

DIRECTIONS FROM THE TOWER

3rd in a Series on the Character of God Called, “Indescribable”

Romans 16:27 – Topic: Knowing God - Wisdom

Billy Ray Wallis of Little Rock and Thurston Poole of Des Arc were both injured and hospitalized after their truck struck a tree alongside Arkansas State Highway 38. The accident occurred as they were returning from a frog gigging trip and the headlights on Poole’s truck malfunctioned. They determined that a fuse in the headlight circuit had burned out. They didn’t have a replacement fuse. But then Wallis somehow noticed that a .22 caliber bullet from his pistol would fit perfectly in the fuse box which was right next to the steering column. They inserted it and it worked fine. Yeah, what could possibly go wrong? After they had driven about 20 miles the bullet apparently got heated up and it discharged. It struck Poole in a very masculine spot, causing him to swerve off the road and ram into a tree. Poole suffered only minor cuts and bruises from the impact, but needed surgery to repair the bullet wound. Wallis suffered a broken clavicle.

The lack of wisdom there is astounding. But before we get too smug in our disdain we should remember that we all have 99.9% of our genes in common with those guys. Still, sometimes you just shake your head in amazement at what people do. Toby told me yesterday that he had seen a survey that revealed 25% of Americans believe the sun orbits around the earth. Again I was dumbfounded. But then I asked myself, “How do I know the earth orbits the sun, not the other way around?” It is only because people have told me it is so. I don’t know it from anything I have observed personally. In fact, on the basis of what I see and know, it sure looks like the sun is going around us. It feels like we are stationary and the sun is moving. I only think otherwise because people who are smarter than me have studied the heavens and have told me this is true.

When it comes to knowing what God is like we are in a similar situation. On the basis of what I personally observe and know I can’t conclude much about God. But God has revealed truth about himself to people who have passed on the information to us. One of those people was a first century Jew named Paul. He wrote a letter to Christians in Rome. In a part of it at the very end that we have labeled Romans 16:27 he shared some of the revelation that God gave him, and it had to do with wisdom.

In verse 25 Paul began a prayer that was the close of the letter. He wrote, “Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel.” Then he went on a bit of a rabbit trail before getting back to his prayer in verse 27. “To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen.”

GOD IS THE ONLY WISE GOD

This sounds like Paul is saying there are a lot of gods out there, but the true God is the only perfectly wise one. That would have made sense in the culture of his day, since it was a polytheistic culture. He could have been saying, “My God is better than yours because he’s wise and yours isn’t.” But that’s not really what he meant. He was not differentiating God from the false gods of the culture of that day. The words “the only wise” form an adjectival phrase. Do you remember the old cartoon character Yosemite Sam? He once was described as a “pistol packin’ cowboy.” The term “pistol packin’” is adjectival, describing an aspect of his character. That’s what “only wise” is in this verse.

That phrase actually tells us two things about God. The first is that he is wise, and the second is that he is the only being who is wise in the way that he is wise. To unpack that we first have to understand what wisdom is. One of the Webster dictionary definitions of wisdom is “scholarly knowledge or learning.” That is not the ancient understanding of wisdom, nor is it what we would consider wise. Imagine an absent minded professor type of scholar who has encyclopedic knowledge of some arcane field of study, but who hasn’t got a clue about relationships, or about the everyday practical matters of life. Would you consider that person wise? No. Knowledgeable in a narrow band, yes, maybe smart, but not wise.

Historian Paul Johnson wrote a book titled *Intellectuals* that recounts the lives of many of the people who are considered icons who have shaped western culture. He looked at Jean Jacques Rousseau, Ernest Hemingway, Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, Jean Paul Sartre, and others. What his book reveals is depressing. These people, all smart, were by and large, selfish, heartless, cruel, and complete failures at relationships. Is that wisdom? I don’t think so. Johnson wrote, “One of the lessons of our tragic century is beware of intellectuals.”

Another dictionary definition of wisdom is “the quality or state of being wise.” Well, yes, that’s accurate, but unhelpful. Another gets much closer to the heart of the concept. “Knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action.” So it is knowing what is right and being able to judge how to act in light of that.

In his classic book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A. W. Tozer wrote, “wisdom...is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve those ends by the most perfect means.” So it is the ability to know the perfect things to do, along with the ideal way to achieve those ends. Stephen Charnock said much the same in his classic, *The Existence and Attributes of God*. He wrote that wisdom consists, “In acting for a right end. The chief part of prudence is in fixing a right end, and in choosing fit means and directing them to that scope. To shoot at random is a mark of folly.”

I learned from experience that last statement is true. I have gone hunting just once in my life. My dad took me quail hunting one time. I suspect the experience was so unsettling for him he never did it again. He gave me careful instructions about gun safety, then armed me with a shotgun. Off we went, marching through the brush in search of quail. It was a successful hunt. I define successful as no humans were wounded or killed. I fired my gun one time. I thought I saw a quail and fired at it. I missed, which was okay because it turned out it wasn't a bird at all. But one thing was clear to me that day. To just shoot at random truly would be foolish. At best you are wasting ammunition. At worst you could hit something you absolutely don't want to hit, like another person. I wasn't foolish that day, so no one was harmed. Neither were any quail.

God is wise in the sense that he knows what is the best thing to do, and he knows the best way to do it. He knows that about every single aspect of life, every event that will ever occur. He knows it in regard to every person who lives or ever will live. God is the only wise one because no one else can be wise like he is. Isaiah 46:10 quotes God saying, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand and I will do all that I please.'" God knows the end of things from the beginning. What he plans happens, because for him there are no surprises. This means he never experiences unintended consequences. He can see before he ever acts what the result of his actions will be.

No human, in fact, no being in all of creation, has that ability. We do the best we can, and the wisest of us make good decisions, but we never really know what the ramifications of some decision will be. We know that a general law of life is that if you make good decisions you usually will get good consequences, but you don't know what sort of collateral results might happen. I was thinking about some people who owned a restaurant over in San Elijo Hills and who not long ago opened another one that Michael and Carissa really like. But within a few weeks of opening their new restaurant, the pandemic came to town. They had to close their brand new restaurant. They made what seemed a good decision, but they could not foresee what happened.

When our kids were young the school they attended had a bike safety rally one day. They had fire fighters come to the campus after school and talk to the kids about bike safety. This seemed like a good idea, so our kids went with their bikes to the event. They got bike safety certificates showing they now were verified safe bike riders. As they headed back home on the bikes, only a block or so away from the school, one of their friends cut Toby off; they collided and he went down on the pavement face first. He was wearing a helmet, since it was a bike safety event, but it didn't save him from getting a concussion and ending up in the emergency room at the hospital. We thought sending our kids to a bike

safety event was a wise choice. Had we known what it would produce we would never have made that decision. Our problem is we don't know how things will turn out even when we make good choices. God always knows what is going to happen. That is why is the only one who is wise as he is wise. He is perfectly wise, and he is perfectly wise in everything.

Our minds play with us and push us in the direction of justifying whatever choices we make, so we unconsciously convince ourselves that we were in the right. I have friends who are choosing a lifestyle, making decisions that are making them unhappy, unsettled, lacking in peace and joy; but they refuse somehow to connect up their choices with the results. We are lacking in wisdom. But God is not. God is always wise. He always chooses the best goal and the best way to reach the goal, and is never surprised by something he didn't see coming.

Daniel 2:20-22 says, "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him."

THERE IS EVIDENCE OF GOD'S WISDOM

It can be seen in creation

Psalm 104:24 says, "How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all." God's wisdom is displayed by the works that he has made. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." These verses tell us that all we need to do is to look at creation and we can see God's wisdom on full display. What an incredible, intricate, beautiful system he has made.

One day before we were all put under house arrest I had to go out right around sunset. As I was driving west I was stupefied by the magnificence of the sunset. The colors were so brilliant if some great artist had painted it exactly and reproduced what I was seeing perfectly, you would say, "Well, the painter overdid it. These colors are far too vivid. It doesn't look realistic." It honestly did not look realistic. But it was real and it was spectacular. It was a tiny sample of the wisdom of God. Who could come up with a system that produces such magnificent beauty?

A couple of years ago I had to have hernia surgery. A doctor had to cut holes in me, go inside my body and sew a patch in there to fix it. The amazing thing is in a short amount of time all those wounds healed up. Today I can barely see the spots where they cut me open and there is no pain there at all. My body fixed itself! That is an astounding system!

Stephen Charnock in his book says, “All things in the world work for some end, but the ends are unknown to them.” A tree does not know that it must absorb carbon dioxide and convert it to oxygen, but it carries out its work nonetheless. Bees go about pollinating plants, but they don’t know that their doing so is essential to producing about a third of everything we eat. Charnock says, “There must be some supreme wisdom which moves and guides” all the parts of creation to their intended end. An arrow doesn’t know who shoots it, why it is shot or what its target is, but the archer knows. God is the archer who fires all the arrows of creation.

There are a lot of things in creation that we wonder about. This summer when you have a barbecue in your backyard you might wonder why God would ever have included flies in his creation. What you may not know is that when an animal is injured and has an open wound, flies are drawn to the wound. They lay eggs in it, and those eggs become maggots. The maggots eat the dead and dying tissue that would otherwise become infected and kill the animal, thus enabling the wound to heal and the animal to live.

It can be seen in the gospel

In 1 Corinthians 1:23-35 Paul wrote, “We preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ 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.” Christ crucified looks like foolishness to the world. But God’s “foolishness” is wiser than the greatest human wisdom.

God loved humans so much he wanted to rescue them and bring as many as possible into his kingdom. But how was he going to do that? The problem was that the humans were guilty of bringing evil into the world, and evil, by definition is a horror. It harms and destroys. How could God rescue us when we were guilty? Human wisdom can only come up with two possible ways of solving the problem. One is to say, “Well, just love them and forgive them. Accept them anyway.” The other is to say, “Lay down the law to them and tell them to clean up their act and do better.”

But consider a terrible criminal who has done heinous, evil acts, harming and killing many people in horrific ways. Laying down the law and encouraging him to do better is not going to work, and is it fair to his victims? Do you just love him and forgive him? That is just not right either. That’s the kind of dilemma God faced with us. His solution was to be just. The penalty for evil is death. That’s the right penalty. But then he came to this world and took the penalty upon himself, making a way for us to be accepted and then changed from the inside out so the evil itself will be done away with.

Is that a solution any human would ever have dreamed up? Would you offer to serve that evil criminal's sentence for him? I wouldn't. He is getting what he deserves. But God came up with this bizarre plan to rescue us at enormous cost to himself. This "foolish" plan is the most brilliant plan ever concocted. The foolishness of God is infinitely wiser than the greatest wisdom of human beings.

It can be seen in the church

Ephesians 3:10 says that God's "intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." So God displays his wisdom through his church.

Um, what now? The church? Uh, really? Have you looked at the church? Honestly there is a lot that people in the church do that I don't want to be associated with. I hear a lot of stuff coming out of the church that doesn't have anything to do with the Spirit of Christ. Jesus said the world would know we are his followers by the way we love each other. By that measure, if I weren't a believer, I fear I might conclude these people are not followers of Jesus at all.

Then I look at our little church. I believe we actually do love each other, and others outside the church as well. I think we do live by the gospel of grace. But I have to admit, we're not especially impressive. There's nothing amazing about us, so how do we display the wisdom of Christ? How does the larger church show God's wisdom?

We tend to think what shows the wisdom of God is the stuff that impresses people. Go to a church with a campus that would make a university envious, services that would rival Hollywood productions, well-oiled, efficient organizations that outdo corporations, masses of people involved in the programs. We have no doubt that this shows the wisdom of God. He's the one who put this impressive display together, so he must be really wise.

But we forget what God has been doing from the beginning. Who did Jesus choose to be his foundational leaders? Country bumpkins, unsophisticated and unknown fishermen, social outcasts who were uneducated, insignificant and disrespected. Look at what Paul said about the Christians in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-28 he said, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose weak things of the world to shame the strong; God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are."

God chose the foolish, the despised, the weak, the lowly to fill and build his church. Later in 2 Corinthians 12:9 he would say that his power is perfected in weakness. God has taken

substandard materials like me, and he has made a masterpiece out of it. After 20 centuries the church is not merely still surviving, it is thriving. It exists all over the world, involving millions of people... all accomplished not by the brilliance, the abilities, the strength, the cleverness of people. It is accomplished by God's Spirit using the least likely candidates.

In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan wrote, "In a move so reckless and costly and counterintuitive it seems harebrained and laughable to the...philosophers of this age, but which makes the rulers and authorities of the heavenly places shudder, God sought those who were nothing and made them, by his choice, his own sons and daughters."

IMPLICATIONS

BELIEVE YOU ARE AN EXAMPLE OF GOD'S WISDOM

Who created you? Well, see, my mother and father...No, I'm not talking about the physical process of how you were born. I'm talking about who is ultimately responsible for you having a life? Your mother and father could have created nothing unless God was involved. God is ultimately the one who gives us life. Psalm 139:13 says to God, "You created my innermost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." God is the one who thought you up and made you happen. Yes, he used your parents, but he was the one behind it all. We know that because we know that humans do not have the ability to come up with that process, to make it actually work or to control it. So ultimately you are made by God.

God is the only wise God. He is wiser than any other being in existence. Is he wise some of the time? Or most of the time? No, he is always wise. He is wise in everything he does. So what is the implication? Is he wise in creating you? Yes, he is. Creating you is an act of his wisdom. Psalm 139:14 says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well." God's works are wonderful and wise. You are one of his works, and that makes you a wise and wonderful work of his.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." The Greek word translated "handiwork" is *poiema*. We get the word "poem" from it. It means a piece of great craftsmanship. That is who we are. A masterpiece of God's wisdom.

I admit that I have trouble believing that. Why didn't God make me more talented? Why didn't he make me more capable at ministry if he was going to call me to it? Why didn't he make me organizationally more adept and more visionary? Why didn't he make me more dynamic and charismatic? Why didn't he make me more insightful? Why didn't he

make me more consistent? Oh by the way, I wouldn't have minded if he'd made me smarter, better looking, bigger, stronger, faster, more coordinated, oh, yes, and with a lot more hair? I see so many weaknesses and failings in me. I'm not what I wish I were.

But here's the thing. I am God's poem. I am his craftsmanship. I am a product of his wisdom, just the way I am. And so are you. God doesn't need our ability, our charisma, our strengths, our human impressiveness. In fact, his power is not culminated by those things, it is short circuited by them. His power is perfected in our weakness. My lack of strength and ability is the thing that brings his power into play. All God requires of us is our humility, faithfulness and our trust. Just do our best to be what he has made us to be, humble ourselves and trust whatever he wants to do with us. We need to trust that even though it may not seem impressive to us or to others, God is making a masterpiece out of us.

What gives us true value, what makes us able to be at peace with who we are, is this truth. We are God's poems. Attempts to establish worth or be secure in ourselves on any other basis actually will fail, and in fact create dysfunction and harm to us.

BELIEVE GOD'S INSTRUCTION IS WISDOM ITSELF

Again I will quote Stephen Charnock. He wrote, "While we acknowledge (God) wise in our opinion, we speak him foolish by our practice." In other words we say, "Yes, I know that God is wise," but then we choose to do what we think is best or what other people tell us. We let the world around us shape our ideas and our choices. In so doing, as Charnock says, we speak God foolish. We say he doesn't know what is best. But that means we say he is not wise at all.

If we truly believe God is wise, that means he knows what is right and best, what will produce the best outcome, and he knows the means to gaining those ends. Will we act on our stated belief and follow his wisdom, or will we speak him foolish?

Years ago a woman who was in our church at the time came to see me because she had something she wanted to believe about how we should live that she knew was contrary to what I taught. She wanted to explain how what the Bible clearly said, it didn't really mean. I tried to help her see how she was trying to dodge the obvious meaning of the Scriptures but she stubbornly hung on to her position. Finally, after a long discussion, seeing what the real problem was, I said, "I would like you, for the sake of discussion, to assume for a moment that God actually means what these verses clearly say." She interrupted and said, "But I don't believe that's what God would really mean." I said, "I'm not arguing that for the moment. What I'm asking you to do, for the sake of discussion, is,

for the moment, assume that it is true. I understand your position. I'm not asking you to admit you're wrong. I'm just asking you to assume for a moment that what I'm saying is really what is written to us. As you assume that I want to ask, would you believe and do as he says?" She said, "But it's not what I think he says." I said, "Do you see what the real issue here is? It is that you are not willing to admit even the possibility that these verses mean what they say because you know that you will not obey them no matter what. In other words, it is more important to you to believe and live out of your position than to do what God says. That particular position is an *idol that you are worshipping more than you worship God.*" I wish I could say it helped. Unfortunately, she went away kind of mad. Her thinking had been formed not by what God says to us, by his wisdom; but by what friends and the world around us says. She was calling God foolish. Let's make sure we never do that.

BELIEVE GOD'S PLAN IS WISE

Our son-in-law, Michael is a pilot for Delta Airlines. That means he used to fly planes all over the country. These days it means he stays at home and helps take care of his and Carissa's son, Wesley, because the airline business has dropped 90%. But some day he will fly again. When he does he will always fly under the direction of air traffic controllers. They tell him what direction to fly and at what altitude. Sometimes they even will tell him what speed to fly. His job is to immediately comply with all of the controller's instructions. If he fails to do that he puts the lives of hundreds of people in jeopardy. When he is instructed to turn right to 120 degrees and ascend to flight level 320 his job is not to say, "Nah, I don't feel like doing that. A more direct route to our destination is to fly 180 degrees, so I'm going to do that."

The deal is that an air traffic controller can see what a pilot can't. He's looking at a radar screen that displays all the traffic in an area. He knows what Michael doesn't. He gives instructions that will get the plane to its intended destination safely without conflicting with other aircraft.

As we go through life we must trust God's wisdom in our circumstances. We must know that he knows and sees what we cannot. So though at times he may take us places we don't like and can't understand, we can trust his wisdom. Trust what he knows and trust that he knows the best end for us and the best way to get there.

There will be times when we don't see the plan and we don't understand why God would have the things that we are experiencing happen to us. We ask why. This doesn't make any sense. We are frustrated, confused, and tempted to doubt God. In those times we need to remember he is God only wise. He sees things on his radar screen that we don't see.

God's wisdom is our anchor in those times. We trust in that, not in our ability to figure it all out or to control it all.

As we trust him we can be at peace in every situation, knowing that God is wisely guiding us through life. Charnock wrote, "The stability of a gracious soul depends upon the wisdom of God." If we wish to be at peace, to be stable in life, then we must depend at all times upon the wisdom of God, knowing that it is far wiser than any other wisdom.