

WHEN THE BASES ARE LOADED

14th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 3:10-13

Humorist Jack Handey is known for what he calls his “Deep Thoughts.” Here are a couple: “I can picture a world without war, a world without hate. And I can picture us attacking that world because they’d never expect it.” Another is, “I hope that after I die people will say of me, ‘That guy sure owed me a lot of money.’”

In his book, *Fuzzy Memories*, he recalls a time during his youth when his life was being made miserable by a bully. This bully would demand that Jack give him his lunch money or the bully would beat him up. Jack says that he decided to fight back. He started taking karate lessons. But after a few lessons he realized that he was paying the karate teacher quite a bit more money than he had been paying the bully. So he quit and went back to paying the bully.

Was that a wise decision? I don’t know. But I want you to think with me about wisdom, in particular, God’s wisdom. We will see that God demonstrates his wisdom in a most unusual way. But we will also see that God’s wisdom has important implications for our lives. Let’s look at Ephesians 3:10-13.

THE CHURCH DEMONSTRATES GOD’S WISDOM

Verse 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 places.” Let’s think about the wisdom of God. The first question we must answer is what is wisdom?

In his classic book, *Knowing God*, the late J. I. Packer wrote, “Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.” In his 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 those men agree that wisdom is the ability to know what is the best thing to do, then be able to choose the best way to accomplish that. Think about this in the practical matter of using money. Suppose a person receives a large sum of money. What should this person do with it? One option would be to go out and buy a Ferrari F430 for \$200,000, take a lavish trip to Bora Bora staying in the Four Seasons for a cool \$30,000, buy some nice bling for \$50,000, and so on, blowing through the whole pile of cash in the space of a couple of months. That person would have chosen as a goal to have a blast spending money for as long as the money lasts. Another option might be to invest the money in a variety of investment instruments in order to preserve and grow the newfound wealth. That person chose the goal of having more long term financial security.

Which of those would be the wisest? The wise person can determine the best goal and the ideal methods for achieving that goal. In the eyes of most people, of course, the wiser option of those two would be to invest the money rather than immediately spend it all.

But wisdom is not primarily about money. We learned when studying Proverbs that wisdom is about how to master life, how to make the most of life. Thus it is about knowing what is best to do in life to make the most of it and how to accomplish that. When it comes to God it is even bigger than that. For him it is about how to bring about the highest possible good in every way and in every aspect of life.

Romans 16:27 says, “To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen.” God is the God who is the only wise one. Does this mean that there are no other wise beings? No, there are other beings that are wise. The book of Proverbs is full of descriptions of what wise human beings are like. Paul’s point in Romans 16:27 is that while there are wise people, no one is wise the way God is wise.

Author Mark Buchanan said, “If you compare the wisdom of anyone, anything, any other god or guru or philosopher...to God and his wisdom, you’ll find that they’re all nincompoops. In comparison to God everything else looks like sheer and utter and bumbling folly.” There is an obvious reason for this. Wisdom is the ability to know both the best outcome and the best way to achieve that outcome. God has a huge advantage over every other being. That is that he knows the end from the beginning.

Isaiah 46:9-10 quotes God saying, “Remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me. 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 is able to tell what will happen at the end of time, and was able to do that from the beginning of time. He was able in ancient times to tell things that are still to happen in the future. This is why God could predict through Daniel the course of history leading to the Roman Empire, and why he could tell us that Messiah would someday come.

God knows what will happen in the future. In Psalm 139:16 David wrote of God, “Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Have you ever thought about how David knew that? Yes, God revealed it to him, but he also experienced it in his life. In 1 Samuel 16 we see the story of how Samuel was instructed by God to go to the home of a man named Jesse who had almost enough sons to field a baseball team and name one of those sons the next king of Israel. God told him after a process of elimination that the one he had chosen was David, the least likely of the bunch, the youngest of them all. That day when Samuel anointed David as the next king of Israel David was likely in his early teens, somewhere between 10 and 15 years old.

What a bizarre experience that must have been for a teenaged boy. He wasn't even considered for next patriarch of his own family. In fact, he was the least likely to be the head of anything. We know his older brothers looked down on him to some extent, because that's what older brothers do. We get a glimpse of that at one point in the Bible when his brothers express their disdain of him. The idea of him becoming king was absurd. Israel had a king. His name was Saul, and he had a son named Jonathan who was the obvious choice for next king. He was an honorable and admirable man of incredible courage, a leader the people loved and he was next in line for the throne. So how would it ever be possible for David to become king instead without some sort of ungodly violence? David was 30 years old when he became king. That meant for more than 15 years he lived with this idea that God had chosen him to be king, but he could see no way that could happen. In fact, for much of that time he was concerned about just surviving to the age of 30. But a day came when David was indeed crowned king of Israel, just as God had said. He knew at that point that all the days ordained for him were written in God's book. God knew what was going to happen all along.

Only God is wise in the way that he is wise because only he knows the end from the beginning. He is never going to be frustrated by unintended consequences. A couple of years ago Laurie and I put new counters in our kitchen to replace the tile counters that had been there for 27 years. We had looked at new counters for several years. When we got down to decision time we spent hours looking at slabs of stone trying to find one that would be just what we needed. I wasn't sure we'd ever be able to pull the trigger on anything. We had an idea of what we were looking for, but we couldn't find one that was just right. Eventually, we had to make a decision. That day we went back and forth between several choices, but both of us finally agreed on one we thought was the best. We really liked this stone. Then came the day they installed the counters in the kitchen. The counters were great, the installers did a very good job, and they were beautiful. But both of us had that sinking feeling in our stomachs. It didn't look in our kitchen the way we thought it did in the facility where we bought it. Though it was nice, it didn't go with our décor at all. How could we have not seen how it clearly did not look right with our décor? We had been so careful. But we had missed it, and not by just a little. We missed it by a lot. We ended up having to redo the colors in our kitchen. We really like what we now have, but we never intended to go there and did not originally envision what we have. We are finite beings, and we don't know what is going to happen in the future. As much as we think we know what is best, we don't know what the ramifications of what we're aiming at will be.

In an article in *New Yorker* magazine, Andrew Gropnik wrote, "The best argument for reading history is not that it will show us the right thing to do in one case or the other, but rather that it will show us why even doing the right thing rarely works out." In 1958 Mao Zedong, the communist leader of China, announced a campaign that would be crucial to his plan for the Great Leap Forward for China. It was the Four Pests Campaign, aimed at ridding China of rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows. The first 3 were targeted because they caused diseases, the sparrows were targeted because they ate seeds and grain and thus reduced crop yields. The Sparrow

Campaign was quite successful, reducing the sparrow population in China to near extinction. But the law of unintended consequences intervened. With no sparrows to eat them, locusts multiplied dramatically. The hordes of locusts destroyed crops, and that led to the Great Chinese Famine that killed at least 15 million people, and possibly as many as 45 million. We don't know what results our actions will produce. We are just not that wise. Only God is wise enough to know the future. God never has problems with unintended consequences.

It is important for us to remember this truth, because we often don't know why God shapes history the way he does. We look at the horrific things that so often happen that seem random, or at the least, out of God's control, because it doesn't look wise to us. We need to remember that God is wise beyond our ability to even imagine. We don't know all the why's, because we don't know how it will all work together in the long run. But God does.

We can see the wisdom of God if we just look around. We can see it in creation. The marvel of how the universe works is astounding, but no more astounding than the marvel of the human body. As advanced as science is today there is still a universe of things we don't understand about how the human body works, and even more that we could never replicate by human means. The simple truth is for all our cleverness and ingenuity, for all the brilliant advances of modern science, human beings cannot create a tree or even a blade of grass. Only God can do that.

But we can see God's wisdom in other ways. One of the most powerful is through the cross. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Then down in verse 25 he wrote, "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." God used the cross to crush evil, sin and death. He came up with a way to appear to lose in spectacular fashion, and yet that loss was the victory that could be won no other way. No human being would come up with the cross as a way to rescue the human race. God's apparent "foolishness" was wiser than the greatest wisdom of human beings.

But what is astounding in this passage is that Paul claims that now God is displaying his many-sided wisdom through the church. It sure doesn't seem like it does it? The church is considered the farthest thing from great wisdom by the world around us. The world thinks the church is insignificant at best, and a laughingstock at worst. The world doesn't say, "We are facing a terrible political crisis. Let's call the church." The world doesn't say, "Our economy is in a meltdown! Let's call the church."

Honestly, the church doesn't look much like a display of wisdom to me. Our friends in Chicago, Michael and Breanne Fuelling, just sent us a news story about a Christian leader in their area. Michael has told us about this situation. This leader has a megachurch, has published several books and is invited to speak all over the country. But he has been arrogant and has walked all over people. This latest story is that he is being investigated for trying to hire someone to kill

someone for him! This is a man whom many have respected. Ugh. The church bumbles around and is divided, often focused on all the wrong things. It doesn't immediately evoke the wisdom of God. So in what way does the church display the magnificent wisdom of God?

Suppose that you are given a mandate to start a company or an enterprise of some kind. This enterprise has to be global in reach, and it needs to be sustained for at least 2000 years. It has to be able to operate in the worst slums in the world, but also in the highest society. It needs to transcend cultures, classes and races. It has to be able to transform lives that the world can't do anything with, including addicts, prostitutes, criminals and others.

What would you do? The usual approach would be to go to successful companies, maybe to the best universities, and look for people who are the best and the brightest, the top performers, the movers and the shakers. It would make sense to try to recruit the cream of the crop to fulfill such a demanding mandate. What did God do? He lined up quite a roster of people, fishermen and despised traitors. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 Paul wrote, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. 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 the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

The seemingly reasonable approach to such a monumental task is to take the best, most gifted, most capable people possible to carry it out. God said, "I'll take Rick." I'm not a total waste of DNA, at least I like to think I'm not, but I am also about as remarkable as vanilla ice cream. With raw material like that God has built and sustained his movement for two millennia, and it is in every corner of the world. It has withstood continual efforts to eradicate it. A few weeks ago after church on Sunday we had lunch with John Scudder, who is working with the Literacy Mission in India. He told us about the caste system in India and how that impacts people. Christians there transcend the caste system in dealing with each other. But he said that if you become a Christian then everyone looks down on you. You are lower than the lowest caste. That has practical implications, for being a believer in Jesus means that many of the best jobs will not be available to you. Yet, despite this prejudice, despite attempts to persecute Christians, the church continues to grow there.

The church is made up of human beings, and because of that it is a flawed institution. Fallen people can and will foul up anything and everything. But despite that, and despite repeated sustained efforts that continue to this day to destroy it, the church continues to exist and bring the gospel of grace to the world. It's fallibility in fact makes it even more amazing that it still exists. This is profound evidence of the wisdom of God for that means his kingdom is open to fallible, flawed, often bumbling people. It is open to all, with all their flaws.

Do you see what a magnificent role we, the church, have? Only in the church do people hear of the gospel of Grace. The world cannot and does not bring God's grace to people. Here they see it

lived out, as undeserving, flawed, often faithless people still live in God's grace and find true life. It is our very ordinariness, our flaws and our spiritual poverty that shines a light on the miracle of God's grace and of the continued thriving of God's church. What a marvelous calling we have. We should always rejoice in it and give thanks for it.

THE DEMONSTRATION IS FOR A SURPRISING AUDIENCE

The really surprising thing about this demonstration of the wisdom of God is the audience for it. Paul tells us the point is that God's wisdom would be "made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." It is not primarily for the human beings around us, nor for the influential powers among humans. It is to rulers and authorities in the spiritual realm.

In his play *As You Like It*, Shakespeare had the character Jacques utter one of his most quoted speeches. In it he said, "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players." In a way that is true. We are living out our part, but unbeknownst to us, there is an audience that we can't see. We are being watched as though we were playing a role in a play on stage. Only the audience is unseen. It is made up of beings who live in the spiritual realm, beings we cannot see, hear or touch.

The book of Job gives us a glimpse of this. In Job 1:8 the Lord says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Satan responds in verses 9-11, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." So Satan said, "Of course he worships and obeys you. He's not going to bite the hand that feeds him. You continually bless and protect him so he does what you want because he wants the good times to keep rolling. Throw a few curveballs his way and watch what happens. He'll drop you faster than he would drop a red hot frying pan." In other words, the only reason any human would ever obey God is he gives them what they want. If he doesn't then they won't really worship and obey him.

That began the events that make up the story of Job. Job never knew what was really going on. He didn't know that there was a cosmic conflict going on in the spiritual realm and that beings were watching him to see whether what Satan said was true or not. Would Job crumble and bail out under the pressure, or would he stay true to God even when there was no evidence that God cared about him at all? In fact, the evidence suggested just the opposite. Yet Job still trusted God.

This is an idea that people in our materialistic, human obsessed, culture find almost inconceivable. It is hard for us in our culture to believe the truth that there is a spiritual realm, one that is right here right now. But the Bible insists that it is very real and present every moment of every day of our lives. And it also says that is where the real action is. Why does God want to

demonstrate his wisdom to beings in the spiritual realm? We don't know. I think it has to do with proving his justice and his character, but he doesn't really tell us. What he does tell us is that behind all that is happening on this planet that we can see, there is a spiritual reality that determines what goes on here.

We have a part to play in this cosmic demonstration, just like Job did. All of us have a desire for significance. It is one of the driving forces of human psychology. It is there all the time in every person. Most of us as kids wanted to be athletes or actors or performers in some way. The cool thing is we are performers. An audience is watching everything we do.

As I was driving home from the hospital one evening this week I had gotten off the freeway at La Costa Avenue and was driving east toward El Camino Real. I usually experience a little frustration there because even though the speed limit is 55 there I always seem to end up driving behind people who want to go 45 or less. I was tired that evening and just wanted to get home, but as I was driving along sure enough I ended up behind a person who was going 45 and then for no reason began braking. They slowed to 40, continued on for a bit, then started braking again. They slowed to 35, then started braking again. It looked like they were aiming at coming to a complete stop. I discussed their driving strategy with them. I said, "What is wrong with you idiot? Do you have a clue about what you're doing?" My tone of voice was quite harsh. But that was all right because I was in my car and no one except Laurie could hear me. So I can look like I'm still a holy pastor man who is always kind and loving to people instead of an emotional volcano who erupts because someone slows him down so it takes him a whole minute longer to get where he is going. Except God wants to demonstrate his wisdom through me to beings in the spiritual realm who had a front row seat to all my rantings. I guess I demonstrated God's wisdom in that someone in that realm was probably saying, "Well, I guess God must be really wise because if his church can survive a doofus like that guy it's a miracle."

In one way that feels kind of creepy. In this modern society there is something we don't like to think about too much or it might turn us into the kind of "go out in the woods and live off the grid" kind of people they show in movies. The factor I refer to is that we are being watched. There are cameras everywhere in our world. It freaks me out that people conceivably can hack the cameras on our computers and smart televisions and watch us when we don't even know it. Laurie used the maps feature on her phone to get directions to a place we were going, and right after that began getting ads pertaining to that place. Someone is paying attention to everything we do on the internet. I get recommendations for books to read and shows to watch based on what I've read or watched. It can make you paranoid.

So now we add to all of that invasion of our privacy, beings in the spiritual realm watching every action we take. Yes, it could kind of creep you out, but it also has a positive aspect to it. This brings significance to everything you do. I officiated at another wedding a couple of weeks ago. I

once again lamented to Laurie about the state of weddings these days as I often do. I suspect it's a result of the demise of the church wedding and the rise of the DJ. Although this one was much better than most, these days there is still a sense that the actual wedding ceremony is a sort of necessary appendage to the reception party, which is what really matters. Let's just get this ceremony thing over with so we can get to the party. A pastor, then, becomes a kind of glorified notary. You have to have him there to make the thing official, but that's about all. Some people would probably rather have the notary because he wouldn't make them feel awkward and uncomfortable the way a pastor does. Typically, I don't know 90% of the people at the wedding. So often I end up visiting with people I don't know who aren't very excited about knowing me because, "Yikes, he's a pastor. He might do something religious, like take an offering. He's just too holy for my liking." So for someone like me who is not a big time extrovert it can be draining, and it can feel like there's not much point. But here's the thing: I'm on stage. I have an opportunity to demonstrate something about the wisdom of God in that situation. Yes, I can demonstrate something to the people, but even more, being faithful and trusting God in that situation demonstrates something to those spiritual beings, those rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm. I may not come away from such an event with any visible or tangible evidence that I've done anything good or significant at all, but I can know that I've done something God thinks is hugely important. I've played my part in that cosmic demonstration of his wisdom. And you can do the same in every single thing you do.

For us as a church this is a huge message. We don't look all that impressive. We may not blow anyone in this world with our slick productions, our size, our brilliance or our power. But in our humility as we are faithful to our Lord and live in his grace we show God's wisdom to a watching audience.

APPLICATION

TRUST IN THE WISDOM OF GOD

Another line by Jack Handey is, "I hope life isn't a big joke, because I don't get it." Sometimes we will feel like that. It seems like a joke, but we don't get it. But we need to remember the wisdom of God is at work even when we don't see it. Way back when God called Abram he told him he would make of him a great nation, he would bless him and his descendants, and through them he would bless the entire human race. Abram's descendants would be God's unique people. Those people proved to be far from perfect. Jacob was a con man who was constantly running schemes. His sons committed an atrocity and wiped out an entire town because of the crime of one man, then they sold their own brother to slave traders. Later Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt, but they complained and bucked him at every turn, and at the first chance they had started worshiping an idol. They refused to do what God said when they got to the border of the promised land, and ended up spending a generation in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. Once in the land they kept turning away from God. They had a constant tendency to adopt the idolatrous practices of their neighbors, refused to listen to God's prophets, often persecuting

them, never consistently obeyed God's laws, and when God sent his Son to them they rejected him and killed him. That sounds like a train wreck of a plan. Why didn't God choose some better people? And yet, somehow God used that people to do exactly what he said, to bless the entire world. He used them to bring his Messiah in the world, and he used that people group to be the foundation of the church that would bring the message of hope to the whole world.

Then there's the church, called out of darkness into God's kingdom of light, given the task of declaring the praise of him who called them. From the very beginning church history is a disappointing story. Right away the Christians wrangled over money donated to help widows. They had a big blowout over whether non-Jews could even be a part of the kingdom. The Corinthians argued over everything. The Philippians were at odds because two women were fighting and everyone took sides. There were materialistic people who tried to make money by trying to build their own little kingdom in the church. There were power struggles. Again there has been compromise, selfishness, outright disobedience, faithlessness and even violence. In many ways it has been another train wreck. And yet the kingdom of God continues on the planet. Somehow, despite all the flaws and frailties and faithlessness of people in the church, the church has continued. That global enterprise has moved ever forward. It still changes lives and brings hope to people at every level of society in every culture in the world. In verse 11 Paul said this is all "according to his (God's) eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." The plan shouts at us the wisdom of God.

What this says to us is that we can and should trust the wisdom of God in our lives. There are going to be ups and downs, failures, twists and turns that we would never have imagined, but through it all we can know that our God is wise, and is working his eternal purpose in our lives. This applies to us in two ways. First we must accept his wise plan. It won't always be what we want it to be. It may not look pretty. It certainly hasn't with either Israel or the church. But in the end it will be wise and good, so we need to accept it and not get mad at God because it's not our plan. Second, we can be at peace. Having accepted his plan we can know that it is wise and for our good, so we can rest in his wisdom.

PLAY YOUR PART

In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan wrote, "The drama of our lives is cosmic more than earthly, not intended primarily for human eyes. The church's chief witness is heaven-bent, vertical rather than horizontal, played out in the presence of demons and angels more than neighbors and colleagues...God, it turns out, does not stage his wisdom show for our friends or enemies. He stages it for his."

We need to remember there are forces at work, and that's an encouraging thought. We were meant to be where we are, and we have a big part to play in front of witnesses that we aren't even aware of. And remember, the bigger the stress, the bigger the part. I was watching a Padre baseball game earlier this year, enjoying the fact that for the first time in nearly 10 years the

Padres are not completely irrelevant by June. They were ahead in a tight game, but their starting pitcher was losing it. He got wild, walked a guy, gave up a hit, walked another to load the bases with no outs. At that point they brought in a relief pitcher. They brought in a young guy in whom I had no faith whatsoever. I thought this was going to be a disaster. As he was warming up I was thinking, “That kid must be thinking, ‘Great. Thanks a lot. Bases loaded, no outs in a close game. Thanks for giving me a chance to fail.’” In that situation the likelihood was that he was going to give up at least two runs. That is a high stress situation.

But then I recalled my freshman year in college. I remembered that the only time I got into games was when we were either so far ahead or so far behind that the game was essentially over. The coach put me in because he didn’t care what I did. How much worse could I make it? No matter what I did I was not going to impact the outcome of the game positively or negatively. It made me think that maybe that young Padre pitcher might be thinking something completely different. He might be thinking this was great, that now he had a chance to make a difference, to show the coaches what he could do. To my surprise he managed to get out of that mess without yielding a single run.

I tell you that because that’s how we can think of it when we are facing stressful times. This is when we can make a difference. This is when we can display the wisdom of God. This is when we are being watched most closely by those rulers and authorities in the spiritual realm, just like Job was, and we can show them how wise and good our God is. If we will look at it that way, we will find great motivation for trusting God, for staying faithful and having hope even in the toughest of days.

Satan is making the claim that no one would believe God and trust in him unless God made everything easy and comfortable for them. That’s what he said about Job. God gives us the chance to show that when our lives feel like we’re living in the middle of a tornado, when everything blows up, we still trust in him, still believe that he is wise and good. That shows his wisdom. This is the pivotal moment, our turn to be on stage with the spotlight on us, and to show the audience in the unseen world that we know our God is wise and we will trust him no matter what happens.