

1. Context of 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Historical and Cultural Context

The church in Corinth, founded by Paul around 50-51 CE (Acts 18:1-11), was situated in a wealthy, cosmopolitan port city known for its intellectual culture, rhetorical sophistication, and moral laxity. The Corinthian church was diverse, including Jews, Gentiles, rich, poor, educated, and uneducated members. However, divisions emerged due to their alignment with eloquent leaders (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) and their embrace of Greco-Roman values like wisdom (σοφία, sophia), status, and rhetorical prowess. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (ca. 54-55 CE) to address these issues, particularly factionalism (1:10-17). In 1:18-31, he confronts their reliance on human wisdom by emphasizing the "foolishness" of the cross.

Literary Context

This passage falls within 1:10-4:21, where Paul addresses divisions and redefines true wisdom. Following his plea for unity (1:10-17), 1:18-31 establishes the theological foundation: the cross as God's wisdom and power, contrasting with worldly standards. It prepares for further discussion in chapters 2-4 on spiritual wisdom and leadership.

2. Structure of 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

- A. The Contrast Between Human and Divine Wisdom (1:18-25): The message of the cross is foolishness to the world but God's power to the saved.
- B. God's Choice of the Lowly (1:26-29): God chooses the weak to shame the strong, undermining human pride.
- C. Christ as Wisdom and Righteousness (1:30-31): Christ embodies God's wisdom, and believers boast only in Him.

3. Greek Text and Verse-by-Verse Exegesis (English: Lexham English Bible)

1:18 – The Message of the Cross

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.

Greek Text:

Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σωζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις Θεοῦ ἐστίν.

-Ὁ λόγος... τοῦ σταυροῦ (ho logos... tou staurou): "The message of the cross." *Logos* denotes the proclaimed word or message, here specifically the gospel of Christ's crucifixion. *Stauros* (cross) refers to the instrument of execution, a symbol of shame in the Greco-Roman world (cf. Deut. 21:23; Heb. 12:2). The phrase encapsulates the gospel's content, which Paul defends as central.

-μωρία (mōria): "Foolishness." Derived from *mōros* (foolish, dull), this term conveys absurdity or nonsense. In Corinth's intellectual culture, the cross's simplicity was scorned compared to philosophical rhetoric.

-ἀπολλυμένοις (apollymenois) / σωζομένοις (sōzomenois): "Those who are perishing" / "those who are being saved." These present participles indicate ongoing processes, reflecting eschatological destinies. The contrast divides humanity based on their response to the gospel.

δύναμις Θεοῦ (dynamis Theou): "Power of God." *Dynamis* denotes active, transformative power (cf. Rom. 1:16). The cross, though appearing weak, is God's instrument of salvation.

Theological Insight**: The cross's *logos* subverts human expectations, revealing divine *dynamis* where the world sees *mōria*. Paul sets up the paradox that governs the passage.

1:19-20 – God's Judgment on Human Wisdom

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the intelligence of the intelligent I will confound." Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Greek Text:

Καθὼς γέγραπται· Ἀπολῶ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν, καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω. ποῦ σοφός; ποῦ γραμματεὺς; ποῦ συζητητὴς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου; οὐχὶ ἐμώρανεν ὁ Θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου;

-Καθὼς γέγραπται (Kathōs gegraptoi): "As it is written." Paul introduces a quotation from Isaiah 29:14 (LXX), signaling scriptural authority.

-Ἀπολῶ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν (Apolō tēn sophian tōn sophōn): "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise." *Sophia* (wisdom) refers to human intellectual systems, especially

Greek philosophy. *Apolō* (destroy) suggests God's decisive judgment on human self-reliance.

-**σύνεσιν... ἀθετήσω** (*synesin... athetēsō*): "Intelligence... I will frustrate." *Synesis* (understanding) parallels *sophia*, and *athetēsō* (set aside, nullify) reinforces God's rejection of human wisdom.

-**ποῦ σοφός; ποῦ γραμματεὺς; ποῦ συζητητὴς** (*rou sophos? rou grammateus? rou syzētētēs*): "Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater?" These rhetorical questions (echoing Isa. 19:12) challenge the intellectual elite: Greek philosophers (*sophos*), Jewish scribes (*grammateus*), and rhetoricians (*syzētētēs*, debater/philosopher). The phrase **του αἰῶνος τούτου** ("of this age") underscores the temporary, worldly nature of their wisdom.

-**ἐμώρανεν** (*emōranen*): "Made foolish." From *mōrainō* (to make foolish), this verb shows God's action in exposing human wisdom's futility.

Cultural Note**: The **syzētētēs** likely refers to sophists, admired in Corinth for their rhetorical skill. Paul's questions mock their perceived superiority.

1:21 – God's Wisdom in Salvation

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe.

Greek Text:

Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ **ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ** οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ **κόσμος** διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν Θεόν, **εὐδόκησεν** ὁ Θεὸς διὰ τῆς **μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος** **σῶσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας**.

- **ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ** (*en tē sophia tou Theou*)**: "In the wisdom of God." God's *sophia* ordained that the world (**kosmos**) could not know Him through its own wisdom, reflecting divine sovereignty (cf. Rom. 11:33).

- οὐκ ἔγνω (*ouk egnō*): "Did not know." The aorist tense suggests humanity's historical failure to attain knowledge of God through reason alone.

- **μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος** (*mōrias tou kērygmatos*): "Foolishness of what was preached." *Kērygma* (proclamation) refers to the gospel message, specifically Christ crucified. The world sees it as *mōria* due to its simplicity.

- **σῶσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας** (*sōsai tous pisteuontas*): "Save those who believe." *Pisteuontas* (believing ones) emphasizes faith as the means of salvation, not intellectual achievement.

Theological Insight: God's **eudokēsen** (was pleased) highlights His deliberate choice to save through the "foolish" **kērygma**, ensuring accessibility to all who believe.

1:22-25 – The Offense of the Cross

For indeed, Jews ask for sign miracles and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a cause for stumbling, but to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. For consider your calling, brothers, that not many were wise according to human standards, not many were powerful, not many were well born.

Greek Text:

Ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτοῦσιν καὶ Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν, ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἑσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἔθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς, Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἕλλησιν, Χριστὸν Θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ Θεοῦ σοφίαν. ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστὶν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ Θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

- Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτοῦσιν (*Ioudaioi sēmeia aitousin*): "Jews demand signs." **Sēmeia** (signs) reflects Jewish expectations of a Messiah validated by miracles (cf. John 6:30). The present tense (**aitousin**) suggests ongoing demands.

- Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν (*Hellēnes sophian zētousin*): "Greeks seek wisdom." **Zētousin** (seek) indicates an active pursuit of philosophical **sophia**.

- Χριστὸν ἑσταυρωμένον (*Christon estaurōmenon*): "Christ crucified." The perfect participle **estaurōmenon** emphasizes the enduring significance of Christ's crucifixion.

- σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*): "Stumbling block." For Jews, a crucified Messiah was offensive, contradicting expectations of a triumphant king (cf. Deut. 21:23).

- μωρίαν (*mōrian*): "Foolishness." To Gentiles, the cross lacked intellectual sophistication.

- τοῖς κλητοῖς (*tois klētois*): "Those who are called." **Klētois** underscores God's sovereign call, uniting Jews and Greeks (cf. 1:2, 9).

- Χριστὸν Θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ Θεοῦ σοφίαν (*Christon Theou dynamin kai Theou sophian*): "Christ is God's power and God's wisdom." Christ embodies both, fulfilling Jewish and Greek desires in an unexpected way.

-τὸ μωρὸν... τὸ ἀσθενές (to mōron... to asthenes): "The foolish thing... the weak thing." These neuter adjectives personify God's methods, which surpass human *sophia* and *ischys* (strength).

Cultural Note: The *skandalon* of the cross for Jews stemmed from its association with divine cursing (Deut. 21:23), while its *mōria* for Gentiles clashed with their ideal of a rational, heroic savior.

1:26-29 – God's Choice of the Lowly

For consider your calling, brothers, that not many were wise according to human standards, not many were powerful, not many were well born. But the foolish things of the world God chose in order that he might put to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world God chose in order that he might put to shame the strong, and the insignificant of the world, and the despised, God chose, the things that are not, in order that he might abolish the things that are, so that all flesh may not boast before God.

Greek Text:

Βλέπετε γὰρ **τὴν κλῆσιν** ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι **οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα**, οὐ πολλοὶ **δυνατοί**, οὐ πολλοὶ **εὐγενεῖς**· ἀλλὰ **τὰ μωρὰ** τοῦ κόσμου **ἐξελέξατο ὁ Θεός**, ἵνα καταισχύνῃ τοὺς σοφοὺς, καὶ **τὰ ἀσθενῆ** τοῦ κόσμου **ἐξελέξατο ὁ Θεός**, ἵνα καταισχύνῃ τὰ ἰσχυρά, καὶ **τὰ ἀγενῆ** τοῦ κόσμου καὶ **τὰ ἐξουθενημένα** **ἐξελέξατο ὁ Θεός**, **τὰ μὴ ὄντα**, ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ, ὅπως **μὴ καυχῆσθαι πᾶσα σὰρξ** ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ.

-**Βλέπετε... τὴν κλῆσιν** (Blepete... tēn klēsin): "Consider your calling." *Klēsis* refers to God's summons to salvation, echoing *klētois* in 1:24.

-**οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα** (ou polloi sophoi kata sarka): "Not many wise according to the flesh." *Kata sarka* denotes human standards, and *ou polloi* (not many) acknowledges some exceptions (e.g., Crispus, Gaius).

- **δυνατοί... εὐγενεῖς** (dynatoi... eugenēs): "Influential... of noble birth." These terms describe social and political elites, rare in the Corinthian church.

- **ἐξελέξατο ὁ Θεός** (exelexato ho Theos): "God chose." Repeated three times, this verb emphasizes God's sovereign election (cf. Deut. 7:7-8).

- **τὰ μωρὰ... τὰ ἀσθενῆ... τὰ ἀγενῆ... τὰ ἐξουθενημένα** (ta mōra... ta asthenē... ta agenē... ta exouthenēmena): "The foolish things... the weak things... the lowborn things... the despised things." These neuter plurals generalize God's choice of the marginalized. *Agenē* (base, lowborn) and *exouthenēmena* (despised, treated as nothing) highlight social insignificance.

- τὰ μὴ ὄντα (ta mē onta): "The things that are not." This philosophical phrase may refer to those lacking status or even the gospel's apparent insignificance.

-κατασχύνῃ... καταργήσῃ (kataischynē... katargēsē): "Shame... nullify." These verbs show God's reversal of worldly values, exposing their futility.

- μὴ καυχήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ (mē kauchēsētai pāsa sarx): "So that no flesh may boast."

Sarx (flesh) denotes humanity in its weakness, and *kauchēsētai* (boast) critiques the Corinthians' pride.

Theological Insight: God's *eklogē* (choice) of the lowly reflects His pattern of overturning human hierarchies, ensuring salvation depends on grace, not merit.

1:30-31 – Christ as Wisdom and Righteousness

But from him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "The one who boasts, let him boast in the Lord."

Greek Text

Ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ **ὕμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ**, ὃς ἐγενήθη ἡμῖν **σοφία ἀπὸ Θεοῦ**, **δικαιοσύνη** τε καὶ **ἀγιασμός** καὶ **ἀπολύτρωσις**, ἵνα καθὼς γέγραπται· **Ὁ καυχώμενος ἐν Κυρίῳ καυχάσθω**.

- **Ἐξ αὐτοῦ (Ex autou)**: "From Him" (God). This prepositional phrase underscores God's initiative in salvation.

-**ὕμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (en Christō Iēsou)**: "In Christ Jesus." A key Pauline phrase denoting union with Christ (cf. Rom. 6:11).

- **σοφία ἀπὸ Θεοῦ (sophia apo Theou)**: "Wisdom from God." Christ is the true *sophia*, fulfilling Greek aspirations in a divine way.

-**δικαιοσύνη... ἀγιασμός... ἀπολύτρωσις (dikaiosynē... hagiasmos... apolytrōsis)**:

"Righteousness... holiness... redemption." These terms summarize salvation's benefits:

- *Dikaiosynē*: Justification, right standing before God (Rom. 3:21-26).

- *Hagiasmos*: Sanctification, being set apart for God (1 Cor. 6:11).

- *Apolytrōsis*: Redemption, liberation from sin's bondage (Rom. 3:24).

- **Ὁ καυχώμενος ἐν Κυρίῳ καυχάσθω (Ho kauchōmenos en Kyriō kauchasthō)**: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." Quoting Jeremiah 9:24 (LXX), Paul urges boasting only in God, not human achievements. *Kauchasthō* (imperative) is a command to redirect pride.

****Theological Insight****: Christ is the source of all spiritual blessings, eliminating human boasting and grounding salvation in God's grace.

4. Key Themes and Key Greek Terms

- A. Paradox of the Cross: The **logos tou staurou** (1:18) is **mōria** to the world but **dynamis Theou** to the saved, subverting human **sophia**.
- B. God's Sovereignty: The repeated **exelexato** (1:27-28) emphasizes God's choice of the **mōra**, **asthenē**, and **mē onta** to shame the wise and strong.
- C. Unity in Christ: The **klētoi** (1:24) and **en Christō Iēsou** (1:30) unite diverse believers, countering Corinthian factionalism.
- D. Humility and Boasting: The call to **kauchasthō en Kyriō** (1:31) rejects human **kauchēsis** (boasting) in favor of glorying in God.

5. Application

- A. For Corinth: Paul challenges their obsession with **sophia** and status, urging them to embrace the **skandalon** of the cross and find unity **en Christō**.
- B. For Today**: The passage critiques modern reliance on intellectualism, status, or achievement. Believers are called to humility, finding their identity in Christ's **dikaiosynē**, **hagiasmos**, and **apolytrōsis**, and to boast only in the Lord.

6. Conclusion

1 Corinthians 1:18-31, with its rich Greek terminology, presents the cross as God's paradoxical wisdom and power. Terms like **mōria**, **skandalon**, **dynamis**, and **sophia** highlight the contrast between human and divine perspectives. Paul's use of **exelexato** and **klēsis** underscores God's sovereign grace, while **kauchasthō** redirects pride to God alone. This passage remains a timeless call to embrace the gospel's countercultural message and live humbly in Christ.