a Sunday, lots of people gathering to sing and to open up a book that's really old, the reason it's designed to be like this is so that we can all know with utter assurance that it is God's power that does his work.

now we mustn't fall into thinking that a particular name or a swanky building with preachers educated the best academic institutions and a church full of wealthy, clever people is more likely to win our colleagues, to win our friends and family to Jesus.

That's not how it works. Here's a question to ponder. How were you converted? I can't think there would be many people in this building who were knocked off a horse with a blinding light and a voice from heaven spoke to them directly.

I suspect that most of us were converted in utterly ordinary, unimpressive ways. In rather weak, fumbling looking churches, at rather shabbily arranged CU meetings, by the witness of a friend who could never stand up and confidently articulate the gospel to a room full of people.

How many were brought to life week by week after week, coming to a church service that most of the city would have no idea was happening? I suspect it's most of us.

[34 : 12] What is a powerful church? It has nothing to do with a particular heritage or because we only read books by the most sound people. It's got nothing to do with having an elite set of Christians as part of it.

A powerful church is one that, like Paul, embodies and expounds the foolishness of the cross. And carrying our cross isn't just about sacrifice, although it certainly is.

It is also about shame. Those who were crucified carried their own cross. They were made to carry the instrument of their own execution so that everyone could see and know that they were the worst of criminals.

A powerful church wears that shame because they expound and embody the word of the cross. If our confidence is anywhere else, we will have emptied the cross of its power.

A church is a wise church when its people are together, united under the cross of Jesus, boasting only in him, knowing that they have all wisdom already in him.

[35 : 31] A church is a powerful church when its people rely on the great good news of the cross of Jesus to win their friends, their loved ones. The word of the cross is the power of God.

God, so be careful what impresses you. Let's pray. Father, we do marvel at your gospel.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus and we ask that you would grant us the very great grace that is needed to embrace all that is weak in this world. give us all that we need to keep on refusing this world's crown and instead choosing the cross now to be like our apostle and to be like our savior.

For it's in his name we pray. Amen.