

1 CORINTHIANS 8:4

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. We began looking at this chapter two weeks ago, and so far we've covered the first three verses. Paul started by saying, "Now about food sacrificed to idols." This phrase gives us the main topic of chapters 8–10. Paul was responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers, and this was one of the topics that they asked him about. But Paul did not focus on food right away in his response. Instead he focused on the issue of knowledge. He said, "We know that 'we all have knowledge.'" And that phrase "we all have knowledge" is in quotation marks in the Christian Standard Bible. So Paul was quoting a statement that must have been in the letter from the Corinthian believers. But he introduced this quotation with the phrase "we know that." So it seems like Paul was agreeing with this quote.

Now I don't think this quote is saying that all human beings have some knowledge. That would be rather obvious, and it doesn't fit the context. Instead I think this quote is referring to all believers, and the knowledge is probably a reference to some basic knowledge about God and other spiritual truths. We're going to learn more about this knowledge shortly. But in verse 1 Paul was focused on a danger that comes with having knowledge. He said that "knowledge puffs up." Now this doesn't mean that there's anything inherently wrong with having spiritual knowledge. After all, 2 Peter 3:18 commands us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." So it's obvious that God wants us to increase in our knowledge of him and his truth.

But Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 8:1 is that knowledge can be dangerous if we don't use it correctly. I like to think about the illustration of a knife. A knife is a very valuable tool in a kitchen for preparing food, but it can also be a deadly weapon. So we have to make sure that we're using the knife properly, and it's the same thing with knowledge. Spiritual knowledge is very valuable, but it has the potential to lead to arrogance if we're not careful. And if we flaunt our knowledge and use it in a careless way, we're probably going to end up hurting our fellow believers. So we need to make sure that our knowledge is paired with love. Paul said at the end of verse 1 that "love builds up." When we treat other believers with love and use our knowledge to help them, then we'll make them strong spiritually. That way they'll be able to serve God effectively and live in obedience to him.

Then in verses 2–3 Paul continued to focus on the topics of knowledge and love. He said, "If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it. But if anyone loves God, he is known by him." In these verses Paul gave us two contrasting conditioning sentences. And the first one seems kind of crazy at first glance. It sounds like Paul was saying that if we think we have some spiritual knowledge, then we don't actually have it. But we need to remember what Paul was talking about in verse

1. He was saying that knowledge can easily lead us to be arrogant. So in verse 2 Paul wasn't just referring to knowledge in itself. Instead he must have been referring to knowledge that's accompanied by arrogance. That knowledge is lacking because it's not going to be used properly. We'll end up using it to hurt others instead of helping them.

Then in verse 3 Paul switched from a bad scenario to a good scenario. He focused on loving God, and that's a bit surprising, because we would have expected him to talk about loving other believers. But Paul knew that loving God with our whole being is the most important command. And if we do that, then we'll naturally love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Loving God is the foundation for loving other believers. And Paul said that if we love God, we are known by him. Now Paul certainly could have said that we know God if we love him. But instead he chose a deeper way to describe our salvation. He focused on how we even came to know God in the first place. We know him because he knows us.

Now we know from Scripture that one of God's attributes is omniscience. He knows everything and everyone perfectly. But Paul was talking about a different kind of knowledge here in verse 3. He wasn't just talking about intellectual knowledge; he was referring to an intimate relationship. This is the kind of knowledge that God was talking about in Jeremiah 1:5. Here's what he said to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." That's the wording in the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. And what God meant here was that he decided to enter into a special relationship with Jeremiah before he even existed. God chose to make him a prophet and speak through him.

So in 1 Corinthians 8:3 Paul was saying that God decided to enter into a special relationship with us before the foundation of the world. Ultimately the reason we're saved is that God decided to know us in a special way. Our salvation is based completely on his grace. There's nothing that we could have done to deserve this incredible gift. And this fact should cause us to humble ourselves. That's why Paul brought it up here in this passage. The Corinthian believers were struggling with arrogance, and it had a detrimental effect on their knowledge. So Paul taught them that being known by God is more significant than any knowledge they might have. That's a good thing to meditate on whenever we're tempted to be prideful.

Now let's look at the next verse in 1 Corinthians 8. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 4: "About eating food sacrificed to idols, then, we know that 'an idol is nothing in the world,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" In this verse Paul started by repeating what he said at the beginning of verse 1. The word "about" comes from the same Greek word that we saw in verse 1. And the phrase "food sacrificed to idols" also comes from the same Greek word that we saw in verse 1. As I told you two weeks ago, a more literal translation of that word is the phrase "things sacrificed to idols." That's what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible. In the original Greek there's a compound word here with two parts. The first part refers to idols, and the second part refers to sacrifices.

But we know from the Old Testament that sacrifices usually involved something that could be eaten. Normally an animal of some kind was used, like a bull, a lamb, or even a pigeon. But grain and wine could also be used in certain sacrifices. Either way the sacrifice involved something edible. Now this point wasn't super clear in verse 1. But here in verse 4 Paul added a word that he didn't use back in verse

1. It's the word "eating." So Paul was making it clear that he was indeed talking about food. And the issue here was whether Christians could eat food that was sacrificed to idols. This was a huge deal for the Corinthian believers, because there was a lot of idol worship going on in their city. Food was sacrificed to idols, and then the leftovers were sold in the markets. And the big question was whether Christians could buy that food and eat it.

But Paul wasn't going to give a short and simple answer to this question. First he wanted to address a variety of related issues. And he started by talking about the subject of knowledge. In verse 1 he said, "We know that 'we have all knowledge.'" But he didn't give any details about what kind of knowledge he was talking about. Instead he talked about the need to pair our knowledge with love. But here in verse 4 he was ready to discuss some specific areas of knowledge. He said, "We know that 'an idol is nothing in the world,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" Notice that there are two sets of quotation marks here in the Christian Standard Bible. The same thing is true in the English Standard Version and several other translations. So once again Paul seemed to be quoting the letter that the Corinthian believers wrote to him, just like he did in verse 1.

Now in verse 1 Paul introduced the quotation with the phrase "we know that." And we can see that he used the same phrase in verse 4. In the original Greek the wording is exactly the same in both places. So once again Paul was saying that he knew what the Corinthian believers knew. He was agreeing with them about the two statements that he quoted. So let's take a closer look at these two statements. The first one is that "an idol is nothing in the world." The Greek word for idol is used 11 times in the New Testament. Let me show you a few of them. Look at Acts 7:41: "They even made a calf in those days, offered sacrifice to the idol, and were celebrating what their hands had made."

In this verse Stephen was on trial before the Jewish religious leaders. And he was talking about the Israelites when they were on Mount Sinai. While Moses was on the mountain receiving God's law, the people got tired of waiting for him. So they asked Aaron to make a golden calf that they could worship. And Stephen referred to this calf as an idol. But of course the Israelites weren't the only people who worshiped idols. Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:9: "For they themselves report what kind of reception we had from you: how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." So the Thessalonian believers used to worship idols before they turned to the true God.

And the Corinthian believers were in the same boat. Look at 1 Corinthians 12:2: "You know that when you were pagans, you used to be enticed and led astray by mute idols." So when the Corinthian believers were pagans before they got saved, they used to be led astray by mute idols. I love how Paul described the idols here. He said that they were mute or unable to speak. And that's not the only thing idols are unable to do. Look at Revelation 9:20: "The rest of the people, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands to stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which cannot see, hear, or walk."

So this verse is describing what will happen during the sixth trumpet judgment during the coming seven-year period of tribulation. A third of the human race will be killed by three plagues. Now you would

think that the remaining people will quickly repent of their wickedness at that point. But this verse says that they will not stop worshiping idols. And notice how these idols are described. First we see what they're made out of: gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood. Then we see what they cannot do. They can't see, hear, or walk. So in 1 Corinthians 12:2 we see that idols can't speak, and in Revelation 9:20 we see that they also can't see, hear, or walk. Idols are pretty helpless, aren't they?

And I think that's exactly what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 8:4. He agreed with the Corinthian believers, who said that "an idol is nothing in the world." The English Standard Version says that "an idol has no real existence." The Christian Standard Bible and the Legacy Standard Bible have the same thing in a footnote. The New American Standard Bible has a similar footnote that says, "What it represents does not exist." So the idea here seems to be that an idol has no power to do anything. It's completely helpless because it represents something that doesn't exist. And God's people knew this fact during Old Testament times as well. Look at Psalm 115:4–7: "Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk. They cannot make a sound with their throats."

So an idol might look like it can do a variety of things, but it's completely helpless. We can see the same thing in Habakkuk chapter 2. Look at verses 18–19: "What use is a carved idol after its craftsman carves it? It is only a cast image, a teacher of lies. For the one who crafts its shape trusts in it and makes worthless idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood: Wake up! or to mute stone: Come alive! Can it teach? Look! It may be plated with gold and silver, yet there is no breath in it at all." So idols are absolutely worthless. They can't do anything because they're not alive. So these passages in Psalm 115 and Habakkuk 2 form the background behind the Christian understanding of idols that we see in 1 Corinthians 8:4. It's undeniably true that "an idol is nothing in the world." There is no place on the planet or in the universe where an idol has any power to do anything.

Then Paul quoted a second statement from the Corinthian believers that he agreed with. He said that "there is no God but one." This statement flows naturally from the first one. If an idol is nothing in the world, then it follows that no idol represents a real divine being. Now many people today would agree with the first part of this statement. They believe that there is no God, and so they're called atheists. A theist is someone who believes in God, and the prefix "a-" in front just means "not." This view didn't really exist until modern times, but we do see a reference to practical atheism in the Old Testament. Psalm 14:1 and 53:1 both say that "the fool says in his heart, 'There's no God.'" In those psalms David was talking about people who didn't think that God cared about how they lived. And that's really the idea that drives modern philosophical atheism as well. People don't want to be accountable to a God who will judge them for their sins.

But the most popular kind of religion during ancient times was polytheism. The prefix "poly-" just means "many." So polytheists believe in many gods. They would worship a god associated with the sun, a god associated with the moon, gods associated with different planets, a god of the sky, a god of the sea, a god of the mountains, a god of the rain, and I could keep going and going. People would worship a god asso-

ciated with almost anything. And polytheism was especially popular in the Greek Empire and the Roman Empire, which both had a tremendous influence on the city of Corinth. So there were temples that were devoted to many different gods in the city, and people would go to those temples to offer sacrifices to these different gods.

But Judaism and Christianity fly directly in the face of polytheism, because both of those religions proclaim the view of monotheism. The prefix “mono-” just means one, and so these religions teach that there is only one God. That’s exactly what Paul said here in verse 4: “There is no God but one.” This view is proclaimed throughout the Old Testament. Let me show you a few places where it’s taught. Look at Deuteronomy 6:4: “Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This verse is so important that the Jews have a special name for it. It’s called the Shema. That name is just the Hebrew word in this verse that means “listen.” The Jews were to hear and understand that the LORD was their God and that he is one. This statement stresses that he alone is God.

Now notice that the word “LORD” is in all caps, which means that it’s a reference to God’s name. Most Bible translations don’t actually give us God’s name because of Jewish tradition. The Jews eventually stopped speaking God’s name because they thought that it was too sacred to be spoken. And so they started saying the Hebrew word “adonai” in its place when reading Scripture. This term is often used to refer to God in the Old Testament, but it’s not a name. Instead it is a title that means “lord” or “master,” and it can refer to anyone in a position of authority. It’s usually translated with the word “Lord” if it refers to God, and that’s why most English translations use the word “LORD” as a substitute for God’s name.

Now thankfully Bible translators distinguish between God’s name and the Hebrew word “adonai” by using all capital letters for his name. But this approach still leads to confusion when people listen to the reading of Scripture. After all, they can’t tell the difference between a word in all caps and the same word in lowercase letters. So the best solution here is simply to return to the practice of using God’s name. After all, he wouldn’t have included over 6,800 times in his Word if he didn’t want it to be spoken. Bible translators use a letter-for-letter equivalent for every other name in Scripture. So they should do the same thing with God’s name as well.

Now the exact pronunciation of God’s name has been the subject of much debate. In the past many people thought that his name is Jehovah. We can see that in old hymns like “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.” But Bible scholars have studied this issue carefully, and they’ve discovered that God’s name is most likely Yahweh. We can find confirmation for this view is found in the word “hallelujah.” This word is actually a Hebrew word, but it’s been brought letter for letter into English. This word has two parts: “hal-lelu,” which means “praise,” and “jah,” which is the shortened form of God’s name. Now “jah” doesn’t work as a shortened form of Jehovah because the pronunciation of the first two letters doesn’t match, but it’s a perfect fit with Yahweh. So I tend to replace the word “LORD” in all caps with the word “Yahweh” whenever I’m reading Scripture.

But thankfully I don’t have to do that with one translation. The Legacy Standard Bible never uses the word “LORD” in all caps. Instead it gives us the word “Yahweh” in all 6,800 places where it occurs. Here’s

what the Legacy Standard Bible says in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!” This is my favorite feature of the Legacy Standard Bible. It actually gives us God’s name as it was originally pronounced! There’s really no good reason for us not to say his name. When we talk to people we know, we use their names because it emphasizes our personal relationship with them. And it should be the same way with God. When we say his name in our prayers, it helps us to draw closer to him.

Now let’s look at a few more places where we see that Yahweh is the only God. Look at 1 Chronicles 17:20: “LORD, there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, as all we have heard confirms.” This is part of what David said to God in his prayer after God promised to establish his throne forever. And ultimately this promise will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to reign on the earth. Now look at Isaiah 44:6: “This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Armies, says: I am the first and I am the last. There is no God but me.” God spoke these words through Isaiah to the future generation of Israelites that would live during the Babylonian captivity. He was comforting them with the truth that he was the only true God. He was still in control and would bless them again one day.

So the Old Testament teaches repeatedly that Yahweh is the only true God. And that truth is repeated very clearly in the New Testament. Look at Mark 12:28–30: “One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which command is the most important of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’” I love how Jesus answered this question from the scribe. He didn’t just quote the command to love God in Deuteronomy 6:5. He also quoted the Shema in the previous verse. You see, we can’t truly love God unless we know something about him. And a big thing that we need to know is that he’s the one and only God.

Now look at James 2:19: “You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder.” James wrote these words to professing believers who didn’t think that their faith needed to produce good works. He told them in verse 17 that this kind of faith is dead. And here in verse 19 he compared it to the faith that demons have. You see, demons have faith in the true God, but it’s very limited. They believe that Yahweh is the only true God. But that basic belief doesn’t lead them to turn away from their sins and trust in Jesus to save them. And it doesn’t lead them to serve God and obey him. Instead they live in continuous rebellion against him.

So it’s not enough to believe that Yahweh is the only true God. But that’s where saving faith begins. This truth is something that every Christian believes. As Paul said at the end of 1 Corinthians 8:4, we all know that “there is no God but one.” Now I think it’s safe to say that all true believers will affirm that statement with their lips. But there’s a danger that we will contradict that statement with our lives. We’re all tempted to give our worship to idols instead. Listen to how the apostle John ended his first letter in chapter 5 and verse 21: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” Now in our culture we’re not really tempted to bow down before graven images. But we have other idols that tempt us to worship them. And Paul talked about one of them in Colossians 3:5: “Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.”

Greed is probably the most dangerous idol in our culture today. Most people seem to have an insatiable desire to get more and more money. But there's no way to quench that desire. You'll never get enough money to be satisfied if you're worshiping the idol of greed. And we won't be able to serve God if we're full of greed. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." So let's do more than just affirm the truth with our words. Let's not just say that there is no God but one. Let's live that truth everyday by guarding ourselves from idols. Let's make sure that we're fully devoted to God and that nothing keeps us from living in obedience to him. Let's close in prayer and ask for his help to do that.