**The Spirit’s Power**

January 17, 2021

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Key Verse 2:4 “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”

The prince of Grenada, an heir to the Spanish crown, was sentenced to life in solitary confinement in Madrid’s ancient prison called “The Place of the Skull.” The fearful, dirty, and dreary nature of the place earned it the name. Everyone knew that once you were in, you would never come out alive. The prince was given one book to read the entire time—the Bible. With only one book to read, he read it over hundreds of times. The book became his constant companion. After 33 years of imprisonment, he died. When they went in to clean out his cell, they found some notes he had written using nails on the walls: Psalm 118:8 is the middle verse of the Bible; Ezra 7:21 contains all the letters of the alphabet except the letter j; Esther 8:9 is the longest verse in the Bible. He never made any commitment to Christ, and without the Spirit, he could not understand the Bible. He only became an expert at Bible trivia. This shows that without the Spirit, one cannot understand the Bible. No amount of intellectual study or eloquent argument will help him to know the spiritual truth. Those things will not take the scales off the blind eyes; they cannot give life to the dead soul. Only the Spirit of God can open the heart of unbelievers and reveal the truth of God’s word.

Look at verse 1. “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.” Paul reminds them of how they first met. He didn’t speak at all like his contemporaries. In those days, speaker’s words were expected to be eloquent, Like Mark Antony in William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!” Eloquent speeches produce intellectual and emotional responses, such as conviction or persuasion. Teachers of the time would also speak from a position of superior wisdom. But Paul spoke differently. Unlike philosophers and orators of the age, his message was simple and straight forward. He was proclaiming to them the message of the cross, the gospel message. But he did not do so with eloquence or wisdom.

If we know anything about Paul, we know he was well educated. He was the top student and a master of Jewish law under Gamaliel, which is like studying at Harvard in our day. He was a Roman citizen, born in Tarsus. Tarsus rivaled Athens and Alexandria as a center of Greek culture and knowledge, boasting a library of more than 200,000 books. He certainly had eloquence and superior wisdom. When we read his epistles, his wisdom shines. Why didn’t he use this when he was in Corinth? He worked there as a humble tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquila. He put aside the Ph.D. lifestyle to identify with and reach the ordinary people of Corinth with the gospel.

Look at verse 2. “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” He could have appealed to them from their Greek culture and society, which he understood well. He could have used his oratory skills to persuade them with his wisdom. Instead, Paul forced himself to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Paul relied on the simple message of the gospel. In that immoral and philosophically oriented society, such a simple message as the gospel seemed unrelated to their situation. Perhaps some felt ashamed of the gospel, compared to the knowledge of the day. But Paul did not. In Romans 1:16 he put it this way, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” Paul believed that the gospel, simple as it was, far surpassed the contemporary wisdom. All the philosophy, rhetoric and clever thoughts of men had no power to change anyone. But in the gospel, the message of the cross, we find the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. In our complex, rational and relativistic society today, we are sometimes ashamed of our simple gospel based Bible study ministry. Sometimes we envy big churches with all their talent, technology and productions. But Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Paul decided to preach the gospel message of Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

I think Paul may have come to this conclusion through his personal experience. On his 2nd missionary journey, prior to this visit to Corinth, he had been in Athens. While there, he preached the gospel about Jesus and the resurrection. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers rejected the gospel, saying, “What is he babbling about?” But they invited him to speak before all the top intellectuals of the day, the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-21). What a human honor and once in a lifetime opportunity! Paul prepared an eloquent message, saying, “Men of Athens!” He quoted Greek poets, introduced God the Creator, and expressed superior knowledge, stating that he was proclaiming to them the God they didn’t know (Acts 17:22-31). It was a stirring speech. But he didn’t mention Jesus. He did not mention the cross of Jesus. Only at the end did he mention the resurrection, almost as an aside (Acts 17:31). Some people liked his teaching, but no one was baptized (Acts 17:34). No church was established there. History tells us that there was no permanent Christian presence in Athens until well into the 4th century. It was a failure. Greeks are already full of wisdom, philosophy, and thought provoking subjects. When the gospel was treated as just another theory among many, it had no power or impact.

Then Paul entered Corinth. Paul says, “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling (3).” He lands in Corinth all alone, and he is very, very discouraged. He sees a city just dominated by wickedness; just a filthy place, all alone and he is afraid. He has a terrible mental anxiety over the lostness of the city, and he knows that he is hopeless in himself. Paul’s ministry in Corinth was in weakness and fear. He started by talking about Jesus on the Sabbath among the Jews, but it only made the Jews oppose him and become abusive (Acts 18:1-6). But Paul did not give up on Corinth. He decided to go back to the gospel. He entered the house of a Roman worshiper of God, and began to preach the gospel (Acts 18:7). His message was that we are sinners, who need the cross of Jesus. Would they listen to him? Would it be effective, even though he could not compete with the orators, philosophy and entertainment of the age? Look at verse 4. “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” The Spirit worked mightily through Paul’s message. Where did this power come from? Jesus helped him. Acts 18:9 tells us, “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you…’” Paul was not alone; Jesus was with him. Paul’s preaching may not have been impressive or persuasive on a human level. It may not have been entertaining or thought-provoking. But on a spiritual level it had power that pierced the hearts of those who listened. The result was the changed lives of the Corinthians.

Look at verses 4-5. “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on God’s power.” Many people today deliver messages with eloquence, trying to use beautiful and persuasive words, and large numbers gather to them. But they do not share the message of Jesus’ cross. The idea that men are sinners in need of salvation is unpopular, so they just don’t bring it up. Joel Osteen is a pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas with 40,000 members. He is a very good speaker, and his message is “Your best life now.” He never talks about the cross of Jesus. But his messages inspire many people. I don’t have any eloquence or wisdom like Paul, but still I want to say something else to inspire people, instead of just the gospel. Charles Spurgeon said, “The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher, otherwise men would be the converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher’s learning, otherwise it consists in the wisdom of men. We might preach until our tongues rotted, until we would exhaust our lungs and die. But never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit be with the word of God to give it the power to convert the soul.” May God help us to depend on the Holy Spirit as we teach the Bible and preach his word.

While Paul did not rely on human wisdom, that did not mean that his messages were without wisdom. Look at verses 6-7. “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.” Nicodemus was a smart guy in Jesus’ day. He had a Ph.D. in theology. But when Jesus talked about being born again, he answered like an elementary school student, “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” The smartest guy in this world cannot understand the mystery in Christ. Here a mystery does not mean secret knowledge; it is that it was hidden in the Old Testament, but now revealed to us by the Spirit. There are several wonderful mysteries. First, now Gentiles are heirs together with Jews and they are one in Christ. All the barriers are gone in Christ such as racial, economic, social barriers. (Eph 3:6) Second, God dwells in us through the Spirit. (Col 1:27) It was unthinkable in the Old Testament that the Holy God could dwell in us. It is possible only through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Now we are the temples of the Holy Spirit. Third, Jesus will come again and not all believers will experience death, but all will be changed into glorious resurrection bodies. (1Cor 15:51) Bart Ehrman is a professor of religious studies at University of North Carolina. He knows the Bible much more than you and me. When he reads the Bible, he does not see these wonderful truths, but he only sees the discrepancies in the Bible. For example, in Mark’s gospel, Mary Magdalene and two other women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body after he was buried. In John’s gospel, only Mary Magdalene went there. So he says that the Bible has many errors. But these discrepancies can be explained. In a spiritual world, Ph.D. is “Phenomenal Dud.”

How did God share his wisdom with us? Look at verses 10-11. “But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” I can know a lot of things about you by spending time with you, or reading your facebook posts. But I can’t know your thoughts. I hope you are all listening to the message, but I don’t know who is thinking about lunch, or something else. Even after years of marriage, there are things people never know about their spouses. How much less are we able to know the thoughts of God Almighty! Just as the spirit of a man is the best way to know the thoughts of a man, God’s Spirit is the way to know the deep things about God. While we cannot receive another person’s spirit, verse 12 tells us that we who believe have received the Spirit who is from God. God gives the Holy Spirit so we may understand the deep grace he has freely given us in the gospel. This was his goal, to build a relationship with us. When the Spirit is with us, we can understand the Bible and apply it to our lives. We have access to the gifts of God, starting from the gospel, and all the way to a living hope in God’s kingdom, made certain by the testimony of God’s Spirit in us (Eph 1:13-14).

Look at verses 13-14. “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things (Jn 14:26). We all long to know spiritual truths, like where did I come from? Where am I going? Who am I really? What is life all about? How can we know what is the right thing to do or where to go? Human advice helps, but is limited. Human wisdom gives no satisfying answer. Without the Holy Spirit’s help, we are destined to make mistake after mistake. But the Spirit teaches us the answer to these questions and guides us to live for the glory of God. It would be wise not to waste time trying to explain the spiritual things to unbelievers. It would be like throwing a pearl to a pig. It would be like describing a sunset to a blind man, or discussing a nuclear physics with a baby. The natural man, a man without the Spirit, cannot understand spiritual things. What he needs is not more intellectual study, but new birth. When I graduated from a university, I was very tired and had no meaning of life or direction. My dream of becoming a great mathematician seemed to be gone. I did not know what to do with my life. I searched for a secret in vain to make me super smart overnight. By God’s grace, I was born again and could understand the spiritual truths by the Spirit that I will be changed into glorious resurrection body when Jesus comes again.

In this passage we learned that only the Spirit of God can open our hearts and reveal the truth of God’s word. May God help us to depend on the Spirit for our messages, testimonies and Bible studies so that the Spirit can reveal the truth.

Big Idea: Only the Spirit can reveal the spiritual truth