

## **FIRST CORINTHIANS**

### **God's Call To Salvation I Corinthians 1:26-31**

The scriptures emphatically state:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9).

Hopefully after this message today, you will really believe God's ways are much different than human ways.

In 1:18-25, Paul showed that human wisdom and worldly reason have absolutely no place in the salvation of a person's soul. Paul did not play down the place of the intellect if it is used in a Christian context, but his premise is that worldly wisdom has no place in Christian salvation because the message of the Cross is a divine revelation. For the unsaved man, the gospel is foolishness, stupid, nonsense, absurd and moronic, but for the Christian touched by the sovereign grace of God, it is God's power for salvation.

In 1:26-31 Paul is going to show human wisdom had nothing to do with the salvation of the Corinthian believers. These Christians were saved by the sovereign grace of God, a way which is totally foreign and contrary to human reason. In fact, it was not human wisdom but divine wisdom which saved them.

#### THE SOVEREIGN CALL OF GOD 1:26

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. To prove his point that human wisdom, works or acts have no saving merit, Paul used the Corinthians as "Exhibit A." He said, "Look at yourselves; consider how you were called. Take a good look at your own lives; see what kind of people you are by nature and social standing, and this will prove to you that human wisdom does not save." The word "called" is the key to this section. This is God's sovereign or efficacious call to salvation which deals with the divine side of salvation. To appreciate the full impact of our salvation, we must understand God called us to be saved. He took the initiative. Our salvation is gracious and supernatural from beginning to ending. The Bible declares that all men are dead in trespasses and sins and are incapable of understanding divine truth. How then can men believe in Christ, love God and become Christians? They must be called by God. The Cross will always be foolishness to a person until God irresistibly calls him or her to Christ.

Notice that Paul was speaking to "brothers," those who love the Lord and have respect for scripture. The sovereignty of God in salvation is primarily a Christian family truth to cause us to appreciate our salvation in Christ. The truths of an efficacious call, divine predestination and sovereign election cannot be understood or appreciated by the non-Christian.

In scripture there are two kinds of calls. The general call goes out to all, inviting them to believe in Christ and be saved. There is the efficacious call of a person to salvation through Christ. This call comes when one hears the message of Christ and the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind, jiggles the will and moves the emotions so that a person trusts in Christ as Savior and Lord. The efficacious call is referred to here in 1:26, and it is this call that makes Christianity supernatural from beginning to ending.

Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. God, in His wisdom, had chosen not to call many from among the intelligentsia, the politically mighty, the cultured, the rich, the powerful or nobility in the city of Corinth. Not many of these kinds of upper-class people are called because they see no need for a Savior from sin as they exalt themselves in their own efforts and attainments. Paul's point was that the things which elevate men in the world, knowledge, influence and rank, are not the things which motivate God to call men to salvation. Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Lk. 4:18). The Apostle James taught the same truth: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him" (Jms. 2:5)?

"Of course, it is possible to be rich and Christian, but frequently at the times the church has been least compromised with culture and politics, the majority of believers have not come from the upper classes of the world. From the pre-Constantinian era to the Radical Reformation, from religiously motivated immigration to America in the past centuries to the rapid spread of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World today, this trend has proved surprisingly recurrent. For it is precisely the well-to-do who are often likely not to sense any need for God, because they believe they can buy or manipulate their way into meeting all their needs" (Craig Blomberg, First Corinthians).

Notice Paul did not say "not any" but "not many," for God does call some from the higher classes. In the Church at Corinth there were a few who had some standing in the community.

There was Sosthenes and Crispus who had been chief rulers in the synagogue. Erastus was the city treasurer. Gaius and Chloe were wealthy business people. There may have been a few other men or women of repute, but the vast majority of the Christians at Corinth were common, ordinary people, those the world regards as foolish; and many were considered riff-raff scum, the dregs of society. Many were slaves or of the working class--artisans, tradesmen, the little people of the world.

Lady Huntington, who was an evangelical believer among the English nobility and a personal friend of George Whitfield, the evangelist, used to say she was going to heaven by an "m," because if it had said not "any" mighty or "any" noble, she would not have made it, but the "m" changed it all and let her in.

Paul's argument annihilates communism and the thinking of many modern day liberals who say that the lower classes turn to Christianity out of ignorance or as a crutch due to their depressed condition. Not so, the Bible says Christianity is made up predominately of the lower classes to exalt God's wisdom and sovereignty and to destroy the wisdom of the wise.

The privileged classes are less likely to admit they are sinners and need someone to save them. They want to save themselves by working their way to heaven, but they cannot do it. God calls the sinner not the righteous. He chooses to work His marvels through people who are, from a human viewpoint, the most unpromising. He takes hell-deserving sinners and makes them trophies of His grace, transforming them into the image of Christ. This is contrary to all human logic and reasoning.

Just look at the original Twelve Disciples Jesus called to salvation and service. By and large, they were men from the lower walks of life: fisherman, tax collectors, Galilean peasants. Judas was the only "gentleman" in the whole apostolic band, and he proved to be a traitor and apostate.

Queen Elizabeth I, who was a Bible-believing, Christ-loving Christian said that she never read this verse without stopping and praising God for the fact that she, cultured and a person of power and noble birth, was among the "not many" who were called by God for salvation.

#### THE SOVEREIGN CHOICE OF GOD 1:27-29

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose that which the world calls silly, foolish and moronic for salvation in order to confound and shame the wise of this world. He does this so the unsaved might understand that it is not human wisdom that saves, but it is a sovereign God who saves through the Cross of Christ.

"But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (II Thess. 2:13).

Election to salvation by God is a prominent biblical doctrine and it must be dealt with by every Christian. The fact of God's election is not easy to understand, but when properly understood it will bring great peace and comfort and confidence to God's children. We must never view election as a cold theological doctrine. The Greek literally says, "God chose you for Himself to

be saved." He is personally interested in us. He owns us by His own loving choice. For sure, there is an element of mystery between God's sovereignty in election and man's responsibility to believe in Christ, but if we are saved, it is because God elected us to salvation.

Election cannot be understood unless it is coupled with the truth of total depravity. The Bible declares all men are sinners and deserve hell. Why? People, in their natural state, do not want Christ. They are like a barrel of apples which has been in the hot sun for several months. All are rotten; there is not a good one in the bunch; all must be buried because of their condition and stench. All men are sinners and deserve nothing from God. Why God picked some out of this rotten barrel of mankind for salvation is one of the great mysteries of the scripture. If we are Christians, we can simply raise our eyes and voices to God and say, "Thank you, God, for choosing me!".

"I'm glad God chose me before the foundation of the world for salvation. For had He waited until I was born to choose me, I'm afraid He would have never chosen me, considering what a depraved, debased sinner I am" (Charles Spurgeon).

God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose people who the world calls weak to shame the strong who depend upon their political or military clout, their influence, their money, their "in" with the big shots or city hall.

One of the greatest awakenings of the nineteenth century began in Cambridge University in England when D.L. Moody and his singer, Ira B. Sankey, came to that center of learning. The whole university was outraged that this backwoods, uneducated American preacher would dare to appear and speak in the center of culture of the English world. They well knew that he "murdered" the King's English. The students were determined to hoot him off the platform. Moody began by asking Sankey to sing. As soon as he finished, Moody stepped to the edge of the platform and, looking directly at the students who were gathered there, said, "You gentlemen, don't ever think God don't love you, for he do!" The students were dumbfounded by that beginning. Moody went on and in a few minutes he again said, "Don't ever think God don't love you, for he do!" Something about the very ungrammatical structure of these words captured them and many listened and many were converted to Christ.

He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are. God chooses to save those who are ignoble, who have a low station in life, and who are not of the cultured and privileged classes. God chooses the base, the despised, and those who are looked upon by the world as non-existent. Why? To nullify or cancel or bring to naught all worldly wisdom. The worldling thinks that somehow human reason, wisdom and understanding can save him apart from the Cross of Christ.

The thought of God's election of us to salvation should humble us and give us a deep sense of thankfulness. Remember how Jesus once put it, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matt. 11:25).

So that no one may boast before him. Election makes man nothing and God everything, and this is why God elects some to salvation. Election makes God Creator and man the creature. Not one single boast can be made by man if he is saved, for it all came by God's grace. God will not have any man who is a braggart or a boaster about what he has done for God. No man can stand in God's sight and attribute his conversion to his own wisdom, birth, might, station in life, good works, human will or even his faith. Salvation is all of God; it is supernatural; it is gracious.

While it is true that God chooses some to salvation, let us remember that in our evangelism we are not trying to bring men to Calvinism but to Christ, and then, hopefully, we can bring them to an understanding that salvation is the direct result of God's sovereign purposes.

There were two students, Dick, and Tom. Dick was a strong Calvinist who was trying to reach Tom for Christ. In his witness, Dick, told Tom all about the Five Points of Calvinism, the Reformed faith and tradition, giving him the whole Calvinistic ball of yarn. Finally, Tom came to Dick with great seriousness of purpose and said, "Dick, I'm ready to make the big decision. I have decided to ask John Calvin into my heart."

#### THE SOVEREIGN PLACING INTO CHRIST 1:30-31

It is because of him (God) that you are in Christ Jesus. The reason any believer is in Christ Jesus is totally because God has sovereignly worked in him. God is the ultimate source of our salvation.

Who has become for us wisdom from God. Because of the sovereign work of God, Christ, who the world claims is an imposter and His message foolishness, has become the ultimate wisdom for the Christian. "In whom (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). The Christian has divine wisdom because he is in Christ. This wisdom is ours right now but we must claim and use it by faith. This is a type of wisdom the world knows nothing about. It is wisdom that causes us to look at all of life from a divine viewpoint. This wisdom is summed up in righteousness, holiness and redemption.

That is, our righteousness. This is positional righteousness not experiential and is given to the Christian at the moment of conversion. We actually receive the righteousness of Christ and on the basis of this righteousness (which we do not feel or experience) we are declared righteous before God (justification). This is a word used in a court when someone who is guilty is cleared of charges by the judge. This righteousness allows God to declare a person righteous in His sight and this makes him or her acceptable to God.

The unsaved person thinks he has to work for righteousness and do things which will impress God because he feels guilty. But the Bible says Christ is our righteousness. So often

Christians do not understand positional righteousness and they still try to impress God so He will accept them. Our new wisdom is that Christ is our righteousness and we are acceptable to God because of Him, not because of ourselves. "God made him (Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him (Christ) we might become the righteousness of God" (II Cor. 5:21).

John Bunyan, author of Pilgrim's Progress said, "My righteousness has been in Heaven for 1800 years. Christ is my righteousness."

Holiness. Christ is our holiness and we are set apart to God. In His eyes, we are already one hundred percent holy positionally. In our experience, we fall short of what we could or should be, but God sees us as holy in Christ. Those who are positionally holy are to seek experiential holiness of life. We are set apart to God for worship, godliness, witnessing and service. Our new wisdom is that we are set apart to please God. All other purposes in life bring emptiness, dissatisfaction and despair, but pleasing Christ brings the real purpose of life.

And redemption. This is positional redemption and it looks not only at the fact we have been purchased out of the slave market of sin and set free, but also at the final redemption of the body from the presence of sin. This is the time we will get our resurrected bodies at the coming of the Lord. The new wisdom in Christ tells about freedom in Christ freedom from ourselves, freedom from habits and ultimate freedom in glory from the presence of sin.

Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." God has provided a complete, perfect gracious and supernatural salvation for undeserving sinners. There can be no boasting on man's part. Human wisdom had nothing to do with the salvation of the Corinthian believers. Therefore, the Christians at Corinth (as well as all Christians) ought not to be exalting men. They ought to be exalting God. Man's wisdom leaves men to boast in man. God's wisdom leaves man only to boast in God. The wisdom of God and the wisdom of man in the area of salvation are fundamentally opposed to one another. There can be no middle ground between the two, and compromise between the two is unthinkable for a Bible-believing Christian.

## CONCLUSION

What lessons does God want us to learn from this section of scripture? First, knowledge, power and rank of men do not attract the favor of God. If men are saved, it is because of God's sovereign grace. Second, if the doctrines of election and calling irritate a person, this is normal because these truths are contrary to all human wisdom and logical thinking. Third, the true message of the Cross will be offensive to men and we must learn to live with that fact if we want to be faithful to Christ. Fourth, God chooses the least likely candidates for salvation in order that these chosen ones might help others understand that they are nothing before God. As someone said, "God chose nothings to

make nothings out of the somethings. He chose nobodies to help the somebodies to realize they are nobodies too." Fifth, if you feel you are nothing and a nobody as a Christian, I want to remind you God uses the foolish, the weak, the base and despised to get His work done in this world. We are God's tools and God's fools. He does this to shame and confound the wise. You do not have to have a Ph.D. or be powerful and influential to be used by God. You have been fortified with the wisdom of God and you have been given the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation. Sixth, surely this verse tells us we are not to depend on money and programs or any other worldly maneuver to accomplish ministry. How many people there are who think that it takes only money to do God's work. They reason, "If we could only get so much money, then we could begin a great ministry!" Just the opposite is true. We begin with ministry first and not with money. All Christians are to minister and have been gifted by God to do so. If we begin to do what God wants us to do in ministry, all the money we need will be provided. A biblical principle is that money follows ministry and not the other way around. God deliberately chooses the weak and the obscure and uses them in great power to remind us that it is not status, prestige, bigness or money which makes ministry for God effective. Seventh, surely this verse also tells us we do not have to depend on dynamic leaders and influential people to get God's work done. For almost fifty years evangelicals have poured much of their time, money and effort to reach key leaders in America for Christ. It has not worked and in my opinion has resulted only in producing elitist Christian country clubs. A study of history shows whenever revival has come to a church or a country, it has come when the common man was reached with the gospel, not leaders. It has always come from the bottom up where the common man in Christ almost forces the powerful leaders to act. It is my opinion we have subtly watered down the gospel, making it less offensive in order to reach the middle and upper-middle classes, and in so doing, we may have diluted it to such a degree that there is no true salvation.

"Every middle-class or upper-middle class domestication of the gospel is therefore a betrayal of the gospel" (Gordon Fee, First Corinthians).

Are you without Christ? Do you want to know whether you are among God's elect? Would you like to experience God's sovereign call? You can and it all comes through Christ.

The only way to know you are elected and called to salvation and to make it certain is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ trusting Him for deliverance from sin and giving Him the right to rule in your life. Then, and only then, you will understand that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.