
Holy People, God's Wisdom, and the Power of the Cross

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes you hear people say: I wish the Church today could be more like the early Church in the Bible. My response to that is usually: Don't worry, we are. See, the idea is that the early Church had it all together; they were spiritually vibrant; they had no less than the apostles to lead them and preach. It must have been a golden age for the Church, right? Wrong. The New Testament is pretty honest about the fact that problems in the Church go way back. The letter of 1 Corinthians testifies to this, and today on *Groundwork*, we begin a new series on this wonderful letter. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, with this program, we are starting a fairly large...for *Groundwork*...a fairly large, seven-part series on the first letter to the Corinthians; and just to get started here, Darrell, I think we can just sort of talk a little bit about what scholars sometimes talk about the Corinthian correspondence, in that we have two letters in the New Testament—1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians—but we think there might have been more, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, apparently scholars are saying that there are some letters that got lost in translation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And the current letters that we have are the ones we consider 1 and 2 Corinthians, but technically, they could be 2 and 4 Corinthians; but it is unclear on which letters we do have in the correspondence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there was more back-and-forth, and one of the things for sure that we know, reading between the lines, as it were...and we are going to note this throughout this series...is that what we now call 1 Corinthians was a reply letter. Paul had already gotten a letter from the Corinthians, and that letter from the Corinthians had a very, very long laundry list of questions, issues, concerns, and above all, controversies that were rocking that little congregation.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is right; and Scott, it really reminds me of the FAQ section when you are searching on a website or when you are in a questionnaire, because they hit him with a lot of questions, and he is like, well, according to the things that you wrote me about, here is this answer, here is that answer, and we will be able to dig into that soon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you can almost see Paul checking off the boxes as he goes along: Now concerning this, now concerning that. So, you know he is responding to stuff they already sent him. We don't have that letter either. That letter didn't survive. It is actually amazing that we have as much as we do from the 1st Century, but there were some letters that we don't have, and presumably the Holy Spirit knew we didn't need them either, right? The Spirit gave us the books we did need...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But anyway, scholars think that probably at the time, in the 1st Century when Paul wrote Corinthians, the Corinthian church was probably fairly small, maybe sort of like an average church today, probably fewer than a hundred members, but they were fighting about absolutely everything.

DARRELL DELANEY

You know what is really encouraging to me about this, is that there are no details spared; and there is always some drama involved in the Church, which actually is encouraging to me, because there continues to be issues in the Church, and it does not halt God or stop him from wanting to be involved, and choosing his Church to help and encourage them. That is encouraging for me to see in Corinth; it is encouraging for me to see today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I will tell you though, too, Darrell, I mean, the things that they were talking about, arguing about, and asking about weren't small things. They were asking about the meaning of the cross, they were asking about marriage, they were dealing with a man who had taken up a sexual relationship with his mother-in-law...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yikes!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Members were filing lawsuits against each other. There was a holier-than-thou element lording their gifts like speaking in tongues—more spectacular stuff—over lesser gifts, or what they called lesser gifts. Their celebration of the Lord's Supper was a mess, and there were people denying that there was any such thing as a resurrection; but you know, outside of all that, Corinth was a great place.

We are going to be dealing with all of those...most all of those...in the next six programs, but for this program, Darrell, let's just sort of begin where Paul begins, with the opening of the letter.

DARRELL DELANEY

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ²to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours. ³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— ⁶God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will also keep you firm to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, with the exception of the letter to the Galatians, Darrell, Paul's letters always open with a thanksgiving section, where he kind of, you know, lays it on thick a little bit; and this looks like that, but a friend of

mine...a very good preacher and teacher of preaching, Tom Long, in a sermon I heard back in the 1990s from Tom, he thinks that maybe Paul is being a little tongue in cheek here; because he is praising them for the very things he knows are tearing them apart.

DARRELL DELANEY

Do you think they had sarcasm back then, Scott? Because this is kind like: Oh, you're doing so well! You are doing so great! But we are going to deal with some of these issues that you actually have that you have been addressing. So, it is interesting that Tom would bring that up. I think that is a really interesting look at how this goes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; oh, you've been blessed with all kinds of speech...speaking in tongues was tearing them apart; you have all kinds of knowledge...we are going to take that up in the next part of the program. What they thought was knowledge wasn't such great knowledge. Oh, you have every spiritual gift...well, they were tearing each other's eyes out over spiritual gifts. He actually also doubles up on the holiness language. You could translate: You are sanctified and called to be holy...so, Paul is sort of saying: You guys are so holy, holy; you are just holy, holy people. I am guessing they might have squirmed in their seats a little bit when they first heard this.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is interesting because it could be a twist where it is holy, h-o-l-y, but actually holey, h-o-l-e-y, because they are missing some of the effective things that they need in order to be spiritually mature, and Paul will address that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What Paul is doing here is he is kind of previewing the letter, and therefore kind of previewing our seven-part series here on *Groundwork*, from 1 Corinthians because he kind of ticks through the things that he knows they have been asking questions about. He ticks through the things he knows that they are having some real struggles with; and so, he is basically...you know, he doesn't say it in as many words here...he doesn't say: Oh, by the way, I got your letter; but by listing everything...almost everything here that they had asked about in their letter to him, basically, you know, Paul is saying: I got your letter. I hear you; and we are going to be talking about this in everything else I am going write to you.

DARRELL DELANEY

Another thing that is interesting is the fact that Paul actually speaks about the faithful God who will keep them firm to the end, and who will present them to be blameless on the day; and this is important through all of the challenges that they are facing, that God's priority is that he will teach them and he will keep them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and that actually shows the fact that Paul is signaling some hope right at the start here; that God is the one who...I mean, he knows they are blame-worthy, but he says God is going to make you blameless, and that is good news.

So, anyway, that kind of previews the letter, but in just a moment, we are going to turn to one of the first things Paul needs to talk about, and it is about the cross and what really counts as wisdom and what really counts as foolishness. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, we are in this first program of a seven-part series on Paul's first letter...at least the first letter we have...to the Corinthian congregation; and we were just saying, Darrell, this was a congregation, not very

large, but boy, did they have a lot of problems.

DARRELL DELANEY

It seems that the problems are kind of multiplied because they have like a hundred or less members, but everybody who comes into church carry things with them, whether it be good or bad, or whatever it is. So, the saying goes: If you want to join a perfect church, don't join because you will mess it up by bringing your own issues.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly right. Now, actually, if our listeners have their Bibles open, and if they are looking at 1 Corinthians 1, they know that...really, the first thing after that introduction we just talked about in the previous segment...the first thing Paul talks about is some confusion about who they were following. Some were following Paul, some were following Paul's associate, Apollos; others said they had Jesus all to themselves; but Paul is going to deal with that a little bit more in depth in Chapter 3, so we are going to save that part of the next program...

DARRELL DELANEY

Cannot wait.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, we will just jump ahead now to verse 18 of Chapter 1, and listen to these words:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." ²⁰Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles; ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

DARRELL DELANEY

Now, Paul is speaking from experience on this, Scott, because he has been in Athens, he has been to the debating centers in the Areopagus. He knows that they look for wisdom, they look for rhetoricians, they look for the unique thought of the day, and he is saying that there is no power in any of that; and God actually used the most foolish person and the methods that they consider foolish in order to get his point across.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; yes, the Greeks, you know, they were famous for philosophy. Most everybody has heard of Socrates and Plato. The Greeks loved philosophy, they loved debates, they loved arguing philosophical positions. Indeed, I think it is in Acts 17, when Paul is in Athens, they liked engaging Paul, right up until the time when he started talking about the resurrection, and then it was like: Oh, that is something we cannot buy ever...

DARRELL DELANEY

We'll hear you later on this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, talk to you later. But apparently, Darrell, it looks like this love of worldly knowledge was something some of the Corinthians were maybe carrying with them into church.

DARRELL DELANEY

See, this Greek thought that you are talking about actually is, I would say, probably some baggage that they carried when they came in, because to have Christ crucified is definitely foolishness to any Greek

philosopher, anybody who thinks this worldly wisdom is priority. So, there is a process that these Hellenistic people need to go through in order to understand what it means to believe and have faith in God's power and wisdom, and it is going to change the way that they think about what they have had in the past.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is an upside-down world is what Paul basically presents. I mean, there really aren't too many groups in history, Darrell...I don't think there are too many groups that got founded the moment their leader died, right? I mean, we call it Good Friday. Most people would call it terrible Friday, you know. That should have been the end of the whole movement, and yet, Paul says Christ crucified is the best thing that we could possibly ever proclaim to you; and to the world, that is ridiculous. He says, actually, Darrell, even to the Jewish people it was what he called a *skandalon*—a scandal. A scandal is literally in Greek a stumbling block. They just couldn't...even the Jews...couldn't get past the idea that their Messiah would have gotten crucified or killed. That didn't make any sense to even the Jews.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think one of the reasons why it didn't make sense, Scott, is because the emphasis on victory and winning and retribution and power, those things are not new concepts. I don't know if we know this. We haven't invented that. That came from way back in the day; and when you use weakness as the center of the power, it just upends whatever understanding you thought you might have, considering how this method is done. It is really powerful that God would invert the thing and use weakness in order to be the source of power.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; again, it is completely backward. I was thinking, too, Darrell, that also today, and we will talk about this a bit in the final part of this program, power of any type continues to be the driver of society. The late comedian George Carlin had this about five- or six-minute, amazing monologue, where he just smashed together...it is called *Modern Man*...and he smashed together all the buzz phrases and catch phrases and advertising phrases today; and at one point, he summed up the wisdom of the modern world. He said: You push the envelope, manage risks, be a high flyer, get ahead of the curve; don't snooze or you'll lose; keep the pedal to the metal; have a power lunch; take a power nap; wear a power tie; take a power trip...it's all about power. That is how you get ahead in the world. That is worldly wisdom.

DARRELL DELANEY

And unfortunately, it doesn't work for everyone; and it is actually contrary to the method that we are taught that God uses; and so, the fact that God is turning this whole worldly structure on its head is actually good for us, because if we think about where Paul is going to go when he talks about the Corinthian believers and their own standards of how they came into being and how they came to the faith, then he connects that whole standard with their actual circumstance, and that is encouraging for them and for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, yes; I mean, he said...he goes on in verse 26...he says: Brothers and sisters, think of *you* when you were called. Not many of *you* were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

In other words, Darrell, what he is saying is that this backward gospel, which looks weak and couldn't possibly be effective, he is saying it fits you people, because you aren't the beautiful people, right? If they had *People* magazine back then, he is saying none of you have ever been on the cover of *People* magazine, right? A lot of the world thinks you are losers; well, guess what? God has a gospel tailor made just for you.

DARRELL DELANEY

And you know, that is definitely encouraging for those who struggle from a withdrawal of perfectionism, or for those who think that we need to get on the corporate ladder and climb as high as we can, or those who think power is the way to do things...you need to walk in and dominate a room, or whatever it is. The credentials that they have in their degrees, or the money that they make, God is saying none of that qualifies

us. The fact that Christ was crucified, and he is actually dealing with people who have a lower standard and come from a lowly background; that qualifies everyone, and the saying is that the playing field is level at the foot of the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, exactly; so, you know, Paul is saying don't get caught up in how the world calculates human value. God's math is really different, and as you just said, Darrell, that is exactly what I think we all need to know. That is good news.

DARRELL DELANEY

And Scott, coming up in the next segment, we are going to talk about the implications of some of that, so stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let's dive right back into this. We are going to talk about some of the implications of what we were just saying. So, Darrell, let's now go to 1 Corinthians 2.

DARRELL DELANEY

It reads: And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is again, right? The backward nature of the gospel. Paul is now saying even how the gospel gets communicated isn't dependent on Paul being a great speech writer or rhetorician or orator. Paul was often somewhere else. I think it is in 2 Corinthians where Paul is often defending himself against critics, and one of the criticisms of Paul was that he was always strong in his letters, but a little bit weak in person. We tend to think of Paul as a real, you know, powerhouse, but apparently, he wasn't the greatest speaker in the world; but he is saying that is okay, it is the power of the message that matters, not the power of the speaker. We are actually going to talk about that in the next program. The foolish message fits a weak way of even preaching it, because then it is all on the Spirit.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; Scott, I just want to say that I don't think that Paul was intending to be passive-aggressive. We sometimes get e-mails where people will blast you, but then when you meet them in person, they are timid. That is not the actual reason or the method of Paul at this point. Paul is actually not going to hold on to the credentials that he had. There are some places where he says: I am a Jew of Jews; I have been born of the tribe of Benjamin; I have all these accolades; to let them know he is qualified, but in this moment, it is really about the person and work of Jesus Christ that makes his work effective, and it is not about personalities, it is not about positions or power.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you said this earlier at the head of the program, Darrell. Noting that the Corinthians had so many problems was comforting to you because our churches today do, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

It sure is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the fact of the matter is that all through history the Church has been tempted by worldly power—political power. Anybody who knows sort of the history of the Middle Ages knows that there were a lot of popes in the Church. This was when there was just one church, before the Reformation. There were a lot of popes who tried to seize political power and wanted to rule the nation as well as the Church. And then there were a lot of kings who tried to rule the Church and disenfranchise the pope, or the bishop, or whoever. So, we have always been tempted in the Church to use worldly tactics. Even in more recent times, there are a lot of church leaders who get a little dizzy when they get close to political power. We still like cozying up to political power, and think that maybe it is the way to impose our will on the world.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, power can be intoxicating, Scott; and so, everyone who has an ego and pride have to resist the temptation to try to seize what the world says is important to have, and the methods and tactics that the world says this is how you get things done, because Christ and his crucifixion turned that thing upside down. He uses the weakness of the things of the world and not the strength of the things of the world in order to get his salvation to us; and the message that he is the one who comes in weakness helps us and encourages us as well, because we come in weakness. So, it is really encouraging.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is so important to remember, too, because, you know, Darrell, we are both pastors...you are actively pastoring now, I have pastored two congregations in my ministry as well; and you know, we have been hearing from a lot of our fellow pastors over the last while. Particularly when the pandemic was going on and during the time of COVID, a lot of congregations were fighting just as much as the Corinthians because a lot of stuff got politicized...a lot of political fissures broke out into the open during COVID, and a lot of pastors burned out, a lot of congregations splintered apart, people stopped talking to friends; and it is just a reminder that, you know, what the Corinthians struggled with in terms of being lured by human knowledge, human wisdom, worldly ways of getting things done as opposed to God's humble, sacrificial way, that is still with us. So, then the question becomes, Darrell, what do we do about it?

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, what we do about it is we go back to the basics. So, there was a time when we had this pandemic going on and at our church we went back to the basics: What does it mean to regather? What does it mean to remember? Re-member, as in reconstitute and be recapitulated by God and recalled by God, reaffirmed by God? I think that we need to get back to the basics. Sometimes go back to the gospel 101, if you will, so that we can remember Christ crucified is the main message, and everything springs out of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even that...in the United States in particular...even that we sometimes struggle with. A friend of mine at Calvin University wrote a book in 2020 called *Jesus and John Wayne*, where she documents sort of a long history over the last, you know, half century at least, maybe even longer in the United States, where we have gone for this muscular Jesus; sort of Jesus as Rambo, God's warrior, tough-guy Jesus, like John Wayne; and that is just not who Jesus actually was; and so...gospel, yes, gospel 101, this is what Paul does. He says I am just going to bring it right back to the cross. In the verses you read earlier, he says the only thing I want to know is Christ crucified; that is all I want to know; and I think Paul is saying that is all *you* need to know. You go back to the humble, sacrificial Jesus, and if you model yourself after him, a lot of the problems in the

Church are probably going to go away.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it also sets us free because there are internal and external pressures to be perfect...to win...to do what is well...to execute power that we really don't need when it comes to our relationship with Christ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And if we can be set free by the gospel that gives us the grace to move on, then we also can set other people free for saying: You don't need all of that, you don't need all the knowledge, you don't need all the credentials; what you need to know is Christ crucified, and that is the foundation of your faith. It sets you free from all these worldly standards.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and it will influence how you treat other people, it will influence who you think is important, right? As Paul wrote, and as we looked in the last segment, a lot of the world would look at the Corinthians and say: Losers! They are not the powerful...they are not powerbrokers in society; and Paul says: No, you are the most important people to God, and that means that everybody that we meet are the most important people to God; and so, all we can do is pray that the Spirit will give us the grace to follow where our God and our humble Savior Jesus lead us.

DARRELL DELANEY

Amen. Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we examine the issues the Apostle Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 3.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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