

The Wisdom of God

M. W. Bassford, 9-23-12

As many of you know, I recently finished what was for me a fairly large home-improvement project, the re-tiling of my upstairs bathtub surround. This project had a number of stages, and I can't think of any one of them that went the way I expected. I didn't expect that demoing the old tile would lead to me ripping out about half a bathroom wall. I didn't expect that, despite the promises of the Moen rep, that the new plumbing trim I bought would not fit the older valve in my plumbing. I especially didn't expect that, because I had the water in the tub off for about a month while I was working on it, the tangle of hair and soap about four feet down the drain would dry out and harden into a nigh-impenetrable clog. What I thought would be a fairly straightforward task turned into an exercise in humility.

Now, friends, if I'm not wise enough to anticipate all the twists and turns in a comparatively simple bathroom remodel, how could I possibly be wise enough to navigate all the twists and turns of my entire life? How could any of us be? Clearly, our own wisdom is inadequate to such an enormous task. We must turn instead to the wisdom of God.

The Importance of Wisdom

As we explore this topic of wisdom in God's word, we're going to begin by considering why it is important in the first place. One of the most significant things that it does is that it **SAVES US FROM OURSELVES**. Look at Jeremiah's pronouncement in Jeremiah 10:23. As human beings, just about all of us have a tendency to believe that we're so smart, that we've got everything figured out. We don't need God to tell us what to do because we are perfectly competent to make all of our life choices for ourselves. In reality, this belief is nothing more than an illusion fostered by the devil. In reality, we are anything but competent to figure things out. When we trust in ourselves, that we can build a life on what seems best to us, we're making a decision that's about on par with me trusting Zoë in our living room with an open gallon of paint. I don't know just how it would end, but I am certain it would end badly. In the same way, friends, we can't know for sure how we're going to mess up our lives, but without God, it is certain that mess them up we will.

It is because of this that the wisdom of God **SPARES US PAIN**. We see one example of this cited in Proverbs 6:23-24. Like most parts of Proverbs, this admonition is addressed to young men, and if there is any sin that young men are prone to, it is sexual sin. In fact, to most young men in the world, the statement in v. 24 here would seem like a reason NOT to listen to the Bible: "God's word is going to keep me from evil women and seductresses? Forget that!" However, what seems so alluring to the very limited human wisdom of not only young men, but plenty of other people too, is actually an invitation to disaster. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: about the worst thing that can happen to worldly people is that they are given the opportunity to practice all the sins they want to. If there is some young man who is good-looking, or a skilled musician, or a captain on the football team, or prominent for some other reason, and he gets his pick of the bad women and seductresses, it won't be long before they wreck him. There are many, many slightly older men out there who will attest that the most miserable experiences of their lives came as the result of sexual sin. God warns us against those practices not because He doesn't want us to have any fun, but because He doesn't want us to be miserable. This is only one example. Sin always comes with a price tag attached, and the price is always more than the sin is worth. We don't necessarily see that, but it is always true, and if we listen to God, He will save us from paying it.

The flip side of the coin is that the wisdom of God **GIVES US SUCCESS**. Consider Ecclesiastes 10:10. The point of Christianity is not to gain earthly wealth and prosperity, but one of the side effects of listening to God is that all other things being equal, we will have happy, prosperous lives. Let me give you some examples. If we want to have loving, functional families, the best way to accomplish that is to obey God's wisdom about how to treat our spouses and raise our children. If we want to get ahead in the workplace world, we need to pay attention to what God says about how to be a good employee. If we want to have a successful business, our business handbook needs to be the Bible. If we want to know how to enjoy life to the fullest, we need to listen to what God says about peace and contentment in Him. Even in this life, our success and happiness have very little to do with our circumstances and everything to do with how we handle those circumstances. No matter where we are in life, God's wisdom gives us the road map to a good outcome.

Even more importantly than that, the wisdom of God **LEADS US TO SALVATION**. Let's look together at 2 Timothy 3:14-15. When we look at the most impressive works of human wisdom, we're often struck by how much those human precepts for wise living match what the Bible has already said. However, there are places that God's wisdom will take us that human wisdom can't go. Even the wisest man does not know from his own resources how we can be saved from our sins. Only God's wisdom as revealed in His word can tell us that. This divinely wise instruction begins with the Old Testament, which pointed to Christ from the very beginning. However, it reaches its fullest expression in the New Testament, which instructs us in all things pertaining to life and godliness. Only there can we learn what it means that Jesus is our Savior. Only there can we read about how to find our salvation through Him. This is extraordinarily important. Other sources of wisdom can have useful things to say about this life. However, only God's wisdom can enlighten us about how we can inherit eternal life in the life to come, and if we miss that, we've missed everything.

Indeed, this is why we must allow God's wisdom to teach us to **HOPE IN HEAVEN**. Paul raises this point in Ephesians 1:17-18. There are lots of good things in this life. There are many blessings that God gives us the opportunity to enjoy if we walk with Him. However, if we hope in this life only, we are certain to be disappointed. It cannot provide us with lasting joy because life itself does not last. I've been struck by this over the past year as I've watched my dad wrestle with the loss of my mother. They had 50 blissful, wonderful years of marriage together, but now she's gone, and if my dad's life were only about this earthly existence, any hope of joy he would have would be gone too.

Thankfully, my dad is wiser than that, because he listens to God's word. He knows that this life is not all there is. Indeed, it's not even the most important aspect of our existence. As a result, he can find comfort in the hope he has in Jesus, that the day will come when he will not only see my mother again, but see his Redeemer too. That's the only legitimate hope any of us can have. This life will disappoint, but the hope revealed by God's wisdom will not.

Wisdom and the Cross

As we saw in the last section, God's wisdom and the wisdom of the wisest of men walk together in many ways. However, divine wisdom will take us farther than human wisdom ever will, and this is most evident when we consider the interaction between wisdom and the cross. Paul explores this idea in the last half of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, and we're going to work our way through His words there to as we move toward partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Paul begins by describing **GOD'S PLAN** in 1 Corinthians 1:18-19. Here, Paul points out something that is easy for us to overlook, but would have been very apparent to his original first-century audience. When you get right down to it, Christianity is a weird religion that in worldly terms makes no sense. Here's what Christianity asks us to believe: First, that the only Son of God came to earth to live as a human. This wouldn't have been strange to the Greeks in the church in Corinth. After all, Greek myth is full of various sons of the gods who lived on earth and did mighty things. However, right here is where Christianity takes a bizarre turn. This Son of God, Jesus, didn't use His position to accumulate wealth and power for Himself and His followers. Instead, He lives a humble, simple life, without even a house to call His own, and He suffered the death of a common criminal to save His equally common followers from their sins. To the Greeks, and to human reasoning generally, that makes no sense. Zero. Zip. zilch. Why would the Son of God, who could have become the ruler of the world if He wanted to, meekly die on a cross for no advantage of His own?

Paul explains in his discussion of the effect of the cross on **THE WORLDLY WISE**. Let's read 1 Corinthians 1:20-21. As we saw a moment ago, God's plan doesn't make sense to human wisdom. What Paul reveals here is that God intentionally devised it so that it would not make sense. Even though human wisdom can have some beneficial effects, if we follow the course of the wisdom of the world, it won't lead us to God. Consider the reaction of those whom our society considers wise to the gospel. If you asked people, they would agree that, yes, all those Ph.D.'s in biology in the universities, those are wise, intelligent men. Does their wisdom lead them to God? Quite the opposite! Most of them reject God because their worldly-wise training has led them to reject the very idea of a supernatural Divine Being as foolish. That's the way that worldly wisdom has always been. As a result, God revealed a gospel that He knew would be offensive to the wise, that they would consider foolishness, precisely as a way of screening out the arrogant, self-reliant men whom He didn't want for His followers anyway. The gospel is for those who believe in God, not in themselves.

The gospel had a similar effect on **JEWES AND GREEKS**. Paul explains what happened to them in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25. The Jews rejected Jesus because He wasn't the Messiah their wisdom had led them to expect. The Greeks rejected Him not only because of the crucifixion, but because of the resurrection from the dead, which they found philosophically unpalatable. People still have very similar reactions to the gospel today. Take, for instance, the denominational reaction to baptism for forgiveness of sins. The Bible clearly teaches that in a dozen different places, but 99 percent of the denominational world rejects it. Why? Because in their human wisdom, they have constructed their own theories about how salvation is supposed to work, and when the Bible contradicts those theories, the Bible has to go. Likewise, how about the religiously wise, the theologians who fill the divinity schools? 99 percent of them also don't truly acknowledge Jesus as their Savior. Often this is because, like the Greek philosophers of 2000 years ago, these religious scholars don't believe in the resurrection of the dead either. To people in our society, the gospel is every bit as much a stumbling block and foolishness as it was in the time of Paul. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

By contrast, Paul next calls us to consider **OUR CALLING**. Read with me from 1 Corinthians 1:26-28. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he wasn't writing to the haves. He was writing to the have-nots, because those were the people who were willing to hear the gospel. There were exceptions, but first-century Christians were usually not the wise and the prominent and the wealthy. The same thing is true today. We don't have to be members of Mensa to join Christ's church. We don't have to make six figures a year. I don't think there's a single person in the room who has an advanced divinity degree. We aren't much in the world's eyes, but in God's eyes, we are His special people, and all those who do impress the world aren't. We are the people God wanted because we were willing to listen to His wisdom instead of to our own. Because of our willingness to listen, all those who were too wise to hear are put to shame by our example, and our example will condemn them at the judgment. We prove that they could have listened but chose not to.

This takes us finally to the concept of **BOASTING IN GOD**. Paul uses this language in 1 Corinthians 1:29-31. First, Paul notes that the gospel and the cross make it impossible for people to boast in themselves. Next to Jesus and His love and His self-sacrifice, we don't look so good anymore, do we? Next to the obvious superiority of His wisdom, our own wisdom doesn't look so impressive anymore. Instead, it is to Christ that we must look for our wisdom and righteousness. Our boast must be in God, and what He has said and done, and never in ourselves.

This morning, before the Lord's Supper, let's consider where our boasting truly lies. In our lives, where do we look? Do we look to ourselves, to our own wisdom, to our own good works, to our ability to guide our own lives? Do we tell others about all the things that we think and do and how wonderful we are? Or do we look to Jesus, to His wisdom, to the death that He died to rescue us from our foolishness and failure? Is our speech to others filled with proclaiming what He has done for us? Jesus didn't give Himself because we were doing fine without Him. He surrendered His life because we weren't. Our boast can never be in ourselves. It must always be in Him.

Five Ways to Be Wise

Once we have been confronted by the cross, once we acknowledge the final failure of our own human wisdom and goodness, it makes sense for us to ask how to be wise God's way. In the final portion of this lesson, we're going to consider five ways to accomplish that. The first, quite simply, is to **PRAY** for wisdom. Let's look now at James 1:5-6. The Scripture tells us that prayer is supposed to be a constant part of our lives. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5 says, in fact, that we are supposed to pray without ceasing. In our prayers, one of the things that we should pray for, nearly without exception, is wisdom. As we've seen, we have every reason to boast in God's wisdom, and none at all to boast in our own. From that, we must conclude that we need more wisdom than we have, and that we should constantly seek that wisdom through prayer. In one of our Friday night studies a couple of weeks ago, we explored some topics related to prayer, and we noted that the Bible promises that if we pray for certain things, we are guaranteed to receive them. Wisdom is one of those certain things, so as long as we seek it in faith, we are guaranteed to become wiser. Whether we only obeyed the gospel a year or two ago or have followed Jesus for decades, we must always pray for wisdom.

If prayer is talking to God, then His word is Him talking to us, and it is equally important for us to **LISTEN** to the wisdom of what God has to say. Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 2:6-7. As we saw a few minutes ago, the wisdom of God and His word often appears as foolishness to the world. However, the more we study the word, the more it becomes apparent to us how wise God actually is. For example, at first glance, it doesn't make sense that the Son of God should die on a cross for our sins. However, the more we learn about the Bible, the more evident it becomes that the death of Jesus was God's plan from before the foundation of the world, and far from being a foolish and unnecessary slaughter, that death was literally the only way that God could rescue us from our own evil decision to sin. When Jesus chose to die, that wasn't a mistake on His part. Instead, it was the perfect expression of His love for His brethren, a love that will transform our lives too once we learn to understand it. The more time we spend with the word, the better we will understand these crucial spiritual concepts and the better equipped we will be to follow God. If we don't take the time to listen to God's word, we are spiritually doomed. Once we do listen, though, we make the devil's job a lot harder.

However, what we know about God's word shouldn't remain locked away in our heads. Instead, the wise thing to do is to **SPEAK** about that wisdom. With respect to this, let's read together from Colossians 3:16. There are several important points that we can learn from this. First, it tells songleaders that they need to pay attention to the content of the hymns they select. If a hymn doesn't contain God's wisdom and give us the opportunity to reveal the indwelling of His word, it isn't a hymn we should be singing in worship. Second, this tells us that it is the responsibility of every Christian to sing. I can remember a time when I was in my early teens, my voice was changing, and I wasn't too thrilled about singing in the assembly or anywhere else. That didn't matter. I was a Christian, and God still expected me to teach and admonish my brethren. If we are physically capable of singing, God expects us to sing, even if the best we can produce is the proverbial "joyful noise to the Lord." If we refuse to sing, we are sinning. Third, this passage tells us what our communication should be like even when we aren't singing. Our speech still needs to reflect the wisdom of God's word. We should never speak in ungodly ways, and whenever we have opportunity, we should be discussing the things of the spirit. One of the things that I most love about my father is that he loves to talk about the Bible more than anything else, and he's been that way for as long as I can remember. His example was a powerful force in leading my sister and me to become Christians, and when we love to talk about God's word, we have the same influence on others.

We must also learn, though, to **SHOW** God's wisdom in our meek good conduct. James makes precisely this point in James 3:13. God's wisdom isn't some abstraction for us to shoot the breeze about. Instead, once we understand it, we also understand that it has all kinds of applications for the way we should live. It directs us to a course of life completely different from the course of worldly wisdom, and that difference needs to be crystal-clear in what we actually do. Do we get angry and gossip and spread contention like people in the world do? Or are our lives filled with gentleness, meekness, and peacemaking, like the life of Christ was? Are our lives examples of the lusts of the flesh, or do they reflect the purity of Christ? Sadly, all of us have seen Christians who didn't reflect God's wisdom in the decisions

they made. All of us have seen cases where that drove others away from the Lord. We need to make sure that our claims to godliness are not belied by our dedication to worldliness. We need to put God's wisdom into practice.

Finally, God's wisdom will change our **WALK** toward outsiders. Let's consider this in Colossians 4:5. There are two main ways in which this spiritual wisdom should be evident. First, we have to redeem the time and the opportunities we have to lead others to Christ. If we are seeing the world through God's eyes and we look at someone who is outside of Christ, we don't see someone who has a subtle difference of religious opinion with us. We see someone who is still living in his sins and who will certainly be eternally lost if he doesn't repent. We may well be the only Christian he ever meets in his life. We may be the very best opportunity he ever has to save his soul. Once we understand the situation that way, we will also understand that keeping silent isn't a choice we can make. We have to proclaim Christ.

Second, God's wisdom will also teach us how we should approach those who are outside. We don't come in with rhetorical guns blazing, looking to get somebody told. Instead, our approach, though it must reveal the truth, should be gentle and calculated to persuade rather than offend. What a shame it would be if we turned an unbeliever aside from Christ because of the harsh, abrasive way we presented the gospel! Instead, we must look to redeem the time by answering each person in a way that God's wisdom says is most likely to get them to listen.