

Wisdom from on High

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Holy and gracious God, may your Holy Spirit give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know the hope to which Christ has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance among us, and the greatness of his power for those who believe.

Amen

Introduction



Mark Lehain [review](#) of "How to Think" by Alan Jacobs

In Alan Jacob's excellent book of essays "*How to Think: A Guide for the Perplexed*," he tells the story of Leah Libresco—a born and raised atheist, but who is now a believer.

What happened?

Leah met some Catholic and Orthodox friends at Yale. She also made the fateful decision to join the debate society, the Yale Political Union (YPU). It was there that she learned about winning people over—making converts. She learned not only the importance of winning others over, but being won over herself. Two of her interview questions to be accepted into YPU were these:

"Did you ever 'break someone on the floor'?"

To "break on the floor" means to change your mind in the middle of a debate—right in front of everyone. This was an achievement. But then the candidate was asked a second question:

"Have you ever been broken on the floor?"

The correct answer to the question was “yes.” If you only expected others to change, but you held the same views throughout your life, and were never swayed, it was a sign that you were closed. You weren’t learning. You had a pulse, but you weren’t really alive, engaging the issues of the day.

Leah applied this lesson not just in the debate room, but outside in the real world. Leah “got broken on the floor” with her Catholic and Orthodox friends, and decided to go against her upbringing to follow Jesus. And it turned her world upside down.

In our passage today, the Apostle Paul challenges us to “get broken on the floor,” by giving up human wisdom from below and accepting divine wisdom come down to us from heaven in Christ.

So let’s hear God’s word from ...

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:27-31 (NRSV)

“... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Wisdom from on High

There are many things in life that are counterintuitive. Things that go against the natural way we think things *should* be. Realities and truths that upend and overturn our expectations and assumptions about how life works. Like when you back up your car. You turn the wheel in the *opposite* direction that you want the front of your car to go.

Or exercising when you’re tired—
it actually makes you more alert.

And then the opposite—
overworking actually makes you under-perform.

Or happiness doesn’t come by pursuing happiness itself—
rather happiness is more a byproduct than a pursuit.

There are seeming contradictions in relationships too:
To get someone interested in you—
act disinterested.
And then the flip side of that,

The more you try to control someone—
the more they resist your grasp.

On an even grander and spiritual scale, God's wisdom is very different from human wisdom and rules of thumb. As the prophet Isaiah says, "*My ways are not your ways.*"

In fact, in our passage the Apostle Paul tells us God's wisdom is foolishness in the eyes of human wisdom. To the ancient Greek mind, the incarnation, God becoming flesh—was revolting—laughable. But God's wisdom isn't so much against wisdom as it is a totally different kind of wisdom. A wisdom from a different source—it is divine, not earthly. We're in Advent right now—so let's consider the Christmas story.

There's a virgin birth from an unmarried, minority teenager in a region occupied by a world power. Unclean and uncouth shepherds are visited by angels and invited to see a newborn babe. Gentile astrologists also visit this Jewish Messiah.

God's long-awaited Messiah
is born not in a mansion, but in a manger—
an animal feeding trough.

And then the same story goes into a new act—
from Christmas to Easter.

The same Messiah, now all grown up—
dies a shameful death on a Roman cross—
the ancient version of today's electric chair—
reserved for criminals.

And this brutal device for execution becomes the primary symbol for a religious movement that follows this Jewish peasant Messiah *who rose from the dead!*

This is the proclamation we preach. We've grown accustomed to it. But from the outside, its non-sensical. Weird. And it bucks all respectable wisdom.

Paul tells us in our Scripture,
But to those *called* by God—
it's a very different story:

Christ is the very wisdom of God and the power of God. It's a paradox. The irony of it all is that Christians preach Christ *crucified*—not Christ *resurrected*, which you would think Paul would say, but it's Christ *crucified*.

This gospel of the crucified Christ is scandalous—a stumbling block to some, and poppycock to others. But for all it's an offense to human pride. You expect me to believe that? Not a chance.

Our all-wise God chose what is foolish according to human estimations and evaluations, to shame the proud. God chose what is weak to shame the strong, making what the world deems

consequential, now inconsequential. Socrates got it right, centuries before Christ appeared. When he was told that he was the wisest man in all of Athens he said,

*I am the wisest man alive,
for I know one thing,
and that is
that I know nothing.*

Jesus, the wisdom on high, has a way of turning everything upside down and inside out, telling us how it really is. And then, he does for us, what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus puts an end to the self-help business for believers. He does the work of unselfing us, saying things like:

*To be first, put yourself last.
To be great, be a servant.
To gain, you must lose.
To be lifted up, humble yourself.
Die to yourself.*

God's oxymoronic wisdom is peppered throughout Scripture:

*When I am weak, I am strong.
Walk by faith, not by sight.
Listen with your heart.
See with your mind's eye.*

Give to receive.
Be enslaved to be free.
Yield to conquer.
Serve to reign.
Find victory through defeat.
Die to live.

This is the paradoxology of the Prince of Peace. Hang around Jesus long enough and you may think you've got a case of dandruff—because you'll be doing a lot of head-scratching.

Take for example the Sermon on the Mount.
Blessed are the hungry for they will be filled.

But then Jesus says another place,
"Whoever comes to me will hunger no more."

Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God.
Yet we're told
"He became poor that we might become rich."

Jesus said other baffling things, like: Blessed are those who weep, for they shall laugh. Or leap for joy when people hate you because of me, for great is your reward in heaven.

Jesus says,

"Let your light shine before others,"

and then in another place,

"Don't practice your righteousness in order to be seen by others."

Jesus says,

"My yoke is easy."

But then later says,

"How difficult is the way that leads to life."

Jesus the Prince of Peace, says:

"Do not assume that I came to bring peace."

And in another place,

"I did not come to judge the world..."

And somewhere else,

"I came into this world for judgment."

Wait, what??!! What the heaven is going on here?

Jesus is saying: trust me. Trust in God when everything inside of you is screaming to do otherwise. Trust me when life is not making sense. Let go. Believe.

And when we do this, when we humble ourselves and believe, we soon find all of this is indeed the wisdom of God and the power of God.

It's the wisdom of being foolish.

Tap into your inner-child of God once more.

Allow yourself to be enchanted yet again.

Move forward by going back.

Jesus knows exactly what he's doing here. The cross levels the playing field and reminds us we all fall short of God's glory—no matter our IQ or pedigree. Stop the posturing, jockeying, and mental gymnastics. See the power in weakness. Get to know Christ crucified—identify with him.

Paul doesn't mince words. God will destroy, nullify, and cancel: The wisdom of the wise. The cleverness of the clever. The intelligence of the intelligent. The eloquence of the eloquent.

Christianity is not what you think. It's not a head-trip or a head-nodding affair. It's God's good pleasure to make foolish the wisdom of the world, for:

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

God's wisdom challenges anyone who thinks they've arrived, figured it out, or have a corner on the truth because of their own prowess or prestige that got them into some elite inner-circle. Jesus blows that out of the water.

We're all equal before the cross of Christ—*all of us*. No matter if we're self-educated or home-schooled or have a GED, AA, BA, PhD, or are just full of BS, or permanently enrolled in the school of hard knocks. None of us make the grade or pass the test on our own. You can be a wiseacre or a smart cookie or not the sharpest knife in the drawer—it doesn't matter. None of us can outsmart or outwit our omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. Nobody. Nada. Zilch. Zero.

To believe in the scandal and the foolishness of the gospel, we must undergo a conversion of the imagination, a baptism of our attitude. We need a brain transplant—and receive the mind of Christ. God performs spiritual lasik eye surgery, giving us fresh eyes of faith, to see the unseen, to see blind spots we missed before.

When we sing "*O Come, Thou Wisdom from on High*," we're saying that God's plan of salvation is actually a person of salvation. Divine wisdom is made manifest in, expressed by, and identified with Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in Bethlehem, and crucified in Jerusalem.

If you want to understand deep insights about life, about yourself, about the universe, about God—

Go to Christ—the *crucified* Christ.
The Messiah who was born in a manger.
Go to other Christians who follow him.

As Paul says in Romans,

"I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe."

When we encounter the crucified Christ, the wisdom and power of God made flesh, things begin to change. Lives are changed. Hearts are changed. Outlooks changed. Situations changed. We are changed—transformed and transfigured more and more into Christ's image.

All we have to do is swallow our stubborn pride, and eat humble pie this Christmas. When we do this, we taste and see that indeed God is good and the source of our life in Christ. It's a come to Jesus moment, a mountaintop experience here in the valley below. An aha experience where the light bulb turns on and we see it's all a gift.

We have nothing to bring to the table. Our hands and our pockets are empty. We have no reason to boast. All we can do is raise our cup that runneth over and say thanks.

When God sees us, he sees Jesus. What is true of Jesus, is true of us. The more Christ has of us, the more we become who we are. The more we become like Christ. In Christ Jesus we're gifted with righteousness, sanctification, and redemption—free of charge.

There's a reason we preach the crucified Christ. He can relate with our challenges, and rise above them. The good news is that the crucified Christ knows our pain. Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God, overcomes the power of evil, solves the problem of our sin, breaks our addictions, helps us push through pain leap over obstacles and walk through walls.

The crucified Lord infuses us with living hope when we're feeling hopeless and hapless and useless. It doesn't matter who you are—if you're nobility or royalty, the upper crust or the cream of the crop,

the dregs of society or the middle class. I mean think about the company Jesus kept—He didn't hang out with the up and coming—rather he spent time with the down and out. There's hope for us!

What I'm trying to say is that it doesn't matter if you're blue collar, white collar, or wear a clerical collar—if you're from the Bible belt, the Rust belt, or the Sun Belt. God doesn't care if you're an egghead in an ivory tower or just have egg on your face. None of us—not even the brightest and the best, can speculate our way up to God.

But God's wisdom has come down to us in Christ, telling us,
"all that you have is a gift, it's all grace."

All from God. Accept God's acceptance.

Or as the Prophet Jeremiah says:

*Let not the wise boast of their wisdom,
Nor the valiant of their valor,
Let not the wealthy boast of their wealth,
But if anyone must boast, let them boast in this:
That he understands and acknowledges me,
For I am the Lord, I show unfailing love.*

Or as Proverbs says,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In other words, God is God and I am not.

This Advent, humbly crawl to Jesus, come close and peer into the manger, and know that this baby Jesus can make a nobody, anybody, a Somebody.

*Come, thou Wisdom from on high,
who orderest all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.*

Amen.

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