

None of the Rulers of this Age Understood This

^{1Cor 2:3} And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of **this age** or of the **rulers of this age**, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before **the ages** for our glory. ⁸ None of the **rulers of this age** understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

¹⁰ these things God has **revealed to us through the Spirit**. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, **interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual**.

¹⁴ The **natural person** does not accept the things of the **Spirit of God**, for they are folly to him, and he is **not able to understand them** because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ “**For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?**” But we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:3-16

The “Lost” Screwtape Letter

A Newly Unearthed Fragment from the Infernal Archives *(Recovered from a sealed clay jar in the Judean wilderness. The jar also contained, inexplicably, several pages of a 16th-century French manuscript attributed to Michel de Nostredame. The letter itself, however, is written in a formal bureaucratic hand consistent with the late Second Temple period. How the two ended up together remains a matter of some scholarly embarrassment.)*

My dear Wormwood,

I have been handed what the Research Division insists on calling “**a priority interpretive assignment**,” which is their delicate way of saying they have no idea what to do with it and would prefer the blame to fall elsewhere. A small dossier of the Enemy’s writings has been compiled for us:

the so-called Servant songs of Isaiah, that interminable lament in the Psalter about being poured out like water and having one's hands and feet treated in a most undignified fashion, and a few cryptic lines from Zechariah about someone being pierced and later looked upon with mourning. We are to determine the strategic significance, if any.

I have read them. Twice. Then I had the junior analysts read them and submit summaries. The results have been... illuminating, in the worst possible sense.

The surface meaning is almost aggressively straightforward. A chosen figure is despised, rejected by men, acquainted with grief, wounded, crushed, numbered with transgressors, and finally cut off from the land of the living. One passage even stoops to mention the division of clothing by lot, as though the Enemy felt obliged to include wardrobe logistics in His cosmic correspondence. Another has the gall to suggest that this same figure somehow bears the iniquities of others and makes intercession for transgressors.

At this point the more literal-minded among the staff began to grow restless. One of them actually suggested that the texts might be describing a deliberate plan in which the Enemy's anointed one suffers public humiliation and

death. I had him reassigned to the Department of Circular Reasoning before the idea could spread.

Let us be clear, Wormwood. Even if some measure of suffering or rejection is involved — and the texts certainly make that difficult to deny — the notion that this could be the decisive means of victory is **grotesque**. A “Lord of glory” who ends as a spectacle of weakness? A cosmic triumph achieved through what any competent observer would recognise as total defeat and public shame? The idea **offends** not only **against reason** but against good taste. It is the sort of thing one expects from third-rate apocalyptic ranters or the more unhinged of the Sibyls — not from a power that once ordered the morning stars. If the Enemy truly intended to stake the entire conflict on something so foolish, so exposed, and so apparently final, he would be handing us the war with a ribbon on it.

We have therefore reached the only sensible conclusion available to us. These passages must be read as elaborate political allegory, or perhaps as exaggerated national complaint dressed up in individual language. Possibly they are a coded warning about some future Jewish pretender who will foolishly allow himself to be destroyed by the authorities. In any case, the plain sense — that this suffering is the actual wisdom and power of God — is **too absurd** to

be entertained by serious minds. Whatever the Enemy is doing, He is not so lacking in subtlety (or self-respect) as to accomplish His purposes through the public execution of His own champion.

Continue monitoring the situation, of course. But do not waste valuable resources chasing phantoms. The moment we begin to take the surface meaning of these texts seriously, we have already conceded the field to chaos and sentimentality. Stick to the intelligent reading. Anything else is simply **too stupid** to be true.

Your increasingly fatigued uncle,

SCREWTAPE

OK, no, it wasn't really a letter found in the deserts of Judea next to some Nostradamus quatrains, nor did C. S. Lewis write this. It's my attempt to show what **could have been happening in the spiritual realm** prior to the coming of Christ in light of what was a known prophecy to the Serpent of his coming doom from **Genesis 3:14-15**, a passage that was directed at him. **"The LORD God said to the serpent ... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head,**

and you shall bruise his heel.” Because he knew what was coming, it is perfectly reasonable to think that every time a new OT book was written down that he and others of the infernal realm began scouring their pages, looking for predictions about the coming Messiah that they might use to their own advantage.

1 Corinthians 2: Context and Structure

This takes us into 1 Corinthians 2, which is a continuation of the argument that began in 1Cor 1:17. In the previous passage, Paul has talked about how the wisdom of God is foolishness and a stumbling block to men, but the foolishness of God is wiser than all the wisdom of this present age. And what is God’s foolishness? It is the message of the cross—the plan from eternity past that God in human flesh would in his death actually defeat sin, death, and the devil. The cross is all central, because it’s message is the very power of God to save people from these three great enemies.

Last time we went through 2:2, because we saw that this was the chiastic end that began in 1:17. However, it is also clear that 2:1-5 forms its own nice paragraph—a paragraph that really deals with Paul’s manner of ministry. He has said that when he came to them, he did not come proclaiming the

testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, but he decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified (2:1-2). Vv. 3-5 will take this to a conclusion.

Vv. 6-9 then deal with the content of the wisdom that Paul speaks (or as one commentary outlines it, “Exposition of True Wisdom.” Vv. 10-16 take us to the end of the chapter and the conclusion of the long argument by teaching us how this wisdom is received, or again from the same commentary, “The Work of the Holy Spirit as Revealer: But of What?”¹

Two independent chiastic analyses of the passage put the center *near* the same place, but not exactly identical. One is a thematic or word-connection chiasm that has the center on the quotation of Isaiah 64:4 in 1Cor 2:9.

A / A’: “know” language + Christ (2:2 “know... Christ”; 2:16 “known the mind of the Lord... mind of Christ”)

B / B’: man’s wisdom vs. Spirit/Spirit of God (2:4–5 and 2:13–14)

C / C’: “not... of this world / of the world” (2:6 and 2:12)

D / D’: God’s wisdom/mystery + knowing / revealing by the Spirit (2:7–8 and 2:10–11)

E: the Isaiah 64 quotation as center (2:9)²

¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 226; 252.

² Modified from Pete Owen, “1 Corinthians 2:1-3:1,” *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Feb 13, 2015).

The other sees only a smaller chiasm, which is very tight and **centered on the cross**, just like the previous one in Ch. 1. In this case, the center is just prior to the OT citation—on how the “**rulers of this age**” would never have crucified the Lord of Glory—making this the most important part of the chapter.

- A) ⁷ But we impart **a secret and hidden wisdom** of God,
- B) which **God decreed** before the ages **for our glory**.
- C) ⁸ None of the rulers of this age **understood** this,
- D) **for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.**
- C') ⁹ But, as it is written, “**What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined,**
- B') **what God has prepared for those who love him**”—
- A') ¹⁰ these things God has **revealed to us through the Spirit**.³

The Manner of Paul’s Ministry (1Cor 2:[1]3-5)

Let’s tidy up **the manner of Paul’s ministry** first. **Vv. 3-5**, “**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, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.**” Paul deliberately came in **weakness and fear and trembling (3)**. He was not

³ **Kenneth Bailey**, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011): 103.

some soothsayer, some slick snake-oil salesman, some smooth debater, some persuasive philosopher. He was not arrogant with them. He was not overly confident in his presentation. But he was **not fearing them** either, as if he was terrified that they wouldn't accept him or his message. Rather, he was fearing God and wanted only to please him! This was not an act. Rather, it was a humbled man coming to them *as himself*. That's vital. Paul wasn't a fake or phony. **He was authentic**, just being Paul—a lesson a lot of young preachers would do well to heed as they try to pretend in the pulpit to be someone they are not. Paul didn't think the world of himself. He knew what he was before the Lord blinded him on the road to Emmaus and then opened his eyes in the house of a man he was going there to murder. So he came in quiet, calm, humility to the people of Corinth.

He narrows back on in on his “**speech and message**” (**vs. 4**). This returns to the **method** (speech) followed by the message. It's an ABA'B' structure set off by “not” then “but.”

A My speech (*logos*)

B And my message (*kērygma*)

A' Not in plausible words of wisdom

B' But in demonstration of the Spirit and of power

The method is familiar to what we saw last time. He came “**not in plausible words of wisdom.**” His method was not normal sounding to those who usually trade in ideas. It was the opposite. But that **method was combined with a message** that wasn’t even plausible. It was about the cross, that upside down message about suffering rather than glory, about death as enthronement. That’s what began to bother some of these people so much, as they began thinking maybe they shouldn’t have listened to this guy in the first place.

But Paul says his message was “**in demonstration of the Spirit and power.**” Paul believed so much that **this message was the power of God** that he simply proclaimed what and how he was told, so that if anything would come of it, it would be proven that it was a miraculous work of God and not a manipulation of a clever salesman. *Soli Deo Gloria* (To God alone be the glory) is essentially what he is saying—and God here is the person of **the Holy Spirit**.

Besides **carefully guarding *Soli Deo Gloria***, Paul has a secondary implication that comes from his method and message. “**So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God**” (5). *Sola Fide*. **Faith** alone. Faith must always be placed in **Christ** alone (*solus Christus*). Not in man. Certainly not in gimmicks, devices, tactics, or excitements of man. This is what Paul is teaching.

This is something the long tradition of [American Revivalists](#) which began 200 years ago in the first half of the 19th century with Charles Finney have long denied. [Finney](#) for example said,

It is altogether improbable that religion will ever make progress among heathen nations *except through the influence of revivals ... There must be excitement* sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers, and roll back the tide of degradation and sin. And precisely so far as our own land approximates to heathenism, *it is impossible for God or man to promote religion in such a state of things but by powerful excitements* ... [Revival of Religion] is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means — as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.⁴

Finney effectively [denies that the Gospel by itself is the power of God unto salvation](#). He insists that without the right use of means and powerful excitements (read emotional manipulation), promoting religion is “impossible.” Paul is the opposite and that’s why his ministry was not built on outward appearances, but only on the cross, so that God’s power and our salvation be rooted only in the power and wisdom of God, a deeply important fact, especially for those

⁴ [Charles Finney](#), [Lectures on Revival of Religion](#) (New York: F. H. Revell, 1868, 1835), 11-12.

who struggle knowing if they've done enough, tried hard enough, been good enough for him. No. You haven't. That's the message of the cross. God still gave you Christ and did all that was necessary through his death to make your salvation real through faith.

The Exposition of True Wisdom (1Cor 2:6-9)

Now we move to vv. 6-9 and the exposition or content of true wisdom. He begins by talking about “the mature.” “Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom” (6a). Who are the “mature?” The word is *teleios*, and it can also be translated as “perfect.” Sadly, this is a word⁵ that people in those days as well as our own could have heard a bit differently. In fact, in just a few short decades, it will be transformed by the Gnostics into something very different, much like when Mormons or JW's tell you they believe in Jesus, but do not define him anything like the Bible does. It is important to talk about this. Context matters!

Teleios could carry the idea that those “in the know” who gained special knowledge and secret wisdom could obtain to a higher spiritual life, a form of perfectionism. Curiously, the same idea has gained currency in certain “holiness” and “higher life” movements in Protestantism that

⁵ Along with “spirit” (*pneuma*), “wisdom” (*sophia*), and “power” (*dynamis*) used a moment ago.

teach two tiers of Christians—the ordinary Joe Schmo vs. those who have been perfected—those who no longer sin. This **dangerous interpretation** of Paul will return with a vengeance in the next chapter.⁶

Because of these misunderstandings, the ESV rightly chooses a word “**mature**” rather than “perfect,” to make sure you do not confuse the two. In **vs. 14** Paul will talk about the “**natural**” (*psychikos*) person. This is distinguished from this “mature” Christian or “**spiritual**” Christian in **vs. 15** (same thing). Paul is **not creating two classes of Christians**. Rather, the “natural” are not immature Christians; they are those who refuse the word of the cross. The wisdom of the cross is available to all, not those with secret knowledge. There is no deeper, esoteric content reserved here for a spiritual elite. Frankly, if that is what some of them were, they are not even saved. This is a serious warning. It means they still belong to the old age, the old order, the realm of Satan. This is an **eschatological** term.

That may not even make sense to some. Eschatology is about the coming of a new “age,” which Jesus says is here in his kingdom now. Notice how Paul says that we impart wisdom to the mature, “**although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.**” “This

⁶ **Thiselton** has a good short excursus on this word. See p. 232-33.

age” is the key. Age is the word “*aion*,” and while sometimes translated as “world,” this is here improper. It refers to an era *of time* like the age of the Greeks vs. the later age of the Romans rather than something like the earth vs. heaven. In this case, it is the “age” of the Holy Spirit, brought about by Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. This was not here prior to Christ’s coming, save in type and shadow.

Notice how it says these are “doomed to pass away.” To what does this “age” refer? It refers to *the present evil age* (Gal 1:4). It is a category of sin vs. righteousness, not physical vs. spiritual. This is ethical and moral. But you say, “that doesn’t sound like eschatology.” The old order of sin, death, and the demonic rule ... something has happened to them in the cross of Christ. They are passing away because the age to come has broken in through Christ’s death and resurrection.

What do I mean? Paul continues, “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed *before the ages* for our glory” (7). There’s the word age again (now plural). So, something secret and hidden in the decrees of God is now being made known, not to the elite, not to those “in the club,” but to all? What is it? It was a secret that ee says, “None of the *rulers of this age* understood ...” (8a). There’s our word “age” now a fourth time, but also the

word “rulers” comes back for a second appearance. The “rulers of this age.” To whom does this refer?

The word “**ruler**” is the Greek *archōn*; it is plural. There has been much literature written on this question. Basically, the arguments fall into three camps.⁷ **First**, these rulers are *purely human*. This is in fact what we see in **Acts 3:17** and **13:27**, what some scholars believe is the first use of Paul’s comment here in **1Cor 2:6-8**.⁸ In the first, Peter says about their putting Christ to death, “**And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.**” In the second, Paul himself says, “**For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize [Messiah] nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.**” Both are said in the context of Herod, Pilate, and the Sanhedrin.

A second view says no, these are not human rulers, but *spiritual-heavenly rulers* or princes. The first use of *archōn* in this way is in **Daniel 10:13, 20-21; 12:1 LXX** (especially Theodotion’s Greek as opposed to the OG). The princes of Persia, Greece, and Michael are all identified by this term. Many intertestamental Jewish works speak about *archōns* as heavenly

⁷ For a survey see **Michael B. Evanson**, “[The Rulers of This Age \(1 Cor. 2.6-8\): A Review of Current Research](#),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 24.3 (June 2026): 259-76.

⁸ For example, **Wesley Carr**, “[The Ruler’s of This Age – I Corinthians II. 6-8](#),” *New Testament Studies* 23 (1976): 25.

beings (cf. Gk Enoch 6:7-8; TestSim 2:7; TJudah 19:4; TDan 5:5-6; TSol 3:5; 6:1; 16:5; Jub 10:8; 17:16; AscIsa 10:16; 11:19). John's Gospel identifies Satan as the "prince/ruler" of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. Barn 4:13; 18:2). 1Pet 1:12 and Eph 3:10 speak of ignorant spiritual beings. And many early Fathers took this same view.⁹

A third view is that *both* can be in view; they are not mutually exclusive. In my mind, this is the best option, although I will say that Paul very likely has human rulers as only a secondary instrumental cause, since it doesn't really seem to fit well with what he's talking about. After all, as Heiser says, "It makes little sense for Paul to see irony in the fact that humans didn't know God's mystery-plan involved the death and resurrection of the messiah."¹⁰ Why?

⁹ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles* (CSEL 81.3:24-25), "The rulers of this age are not only those who were great among the Jews and the Romans but also every spiritual power which sets itself up against God. The Jewish rulers cannot be called rulers of this age, because they were subject to the Romans. Nor did the Romans crucify Jesus, because Pilate himself said that he found no fault in him. The rulers who crucified him were the demons. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah but not that he was the Son of God, and so it can be said that they crucified him in ignorance." In Gerald Lewis Bray, *1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 22.

Augustine, *The Ascension* 263, "But if Christ had not been put to death, death would not have died. The devil was overcome by his own trophy, for the devil rejoiced when, by seducing the first man, he cast him into death. By seducing the first man, he killed him.¹¹ By killing the last man, he lost the first from his snare." (Also in Bray). Also Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 36; Origen, *On First Principles* 3.3.1-3; likely Ignatius, *Ephesians* 19:1; 18:1; 17:1 (See Evanson who disagrees with Carr on this).

¹⁰ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 330 n. 26.

Consider three important points. The context says they are “doomed to pass away.” Humans have been passing away since Adam; but not fallen angels.¹¹ No, only their defeat by Jesus at the cross guarantees that they will one day be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:10) where they will “die like men” (Ps 82:7). Second, these same *archōns* (technically, *archē*) reappear in 1Cor 15:24—a passage which is chiastically and thematically connected to ch. 2, where they likewise will be destroyed by Christ when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying them. More eschatology. Finally, Jesus is currently judging and ruling over them. Peter says that because Jesus died, rose, and ascended that angels, authorities, and powers are now subjected to him (1Pet 3:22).

Why is Jesus currently ruling over them? *Because of the cross*; it legally judged them by exposing and nullifying their claim to authority. In the biblical worldview, the rebellious powers exercised a temporary dominion over the nations. This is what Heiser called the Deuteronomy 32 worldview (Deut 32:8-9; cf. 4:19-20; 17:3; 29:26; Ps 2; Dan 10). Colossians 2:15 says that Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them [in the cross].” Their power rested on accusation, fear

¹¹ Even those “locked in Tartarus” in 1 Enoch and 1 Peter will be “let out.”

of death, and the hold of sin (**Heb 2:14-15; Col 2:14-15**). By bearing the curse and canceling the record of debt, Christ removed the legal ground of their accusation. Once the debt is paid and the curse is exhausted, their right to rule and accuse is publicly revoked. This is the very reason why Gentiles be they in Corinth or Colorado can even be saved! **The death of Christ is an apocalyptic event that inaugurates the defeat of the hostile powers.** And as apocalyptic, it is eschatological. The age to come has broken in today. You think eschatology is only future? No, beloved. “**In these last (eschatos) days, God has spoken to us by his Son**” (**Heb 1:2**). The kingdom of God is at hand. God commands all men everywhere to repent and join the forces of Light under the banner of the Son of God. Satan has been defeated. He holds no power here.

There are **two amazing things said about this**. Paul first says that “**None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory**” (**1Cor 2:8b**). This is one of the two possible centers of our passage. This is precisely what I was trying to get at in the lost Screwtape letter. They thought they could use the prophecies to their advantage? So they killed him. Wrong move. Checkmate, God says. God deliberately obscured the meaning and function of the death of Christ, precisely so they

would put Jesus to death. So that *who* would? Pontius Pilate and Herod, but **also Satan** who inspired them! Yet, in his great mercy and providence, God still told the entire world about the whole event hundreds and thousands of years before hand, in many places (here's [a Top 20 list](#)):

- **Isaiah 53** (esp. 53:4–6, 7, 9, 11–12) Suffering Servant pierced, crushed, bears sins, silent, numbered with transgressors, buried with the rich. Heavily quoted/alluded (e.g., 1 Pet 2:24–25; Acts 8:32–35; Matt 8:17; Luke 22:37; Rom 4:25; etc.).
- **Psalms 22** (esp. 22:1, 7–8, 16, 18) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”; mocked; hands and feet pierced; garments divided and lots cast. Directly quoted by Jesus (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34) and fulfilled in the Gospel passion accounts.
- **Zechariah 12:10** “They will look on me, the one they have pierced.” Quoted in John 19:37 (side pierced).
- **Psalms 69:21** Given gall/vinegar for thirst. Fulfilled in Matt 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; Luke 23:36; John 19:28–30.
- **Deuteronomy 21:22–23** “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” Explicitly applied in Galatians 3:13.
- **Exodus 12:46 / Numbers 9:12 / Psalm 34:20** No bone of the Passover lamb (or the righteous) broken. Fulfilled in John 19:33–36.
- **Zechariah 13:7** “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” Quoted by Jesus in Matt 26:31; Mark 14:27 (in connection with his arrest and death).
- **Isaiah 50:6** Gave back to those who struck, face not hidden from shame and spitting. Alluded to in the passion narratives (e.g., Matt 26:67; 27:30).
- **Psalms 31:5** “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” Quoted by Jesus at the moment of death (Luke 23:46).

- **Zechariah 11:12–13** Betrayed for thirty pieces of silver; money used for the potter's field. Fulfilled in Matt 26:14–15; 27:3–10 (directly leads to the crucifixion).
- **Genesis 3:15** Seed of the woman will bruise the serpent's head; serpent will bruise his heel. The protoevangelium; understood as the first promise of the cross's victory through suffering (alluded in Rom 16:20; Rev 12; etc.).
- **Numbers 21:8–9** Bronze serpent lifted up so that those who look live. Explicitly applied by Jesus to his own lifting up on the cross (John 3:14–15; cf. 12:32–33).
- **Isaiah 53:12** "He was numbered with the transgressors." Quoted by Jesus himself as about to be fulfilled (Luke 22:37); seen in the two criminals crucified with him.
- **Psalms 22:16** "They pierced my hands and my feet." Strongly linked to the crucifixion (alluded in the Gospel accounts and John 20:25–27).
- **Isaiah 52:14** Appearance so marred beyond human likeness. Connected to the severe physical suffering of the passion.
- **Daniel 9:26** "The Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing." Understood as the Messiah's violent death.
- **Psalms 22:7–8** Mocked with "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him." Explicitly paralleled in the taunts at the cross (Matt 27:39–43; Mark 15:29–32; Luke 23:35).
- **Amos 8:9** The sun will go down at noon; darkness over the land. Linked to the three hours of darkness at the crucifixion (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44).
- **Isaiah 53:9** Assigned a grave with the wicked, but with the rich in his death. Fulfilled in the burial by Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57–60).
- **Leviticus 16** (Day of Atonement / scapegoat typology) The sin-bearing goat. Strong typological background for the cross (alluded in the broader NT theology of atonement, e.g., Hebrews; 2 Cor 5:21).

This was done so that no one on earth could say God didn't tell us and so no one in heaven could say God pulled a legal fast one. The biblical predictions of the cross are one of the greatest proofs of God's existence in the world. All you have to do is go and read them. Sadly, many will not and continue therefore to remain as ignorant of the plans of God as the Gentiles in Paul's day.

The [second thing Paul says](#) goes right back to the foolishness and stumbling block ideas of the previous chapter. Isaiah himself told us that they wouldn't understand. Wouldn't understand what? The quote is from [Isaiah 64:4](#), “[What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.](#)” I will never forget listening to Bill Clinton's Acceptance Speech at the 1992 DNC and having my jaw drop to the floor when he said, “[As the Scripture says, ‘Our eyes have not yet seen, nor our ears heard, nor minds imagined’ what we can build.](#)”¹² It's difficult to imagine Satan himself taking a text more out of context than this.

Isaiah (and Paul) are speaking of [what God has prepared](#)—something that lies beyond human sight, hearing, and imagination, and that is received by those who love Him, not those who wait on Bill Clinton to build America

¹² [William J. Clinton](#), “[Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York](#),” *The American Presidency Project* (July 16, 1992).

in his own image! Isaiah, Paul says, is talking about the cross of Jesus Christ and how this central message of the cross was such foolishness to the archons, that they put Jesus to death, not realizing that it would be their undoing and the saving of the human race.¹³

How is Wisdom Received? (1Cor 2:10-16)

This takes us to **the third and final section** of our passage, and the very end of this opening argument that roots all of the Corinthian misbehavior is a very specific theology. Let's look at it as a whole.

¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

¹³ In its original setting, Isaiah 64 is part of a communal lament (**Isa 63:7–64:12**). The people cry out for God to “**rend the heavens and come down**” as he did at the Exodus and Sinai. **Vs. 4** then declares that from ancient times no one has heard or seen a God like Yahweh—One who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. The emphasis is on the uniqueness and surprising, saving activity of God for His remnant. When understood in light of all the servant songs that came before, it's no wonder Paul saw this as referring to the cross.

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

It is clear that Paul is talking about **how the wisdom of God is received**. But why? Why end the argument here?

Because this gets rid of every claim at having received it because you are smarter, wiser, or more superior to someone else and that puts an end to their pride which is causing so much chaos in this church. Think about it. The Corinthians were dividing over human leaders, human eloquence, and human estimates of wisdom, and that’s just the start of their problems. Paul has already shown that the message of the **cross is foolishness** to those who are perishing and power to those who are being saved (1:18). He has shown that **God deliberately chose the foolish**, weak, and lowly things to shame the wise and strong (1:26–29). He has shown that his own preaching refused the **methods** of human wisdom so that their faith would rest in the power of God, not in the wisdom of men (2:1–5). He has shown that **the rulers of this age did not understand** the hidden wisdom and therefore crucified the Lord of glory (2:6–8). Now comes the capstone: the only reason anyone ever grasps this wisdom **is that the Spirit of God reveals it to them**.

There is so much to this, and it makes many people very uncomfortable—which is precisely the point. Let's go through it line by line. First, Paul says these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit (10). This is the Holy Spirit, not your spirit. He continues, “For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (10b). There is a Spirit who searches everything, including the depths of God. That isn't your spirit! Let this sink in.

The Spirit and God are viewed separately here. There are two subjects, not one: (1) the Spirit and (2) God. And yet, since God is omniscient, for someone to search those depths would mean that this person must also be omniscient. And since the only omniscient being is God, this would mean that the Spirit must himself be God, yet he is somehow distinct from God.

Paul has a small parenthetical here that demonstrates this. He sets up an analogy. “For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him” (11a). The points of similarity are that a person is somehow distinct from his spirit, just as the Holy Spirit is distinct from God. Similarly, the person's spirit knows the person's thoughts, which are clearly distinct from his spirit. Thus he concludes, “So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Don't press this analogy too far. Humans are made up of bodies and spirits or souls, two parts in one person. The spirit is distinct from the body, yet it is together that they make up the

All of this is to drive home a new point. “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (12). If the Spirit alone knows the mind of God, then the Spirit alone understands God’s wisdom, which is foolishness to the world. The spirit of the world mocks the wisdom of God, so how can it possibly understand it? It comes from a different age (the present evil age). It has a different source: sin and Satan (the “spirit” ala Eph 2:2). The point is, we have received God’s Spirit when we were saved and called by God through the foolish message of the cross.

Notice next that God “freely gives” us things by God. What things? Primarily the thoughts of the Holy Spirit. Or, to put it more concretely, we have received the Holy Spirit himself. The Spirit has been freely given to us by God. But how? Through the proclamation of the foolish message applied by the sovereign will of God to us.

“And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (13). Anyone to whom this has happened has entered the kingdom of God, they have entered the age to come, even if they still live in this world and still

person. But your spirit and body are created. God’s Spirit is not created; He is an eternal omniscient subsistence (Person) in a Godhead. He is distinct from God the Father; yet he is God. He is distinct from God the Son; yet he is God.

remain in the present evil age with its corruption, sin, and death.¹⁵ It's an already/not-yet overlap. Paul's point is not that only super-spiritual Christians get the Holy Spirit to teach them, but that *all Christians do!* How does the Spirit come to us? Through the words imparted that are not taught by human wisdom, but by the Spirit.

Now, if you are following closely, you will come to realize that Paul has just **presented a great problem**. In order to understand the wisdom of God, you must first *have* the Spirit of God. But you only get the Spirit of God through faith. But faith is a receiving of what you *understand*. Do you see the problem? If faith is a work of your intellect, then you must first understand. But you can't understand because you don't have the Spirit. The Spirit only teaches spiritual truth to those who are spiritual, that is, those who already have the Spirit.

So how does a person get the Spirit? Paul ends this entire discussion by making this clear. “**The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has**

¹⁵ My favorite discussion of this is **Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: P&R Pub., 1987), 102-10.

understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ” (1Cor 2:14-16). How do we have the mind of Christ—that is the mind of the Holy Spirit, the mind of God?

It is not through accepting the things of God as a natural person. Enter that most infamous discussion of “freewill.” Freewill is a tricky thing to define and quite often, its definition is just assumed and people talk right past one another because of it. By freewill, some people define it as something like, “I do exactly what I want.” That’s basically how Jonathan Edwards, the great Calvinist preacher of the first Great Awakening defined it. And he affirmed its reality in this sense, as do I. People do exactly what they want—all the time in fact. He said the mind chooses as it does because of motives and those motives are determined by what the mind thinks is the best choice at any given moment.¹⁶ If that’s what we mean by freewill, then we all have it.

But why does the mind think one thing is better than another? Some people define freewill as the liberty of indifference. That’s a fancy philosophical way of saying that the will is neutral and is able to choose properly between any two options. You’ve surely heard that put this way: God

¹⁶ My favorite discussion of this is in James Montgomery Boice, “The Bondage of the Will: A Sermon on Romans 3:11,” *Romans: Justification by Faith*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991–), 297-304. Edwards talks about this in his great treatise, *Freedom of the Will*.

casts the vote for you; Satan casts the vote against you; you cast the deciding vote. The problem is, the will is not in fact neutral. And this is precisely Paul's point.

He couldn't get much clearer if he tried. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God." He *does not* accept them. Natural people, that is people who are not Christians, do not accept the things of the Spirit of God. Why? Because they are folly to him. He's not neutral. Rather, he positively sees God as his enemy and his message as totally absurd. He doesn't run to God with open hands. He laughs at God for the stupidity of it all.

Paul says, "He is not able to understand them." Why? Let me be clear here, because a lot of people are *deeply confused in the opposite direction*. It isn't that the natural person doesn't have natural faculties. He has ears that can hear. He has a mind. He has the ability to reason. What *he doesn't possess is the proper discernment*. Why? Because he is not a spiritual person. He does not have the Holy Spirit, who alone is able to discern the mind of God. The problem is not physical, as if his mouth is simply unable to utter the words, "I believe," as if he is not able to comprehend the message that a man claiming to be God died on a cross for his sin and rose from the dead so that he might be saved. No, that's not his problem. "Cannot" isn't talking about a natural inability.

It is talking about a *spiritual* inability. “They are *spiritually discerned*,” Paul says. It’s like trying to decipher a language you’ve never heard before. It sounds like gibberish. The Spirit alone interprets truly. He does not have the Spirit, therefore he does not have the mind, therefore he does not have the motive, therefore he does not have the will to choose what is right. Paul says without the Spirit of God, this is impossible.¹⁷

He even gives another Scripture to prove it. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him” (16)? This comes from Isa 40:13. And this is an absolutely fascinating verse.¹⁸ The Hebrew reads, “Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel?” The Greek reads, “Who has known the mind of the Lord? And who has been his counsellor, to instruct him?” “Spirit of YHWH” becomes “mind of Kurios.” Note how Paul has been talking about the Spirit, which likely shows that he has had the Hebrew in his head! Yet, he quotes the Greek on the mind, meaning he refuses to collapse Spirit and mind into the same thing.

¹⁷ On the very important distinction of natural vs. moral ability see Douglas Van Dorn, “On Amyraldianism, Different Senses of Ability, the Death of Christ, and Being Reformed,” *Academia* (c. 2015).

¹⁸ See the discussion in Jonathan D. H. Norton, *Contours in the Text: Textual Variation in the Writings of Paul, Josephus and the Yahad*, Library of New Testament Studies 430, ed. Mark Goodacre (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 161-76.

Instead, Paul insists that *the Holy Spirit knows the thoughts/mind of the Lord* and he concludes from it, “*But we have the mind of Christ*.” Mind of Kurios becomes Mind of Christ! That’s amazing in itself, but what does it mean? But it is something very specific that he is getting at. He isn’t talking about the mind of Christ here the way he spoke of the “*secret and hidden wisdom of God*” (7), as if somehow we now know all things. He is talking about the mind-set that caused Jesus to become the crucified “*Lord of Glory*” (8).

What “made” Christ go to the cross, in spite of his deep prayer to the Father to take that cup from him? His *mind* did. You see, the cross of Christ is only made possible by *the mind of Christ set like cement on the cross*. Jesus had to set his mind on the cross, because he understood how difficult it would be. Suffering always is! Yet, he was able because *he understood* the plan of God and the wisdom of God in having him go there. How? He had the Spirit of God who comprehends the thoughts of God. Why did he have the Spirit? Because he alone of all humans was born a spiritual person, for he alone is God. He and the Spirit are One.

You and I have to be given the Spirit as a free gift from God through the message of the cross of Christ. It comes *not of our freewill*, but our freewill—that is the liberation of our

will from its bondage to selfish sinning to willingly setting our mind on the cross as Christians comes later, after we have been given the Spirit. The will is only set free by the Holy Spirit. Paul is tapping into that now, convincing the Corinthians to see things rightly.

This doctrine of **total inability and sovereign illumination** functions as the theological climax of the argument in order to point us right back to the cross and the grace of God alone. If the cross is the power and wisdom of God, and if that wisdom is hidden from the rulers of this age and from every natural mind, then the only possible explanation for anyone believing it is the free, sovereign work of the Spirit. No human wisdom, no rhetorical skill, no religious pedigree, and no “excitements” can produce it. Finny couldn’t have been more wrong. **God must reveal it, or it remains folly.**

The whole point of this is therefore **to humble the Corinthians** with the doctrines of grace. This is what the doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election, and the like are supposed to do. They are given to humble us, to show us that we didn’t come to a saving knowledge of God on our own. We did not “find God.” He found us. He gave us the Spirit, and he did it through the message of the cross couched in foolish means that contradict the wisdom of the

world. How then could anyone boast, save in the cross of Christ our Lord?

By ending here, Paul removes every other ground of boasting. The Corinthians cannot congratulate themselves for being wiser than the “natural” people around them. They have the Spirit only because God gave Him. Their understanding of the cross is not the fruit of their own insight; it is the fruit of divine revelation to them. The same God who chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise is the same God who opens blind eyes by His Spirit. That is why the whole section ends with the mind of Christ rather than the mind of man.

We began by thinking about Screwtape not understanding the wisdom of God, though it was right in front of him. He isn't alone. None of the powers and rulers of this age—be they human or heavenly, understood it. And that was all, part of the plan. Because in the sovereignty of God, he had to have them put Jesus to death. That was the only way we could be saved and God receive all the glory.

They are not alone. Not a single one of us understood this of our own minds, wisdom, intellect, or wills. It had to be revealed to us. And this is the grace of God so that you might know that God gets all the glory for salvation. But also, so that you might begin to learn that the key to living

rightly in God's eyes is by knowing first that even though you were a fool, God in Christ gave you the Spirit through the Gospel. And by this power, he has given you his Holy Spirit. And his Holy Spirit who dwells in you plumbs the deep things of God. Starting with the cross, the intersection of it all.

Moving forward from that place, you are now **reoriented to understand just how you are to live in this world**. The main theology lesson of this letter is now over. It sets the foundation. You are to live as backwards people, backwards from the wisdom of the world. Like fools for Christ, fools that know his commands and laws for you are the only right things you can hold on to in a world gone mad with the delusion of Screwtape, who understood not the Glory of the Lord or the Lord of Glory. Therefore, set your mind on the cross. May the Spirit of God give you the understanding to see how this foolish message becomes for us our salvation and sanctification.

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