

Jesus: The Wisdom of God

DAVE BAST

The Apostle Paul wrote more often and at greater length to the church in Corinth than to any other church in the New Testament. The reason can be expressed in the old proverb: The squeaky wheel gets the grease. Paul wrote so often to the Corinthians because they had more problems than anyone else; and these ancient letters written 2000 years ago to address those problems are still relevant to us today. So, today on Groundwork, we want to dig into I Corinthians chapter 1 to see what God has done in Christ to show the world what true wisdom is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are in the middle of a series on the great biblical images; particularly from the New Testament, but with a lot of Old Testament background to them that illuminate for us the character of Jesus Christ, the person of Christ; what he came to do; who he really is. We have chosen four of those. Last week we looked at Jesus as the Word of God, and today we want to think about Jesus as the Wisdom of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Interestingly, when we came up with the idea for this series it was to get at these images: Word, Wisdom, Image, Lamb; but once we started doing the research, it also ended up being a series on some of the great first chapters of the Bible, because we are focusing on John 1 on two of the programs; today we will ultimately be in I Corinthians 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1 coming up. So, a lot of these come up early in some of the books, but Paul in particular, in the New Testament. The last time we looked at Jesus as the Word of God or the *logos* of God. Now we get to Jesus as the Wisdom of God, which in the Hebrew is *chokmah*, in Greek it is *sophia*, from which we get *sophistry*. It is a feminine term in both Hebrew and Greek, and interestingly, in the Old Testament, wisdom gets personified in the book of Proverbs.

DAVE BAST

You know, just mentioning *sophia* made me think of that great ancient church in the city of Istanbul called Hagia Sophia, which literally means: Holy Wisdom or St. Wisdom – Ste. Sophia – because there was a this sense that wisdom is much more than an idea or a concept, but a personality; and as you say, that dates back to the Old Testament. The great chapter in the Old Testament where wisdom is presented as a person, almost an incarnation, is Proverbs 8, as you mentioned. I will read a few verses from that.

¹²I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. ¹³The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. ¹⁴I have counsel and sound wisdom – so, wisdom has wisdom – I have insight; I have strength – so, there is an idea there that wisdom and power are somehow linked – ¹⁵By me kings reign and rulers decree what is just. ¹⁶By me, princes rule and nobles, all who govern justly. ¹⁷I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently find me. There it is. There is the introduction to the idea that wisdom is somehow a person.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have wisdom books in the Old Testament; we have Proverbs, Ecclesiastes; some think Job is also possibly a little bit in the wisdom tradition, certainly parts of Job fit in the wisdom tradition.

DAVE BAST

Some of the Psalms.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; some of the Psalms sound like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes; so, what is very important, especially as we, ultimately in this program, get to figuring out: What does it mean to say Jesus is the Wisdom of God? That is where we are going, but it is really important to know that Old Testament background; that you have to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is what you can learn out of a textbook. Knowledge is knowing the dates of history, knowing the multiplication tables, knowing the periodic table of elements...

DAVE BAST

It is information.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is information; wisdom is different. Wisdom is a knack for understanding how the world works on a practical level. Wisdom is spitting into the wind and having it come back into your face and saying: Well, that did not work. I will not do that again. Or sawing off the branch you are sitting on; trying to speak patiently to a foolish person. You learn knowledge in school; you learn wisdom through the school of hard knocks.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; through the practical experience of life. Another way of thinking about the difference is this: The opposite of knowledge is ignorance – simply the lack of knowledge. The opposite of wisdom – especially in biblical terms – in terms of the book of Proverbs – is folly or foolishness – just how the Bible develops that concept...

Neal Plantinga, whom we both know, has a wonderful book called: *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, and he develops this idea that sin is not just evil or wickedness or wrongdoing; sin is stupid, sin is folly, sin is foolish.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And particularly, sin is what I think Neal describes as sort of morally culpable folly; in other words, you did something very, very foolish, but you had every reason to know that would not work. If you just paid attention to life, listened to the wisdom of your elders, you would not have done that; but the thing about being a fool in the Old Testament sense is that you are also very often unteachable. You do not pay attention; you do not understand how God's world works. Again, I know Neal did not come up with this phrase, but I know I got it from Neal's book, where he said: Fools are often in error but never in doubt.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is good; and it does not have to do with your IQ, really. A person can be very smart in one sense and have lots of advanced degrees, and still be a fool. A fool is really a person who does not look ahead and consider wisely the consequences of the choices they make.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What might happen if I do this?

DAVE BAST

Right; so, a fool is somebody who slams a six-pack and then gets behind the wheel. A fool is a two-pack a day smoker. A fool is a farmer who has a bumper crop and says: Huh, what shall I do? I know, I will tear

down my barns and build bigger ones. And God says to him that night: You fool, your life will be required of you. So, you are not looking ahead and considering what is the wise way to live in the light of the fact that I am a creature of eternity?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and in spiritual terms, Psalm 14 is the famous line: The fool says in his heart, “There is no God,” or actually, as that psalm has been explained to me, that probably is not atheism the way we understand it today; it is more: The fool says in his heart, there is no God *here*. God is not around. He is not watching...

DAVE BAST

His back is turned, I can get away with this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As though that could ever happen, but a fool thinks it could. A fool thinks you can get away with it; God does not see; which is why Proverbs says again and again: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. You start getting wisdom when you understand that God is in control; God is loving; God has set up his creation; he wants us to flourish in it, but you are going to have to go with his flow, and that is what wisdom is. Wisdom is the knack for going with God’s flow. He set up the creation; he has shown us how to live in it; and if you ignore what God says, well, do not blame us that you drove off a cliff. I mean, there are ways to avoid that.

DAVE BAST

Here is one other thing, I think, before we leave this Old Testament background of wisdom. The way that Proverbs 8 associates wisdom with power or strength; the strength to do, to rule; a wise ruler knows how to be just; but also the power of creation, which is kind of interesting in light of our last week’s program – people can look it up online if they are interested; if they missed it – of Jesus being the Word who created all things; through whom God did his work of bringing the world into being; and wisdom is there in creation, too, according to Proverbs 8; so, wisdom says in verse 22:

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works; before his deeds of old. ²³I was formed long ago at the very beginning when the world came to be. ²⁸When he established the clouds. ²⁹When he gave the sea its boundary. When he marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence.

So, this is kind of a cool image of – not so much here that wisdom is the agent, but wisdom is sort of the cheerleader who is applauding as God makes all of these wonderful things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is very clear that wisdom – there is a lot of knowledge you can have about the creation – a lot of facts and things – but wisdom is how it was set up to work, and wisdom was there in the beginning just observing and seeing how things go. And Jesus now, we believe, from the New Testament, is the ultimate personification – he is wisdom in flesh, and we will see what that means in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture; today especially in I Corinthians Chapter 1. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we are thinking about this image of Jesus as the Wisdom of God, and also the power of God, and the difference between wisdom and information – we have been talking about that, but maybe it is especially relevant living as we do in the Information Age.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and if you want to see this difference, Dave, and it is not hard to see; and maybe this is a little cynical on my part, but people today with their smart phones – interesting that they are called “smart” phones – you can Google your way to anything. We have access to more information than ever before. Wikipedia – it does not matter what it is, we can look up anything, and a lot of people think that that knowledge – that kind of

knowledge – is power; that this has really been a big advancement for the human race; that we are in the Information Age – the information superhighway, as the Internet was initially called – but are we wiser? The cynical observation is: No, we are not wiser. We have more information, but if you look at the comments people leave on CNN's website, on the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, underneath the articles, and you just see such unwise comments. So, we have more information than ever before, but have we really become wiser in terms of understanding how the world works and what is prudent? I do not think those two have exactly gone hand in hand. Nobody talks about the wisdom superhighway. I do not think we have gotten wiser just because we have gotten more knowledge.

DAVE BAST

Right; well, we are still the same people underneath. The opportunity to express your views – everyone can be a published author now with a blog – simply means a lot of people are going to get the opportunity to express their folly and reveal it to those around. So, yes; the whole idea that because we have so much information and it is rapidly expanding, we are going to suddenly banish all disease, and we are going to create eternal life, and we are going to be able to make our children as we want them to be, and eliminate... Do not forget the law of unintended consequences. This can lead to some very bad things, given what human beings are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you just have this really big sense that if the Apostle Paul were still alive today and observing all of this, he would write the same thing to us that he wrote in I Corinthians 1, starting at verse 20, where Paul wrote: Where 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, Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, 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; the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

So, there it is.

DAVE BAST

There it is, right in verse 24: Jesus Christ is the Wisdom of God and the Power of God. They are found in him; they are seen in him; they are revealed in him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And particularly in his cross, which is the exact opposite, of course, of what most people would consider to be a status symbol or a hopeful sign. The cross then – we forget it now – but then the cross was a sign of capital punishment. It was like the electric chair. It was like seeing a hangman's noose. Seeing a cross was never something that put a spring in people's step, because it was where people died. So, it was not exactly a rallying symbol, and yet, there Paul says, all of God's wisdom got revealed in what happened to his own Son on that cross.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and he hammers away at this in this whole passage. We did not read verse 17, a little bit before. We started at verse 20, but listen to these phrases: The Gospel – that is from verse 17; the cross of Christ, verse 17; the message of the cross, verse 18; Christ crucified, verse 23; over and over and over and over, he is drawing our attention to this thing that happened on Good Friday on Golgotha, just outside the gates of Jerusalem; and he says: That is the wisdom of God; that is where the power of God and the wisdom of God was revealed. Not just the life of Jesus; not just his wonderful birth and teaching and life and ministry, and the great example that he was – and oh, you would think, you know, that Paul would draw our attention to the parables of Jesus. They are full of wisdom in that Old Testament sense of wow, that is smart; that is intelligent; here is how you should live; but no, he kind of bypasses even the teaching ministry of Christ – not that that is not important, but what he wants us to see is that the ultimate expression of the wisdom of God is

found at Calvary.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it reminds me of the Apostles' Creed, where we always kind of weirdly jump from "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate" it is like, what about all of the stuff that came in between? Well, that is really important, but it is that suffering – it is that death – and again, as we said in the first segment of this program, Dave, there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is information and facts and factoids and things you can memorize out of a text book. Wisdom is how does the world work? What makes sense? What functions and how do you know? So, when Paul says that the cross reveals the wisdom of God, what he is saying is: The cross reveals God's perspective on what works. Jesus came to save us, and that cross was necessary. Somehow or other, this reveals to us how the world works, and we need to pay attention to that cross if we are going to figure that out.

DAVE BAST

Right; and another great theme running through this section of I Corinthians 1, is that the wisdom of God revealed in the death of Jesus Christ is in diametrical opposition to what human wisdom is and what human wisdom thinks is a real smart thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If the cross is wisdom, Paul says, then what everybody else thinks is wisdom is actually folly. It is not the way the world works.

DAVE BAST

Right; so he says: Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the Law? Where is the philosopher? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? He is showing it up. It is an in-your-face sort of moment with respect to what is wisdom; and God was pleased through the *foolishness* of the preached message of the Gospel to save those who believe. Greeks are looking for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified; so there is this contrast, and that is what we want to dig into a little bit more in just a bit.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork. Today, Dave, we are continuing looking at some of the ways the New Testament used to describe Jesus. Once the Son of God became flesh, there was so much to say that they reached for a lot of images, including a lot of images with rich Old Testament background. Everything we are looking at in this series has Old Testament background, including today's theme of the Wisdom of God, and how Jesus is the personification, the in-flesh version of divine wisdom, and we have been saying what that means is that God is revealing through Jesus what works and what does not work. That is what wisdom says. You read the whole book of Proverbs and almost every single proverb is about what works and what does not work. Paul says in I Corinthians 1, in the passage you just read, what works happened at the cross; and if the cross is wisdom – if that is what works – then most of what we usually think of as success and power and strength is upside down from God's perspective.

DAVE BAST

Right. So listen to this verse again, verse 21:

For 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.

So, the question is: What works when it comes to knowing God? How do you know God? How do you find out... most people have a sense that there is a God. How do you come to know Him? And the world's wisdom has a certain prescription for answering that, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that started at the Tower of Babel: We will get there on our own. We will build our own stairway to heaven, and we will get there – we will mount up – if we just try harder – if we live well – if you are more

moral than the next guy, you will be fine. Maybe God grades on the curve or just takes in the good people. The whole New Testament screams: NO to that aspirational view of salvation that *you* can do it by saying: No, that is not how the world works; that is not wisdom, that is folly. Wisdom is at the cross and the cross says: You cannot do it.

DAVE BAST

Or today, people will say: Well, just look inside you. God is within. How do you know God? Look within. There He is; you have the divine spark living inside you. Or maybe they will say it is through proper rituals or observances. You do this, that, and the other thing; and to all of that God says: No, it does not work. You do not come to know God that way. Instead, it is through a story, which is kind of mind-blowing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It ends at a cross, and that Paul in I Corinthians I says: It is a stumbling block; and in the Greek that is the Greek word *scandalum*, from which we get our word scandal. There is something scandalous about the cross. Now, often when we use *scandal* today, it is usually involving some sin, but really what a scandal is, is something that literally trips somebody up.

DAVE BAST

A stumbling block.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the thing over which... Yes, a scandal is something where a good person lands flat on his face. For all of us who think we have our eyes to the sky and we are looking to get our own way to God, and all of a sudden there is this cross in our path and we trip right over it and we fall flat on our face, and the cross says: No; you cannot get to God that way. You get to God through this cross by gaining union with Jesus Christ through faith.

DAVE BAST

There is a lot of stuff in the New Testament that is very appealing to people. Most people love the Beatitudes; they love the Sermon on the Mount; and it is beautiful. It is wonderful. Non Christians, Christians, whoever they are, they are drawn to this figure of Jesus the teacher, and love your enemies and turn the other cheek, and all that; but underneath that there is another stratum of material, and that is more like bedrock or like a stumbling block, and when people get to that, they stub their toe and they say: Whoa, wait a minute; time out. I gotta believe in this guy dying for me and my sins, and I am not good enough and I somehow need a sacrifice? Give me a break!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Give me a break; or bring on the health and wealth preachers that are sometimes on TV, who say: No, no, no, no, no. You can get your best life now by being successful. It is the great American success story – rags to riches. People would much rather listen to that than a good, old-fashioned, humble yourself at the foot of the cross, repent, be made new, let God drown you in baptism. People would rather listen to happier messages, and what Paul would say is: Look, Jesus is the wisdom of God. Jesus crucified; preaching, of all things, is the way that that message gets communicated, and that is what you need. If you believe anything else, it is folly.

DAVE BAST

Which, incidentally, back to the power of the Word – the Word of God itself has the power to affect what it calls forth; so when the Gospel is preached and people are called to believe this: Repent and believe; that Word can make that happen in people's lives, so that is another little tie-in with...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I like I Corinthians 1:21, which we read earlier in the regular translation, but Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase, *The Message*, gets at some of this. "Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb –

preaching, of all things – to bring those who trust Him into the way of salvation.” The world keeps trying to know God on its own, and it ain’t gonna work. It is just not going to work. You have to listen to the Word preached. It sounds dumb. All through the ages, preaching has been described as boring and dull and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah; but no, no, true preaching of the Gospel – that is the way to connect with that wisdom of God and the cross.

DAVE BAST

And the power of God – there is power there – wisdom and power together. I think there is one last thought here, maybe, to share, and that is that the reason God’s wisdom in the cross of Christ is in your face with respect to human wisdom, is that God intends it to be that way, because he intends to humble the pride of the human race; even to shame them. So, Paul says, as he goes on – this is again Eugene Peterson: Take a good look, friends, at who you are when you got called – this is a little bit later – look at yourselves, you Church. Many of the best and brightest – Nah, huh uh, not you; not many influential, not many from high society families, isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits; chose these nobodies to expose the hollow pretensions of the somebodies. There it is, right there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is how you get saved, and so at the end of that chapter: Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. We have nothing to be proud of; we are undone, but God loves us, and in Christ has saved us through that cross.

DAVE BAST

That is Good News – that is Gospel. Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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