

Living the Reality of Epiphany: The Foolishness of God

By Dave Neale, Ph.D.

Last week In our series ***Living the Reality of Epiphany***, we talked about how people's loyalties in the Corinthian church drifted off to the strong personalities of the community. Remember, some "belong to Paul, some Apollos, some Cephas and some Christ." We talked about how Paul seemed to encourage them to embrace a more direct and simple theology based on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We talked about the Banyan Tree. How we are all different and yet become a tree of faith... somehow.



In the Text

This week we talk more about how that works. So let's go to our text for the week; this vs 18 was the last verse of last week's reading and the first verse for this week, so it is worth taking some time to understand this difficult notion.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." (1 Cor 1:18-19)

What can this possibly mean? What is this foolishness of God? A memorable phrase!

As Paul puts it in vs 25, ***For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.***

Sometimes we understand what something ***is*** by first stating what it ***is not***. So let's start there.

- Firstly, the foolishness isn't that God exists. Everyone in the ANE believed in deities of one sort or another. Religious belief was varied, but ubiquitous. The idea of atheism is a modern invention. The first people to identify as atheists were in the 18th century. That Jews and Christians were monotheists was unique. And that this one God created all was unique, but it wasn't foolish.

- Just as in Paul's day, where religion was ubiquitous, so it is also today. These laments about the secular nature of society today, often are equating advances in equity in public policy with private belief. 'Public policy is secular, so we are all secular,' goes the argument.
 - But that isn't true. Almost everyone in our time believes in some sort of transcendent reality. 35% of Canadians identify as Christians. Another 30% identify as adherents to other world religions. And 35% say they have no formal religious affiliation, but that doesn't mean they don't believe in transcendence. Most of these people identify as "spiritual," just not in institutional religion. Your good, proper atheist is a pretty rare creature.
 - Let me say that in another way. Most people simply do not believe that there is no other, higher level of mind than our own. Most people want to believe that there is more to life than the happenstance of the material. Most people draw back from the horrible idea that there no meaning to it all – that there is nothing transcendent.
 - So it isn't foolish that God exists. The opposite is true.
- Secondly, it wasn't foolish to the ancient mind that God could have a son who was essentially divine and human at once. Christianity did not originate the idea of a god/man. In the Greek philosophy of the period there is the concept of the *theios aner*, "divine man." Paul's opponents thought that perhaps Jesus was just one such divine/man, sure. The Jewish concept of Messiah is just such an idea. It's not foolish.
 - It isn't that this divine man could be raised from the dead. After all, and especially if you are a theist, some who believes there is a God and that this God is intimately involved with creation on an ongoing basis, that the God who created the universe raised his Son from the dead doesn't seem like such a stretch. I've never understood Christians who have trouble with the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Our creed enshrines it. On the third day he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

What Paul does say is that the **cross** is foolishness.

I'm not going to get into a heavy thing about the theology of the cross – those are very deep waters and holy week is a better time for that. But here we say that the cross is the mysterious, seemingly unaccountable, activity of God that reveals to us what we really need to know about the nature of God. It is holy ground.

We often say that know matter what you are facing in life, God can redeem that ("save" is the biblical word), because Jesus himself experienced suffering and humiliation to the uttermost extent in human experience. That is the foolishness of God. A God who goes to a cross is a God for the world as it truly is – decaying in its own self-inflicted sin.

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“The Christian preaching of a Saviour who died a slave’s death on the cross was *μωρία*”, *mōria*, foolishness to worldly wisdom (BAG, 533).

There is another thing to be learned here about “those who are perishing.” I think Paul was partly taking aim at those *within the family of faith* for being so resistant to the message of the cross. He isn’t speaking just to people who don’t believe. Why do I say this?

Well, because Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14. The situation is the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians around 600 years before Jesus. Vs 3b says ***I will besiege you with towers and raise siegeworks against you.*** The leaders of the Jerusalem temple society have, so says God through the prophet Isaiah, have “stupefied themselves” and become “blind” in their pride and devotion to their personal power and the prerogatives of temple society. The people ...***draw near me with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*** (Isa 29:13).

So this is a word of rebuke about a proud disposition of mind that makes the vision of God as ***sealed document***, as Isaiah describes it (v 11). We can become so dependent on human consciousness as the sole source, the ultimate source of understanding, that we cannot see God.

Let us be aware, this text cautions us, of the pride of mind that closes our minds, that takes away our ability to see beyond the merely rational.¹

It is a reminder that God’s ways are not our ways. That a proud mind will find the vision of God a sealed document. There is an old adage that the real sign of a wise mind is that it understands what it does not understand?²

For me, I often prefer to read books that I don’t agree with or that teach me something I’ve never considered. Novels are a good way to broaden the understanding of human nature. Read good novels and you will grow spiritually.

Finally, how is this message of the cross the ***power of God to those being saved?***

The “power of God.” Those three words together is a pretty big deal.

To paraphrase verse 18:

The cross is crazy to those who believe they know everything they need to know about everything, whose conception of knowing rises no higher than human consciousness. But to those whose mind is open to transcendence, they release the power of God in us to experience redemption and life-changing rescue through the cross of Jesus.

Finally, how do we actually open our minds to the vision of God? File this under the heading the anthropology of Epiphany – how we make the revelation real-time in life.

Arthur C. Brooks is a Professor of Management at the Harvard Business School. He writes to a wide audience, but he happens to also be a Christian man. He is a cool guy and very sensible.

His book *From Strength to Strength* is directed to high achievers who find themselves in mid-life at the peak of their career. And yet, the question of meaning in life rises with new urgency. What is it all about, success and all in hand. Interestingly, this is the point in life when many people return to the consideration of meaning.

In his section on entrepreneurship he says the greatest entrepreneur in history isn't Steve Jobs or Elon Musk. He says it Paul of Tarsus. "First century convert to the teachings of Christ who organized the work of a messianic itinerant preacher into a body of coherent theology and spread it around the ancient world.... Which has grown for 2000 years and today has more than two billion followers."³

But changing your mind is hard in a life where you've been too busy to explore meaning, or you've been indifferent or anti-religion all your life. It's embarrassing to admit you still feel lost, even with all your success. He talks about Nicodemus, the Pharisee leader, who came to Jesus... at night.

Or, as Jesus put it to Nicodemus, ***You must be born from above.***

Brooks says its hard to turn to the transcendent, to God, all at once. So "make a subtle shift." Go from 'Nah,' to 'maybe someday.' From 'not really,' to 'but open to the suggestion.' From, 'This is all an accident of nature' to 'Maybe this is all created. Maybe God is there.'

Then start to give it thought and time. Come to church. Do some reading. Join a group. Get on with it. God will find you if you seek Him.

Musicians come...



So let's bring this back around to where we started and look again at our tree of faith. Here we are, with all our petty loyalties, so sure that our view is right and someone else's is wrong. But it seems so silly when you hold up our limited minds to the transcendence of God. What holds this tree together? The cross holds this tree together. The cross is the key to how the tree sustains life. For us, the cross is the power of God.

¹ It is a reminder, in a very Job-like manner, that God wisdom humbles all of creation. The proud mind, says Isaiah 29: ***You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, "He did not make me", or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, "He has no understanding.*** (Isaiah 29:16)

² Now... about keeping an open mind... In 2021 the Christian book industry topped \$700 million annual revenue. I'm sure a very great deal of good is done by this. A growing Christian should cultivate and an open mind. Perhaps every other book you read should be a book you perhaps don't quite agree with, or on a topic about which you know nothing. The closedness of mind we find in much of modern Christianity is because there is this big echo chamber that people live in.

³ Arthur C. Brooks, *From Strength to Strength*, 2022.