



God's Hidden Wisdom

Paul calls God *'the only wise God'* (1 Tim. 1:17), implying that God alone is wise. We know that angels and human beings possess wisdom to a degree, so we must understand the inspired apostle to be speaking comparatively here. The wisdom of angels and people is derived, dependent and finite and, as such, is unworthy of notice beside God's wisdom, which is underived, independent and infinite.

A. W. Tozer says: *'When Christian theology declares that God is wise, it means vastly more than it says or can say, for it tries to make a comparatively weak word bear an incomprehensible plenitude of meaning that threatens to tear it apart and crush it under the sheer weight of the idea.'* When we ponder God's wisdom, it is as though we are standing on a beach and gazing at the ocean – its vastness and unfathomable depths fill us with admiration.

Few Christians would deny that God is wise. But what do we mean when we say that God possesses great wisdom? How does it manifest itself? And what implications, if any, does God's wisdom have for our daily lives? I want to explore these questions in this article.

What is God's wisdom? To answer this question, we must first ask what wisdom is. Wisdom is not knowledge but the application of knowledge. Wisdom involves discerning the best possible outcome in a situation, and determining the best possible means to achieve that outcome. So God's wisdom, among other things, is the ability to devise perfect goals, and to achieve those goals by perfect means. Because God knows absolutely everything about the beings he has created, he knows intimately all their characteristics and abilities, all the things that they can and cannot do. Because he knows all the possible consequences of all possible events, he can infallibly determine the best outcomes to strive for and the fittest means to achieve them. Because he is perfectly good and just, nothing hinders him from choosing what is perfect; because he is infinite in power, nothing can hinder him from executing his plans with flawless precision.

What are God's designs and goals? At this point, it might be objected that finite beings are incompetent to determine the purposes of a Being as superior to us as God is. Of course, that is true and, even where God has revealed his designs, we are not able to comprehend fully all of his plans. But, since God has endowed us with a degree of wisdom and has revealed something of his designs, it is not arrogant to venture to express his goals, especially where they are obviously in complete conformity with the dignity of his Person. God has made it clear that his first purpose is to bring glory to himself by manifesting his attributes. A second goal is the ultimate good of his people – we are told that he causes all things to work for their highest good (Rom. 8:28).

God's further designs include upholding the moral government of the universe and promoting righteousness and truth. These goals are in perfect harmony with the dignity and excellence of his character.

God's wisdom is intimately linked with his goodness and power. His goodness is the fountain from which all his designs proceed. Any good that we see in the world merely emanates from him: 'He is good and he does what is good'. His infinite power enables him to accomplish all that he determines to do. So it is that God's infinite wisdom contrives the way for his goodness to express itself in action, and his infinite power effects what his infinite wisdom designs.

God's wisdom is revealed to us in three particular areas: i. *in creation*, ii. *in redemption*, and iii. *in providence*.

1. God's Wisdom in Creation

In the first place, God's wisdom is revealed in creation. Consider how the solar system was designed. The planets revolve about the sun in a regular orbit, so that the sun acts as the source of light and heat for them. The earth has been placed at just the right distance from the sun. If it had been nearer to the sun, the excessive heat would have evaporated the water in the seas and destroyed all animal and plant life; if the earth had been placed farther away from the sun than it is, the excessive cold would have frozen the water in the oceans and caused all animal and plant life to perish. Great wisdom is revealed in the design of the solar system.

The earth, as well as revolving around the sun, rotates on its own axis once in twenty-four hours. As different parts of the globe turn to face the sun, day and night are produced. By day, the sunlight nourishes vegetation and gives light to people and animals, so that they may go about their daily activities. By night, they rest from the labour of the day and replenish their strength.

The earth takes a year to travel around the sun and its elliptical orbit produces the different seasons. The seasons not only produce a variety of weather and scenery, but also perform an important function for vegetation and crops. In winter the earth rests and replenishes its strength and, as the seasons progress, the grass, plants and trees proliferate and crops ripen in preparation for the harvest. Does not all of this point to a wise design rather than a chance happening?

Consider how the earth's surface has been formed. Had it been made up of rocks and sand it would have been unfit for human beings to live on, but the surface is made of soft soil which allows plant roots to penetrate and seeds to grow, and water to penetrate to nourish plants and vegetables. A large portion of the earth is covered by water, yet the vastness of these oceans is held in check so that it does not overflow the land. Water from these oceans rises to form clouds, which in turn produce rain; the rain supplies rivers and springs and maintains the growth of vegetable and plant life. So, without the vast oceans all the earth would be a dry wilderness. And instead of being one vast flat plain, the earth is formed into mountains and valleys; this variety allows for the passage of rivers and produces a diversity of plants which grow in different areas and at different heights. All of this testifies to admirable planning and skill.

Consider how our bodies are formed. The bones support the body and are arranged in such a way that they permit bending of the limbs and trunk, and thereby allow a range of movements. The muscles, which attach to the bones, have the ability to contract and produce movement of the different parts of the body. Some of the functions of our bodies such as eating, drinking, washing and so on are left to us to do. But others are involuntary. So respiration, the beating of the heart and circulation of the blood continue while we sleep for the obvious reason that if they ceased it would prove fatal. God's wisdom is evident in this: he has left in our hands what we can do for ourselves, but reserves to himself those things which we have not the capacity to do.

We have been provided with organs of sense so that we can see, hear, smell, touch and taste; and these convey to us an intimate awareness of our environment. Consider for a moment what a marvellous organ the eye is! It is so small, yet with it we are able to perceive objects near and far, we can view a tiny insect and contemplate the distant stars. It enables us to judge size, shape, colour and relative position. That this tiny organ has such a variety of perception attests that it did not occur by chance, but has been designed.

All throughout the world, living and inanimate things are amazingly adapted to one another, and an enormous variety of means is used to produce this harmonious interworking. This should not fail to convince us that nature is the creation of a divine craftsman. We may as well deny that there are any marks of design in a watch as that there are any in the system of nature.

2. God's Wisdom in Redemption

Although God's wisdom has been impressed on the creation, it is much more so in the work of redemption. There can be no nobler end or goal than God's glory in the salvation of lost humanity, nor could there be any more admirable means to this end than God manifest in the flesh. In

redemption there is something more mysterious, sublime and wonderful than all the mysteries of creation.

Human reason may of itself comprehend something of nature, but, unless it is illuminated by the Holy Spirit, it cannot perceive any of the depth or beauty of the plan of redemption. And even when the human mind is supernaturally illuminated, it can comprehend only a little of the mystery of redemption; even the angels themselves cannot grasp all of this mystery.

To attempt to understand something of the wisdom of God manifested in redemption, let us consider first the obstacles to redemption and then how God in his wisdom overcame these and brought it to pass.

In the first place, humanity rebelled from God and became defiled by sin and, as a result, God's justice pronounced the human race worthy of everlasting condemnation. The sin which humanity had committed was an infinite evil because it struck at the infinite majesty and holiness of God. All the angels in heaven could not have provided a satisfaction for sin; any offering they could provide would be merely finite, while God's wrath against sin is infinite. In any case, one sin sank their fellow angels into chains of darkness forever, so how could they hope to atone for a world of iniquity? The first obstacle, then, was that no one in heaven or on the earth could remove the punishment due to the human race.

The second obstacle concerns the fact that, in this matter of redemption, God's attributes appear to be at variance with one another. On the one hand, his justice demands that the requirements of the law be met. Justice cries: 'God's Majesty has been offended, his law violated; the wages of sin is death.' God's holiness, which abhors sin, cannot but stand with his justice; and his truth cries out that the threat, '*You must surely die*', is too sacred a thing to be ignored. On the other hand, God's mercy longs to save this poor creature who was made in his own image, but seduced by Satan. '*Must humanity perish eternally?*' asks Mercy. '*Will no human being remain to serve God and enjoy him?*' Thus any consideration of saving fallen humanity seems to produce a conflict between God's justice, holiness and truth on the one hand, and his mercy on the other.

These obstacles create an insoluble problem for finite minds. No human being – nor even any angel – could so much as begin to think of a satisfactory remedy. Where finite minds must fail, the infinite wisdom of God contrived an incomparable way of salvation for us. Whereas no finite creature could satisfy the infinite requirements of divine justice, an infinite being, the Son of God, would do so. He would assume a human nature, die on a cross and pay an infinite satisfaction to divine justice. Jesus Christ is God and man at the same time. He took our human nature so that he might be capable of suffering and so satisfy God's justice in the same nature that had offended it. He was God, therefore an infinite value attached to his sufferings, so that, though they were the sufferings of only one, yet they might satisfy for a vast number, and so that, though they were temporal sufferings, they might be a complete equivalent for everlasting sufferings.

Here, then, is a perfect alignment of justice and mercy. Justice is satisfied in that Jesus Christ, our Substitute, was caused to endure an accursed death for us. Mercy is manifested in that sinners who repent and trust Christ are spared everlasting torment and granted everlasting felicity. Justice was satisfied in exacting the entire punishment from the Redeemer, mercy exacts nothing from the believer, but forgives all and bestows eternal life.

In the cross, God's wisdom brought contraries out of one another: he brought life out of death, victory from apparent defeat and blessing out of a curse. The death of Christ, which was procured by Satan's agents, utterly overcame Satan and his principalities and powers (Col. 2:15). As Edward Polhill says, the devil '*was overcome, not by a man only, but by a man suffering, bleeding, dying upon a cross*'. A. W. Tozer, referring to God's wisdom in redemption, says:

'The sharpest eyes of the holiest watcher in the blest company above cannot discover a flaw in the ways of God in bringing all this to fruition, nor can the pooled wisdom of seraphim and cherubim suggest how an improvement might be made in the divine procedure.'

What peerless wisdom produced the mystery of redemption! Here, here is something that should fill us with an admiration which exceeds that due to the wonders in nature!

We have spoken of God's wisdom as seen in *creation* and in *redemption*. But God's wisdom is also manifested in providence.

3. God's Wisdom in Providence

This world lies under the shadow of that terrible calamity, the Fall of humanity. That explains the evil, the wrong-doing, the suffering and the sickness in the world. Yet in the midst of this darkness, the light of God's providence is constantly at work, guiding all things with an unerring hand, and bringing light out of darkness and good out of evil.

God often brings about his designs in ways that seem contrary to the desired results, by a sequence of events which appear to frustrate his purposes rather than accomplishing them. God intended to honour and elevate Joseph, but how did he go about it? Joseph was hated by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold into slavery and then imprisoned under a false accusation. But all of this was a part of God's plan to elevate him to the second highest office in the land, and to bless all of his family. Similarly, in the time of Gideon, God intended to deliver Israel from the Midianites, but what did he do? He reduced Israel's army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred men, and by this seemingly contradictory means gained the victory (Judg. 7:2). God frequently deals with his church in the same way, bringing his people into difficulty before he delivers them. Just as he broke apart the ship on which Paul was sailing, yet used the broken pieces to bring the sailors safely to shore, so he breaks us in pieces by afflictions, but uses those broken pieces to bring us safely to heaven's shore.

Sometimes God's designs appear to be on the verge of failure, when in reality they are about to be accomplished. Events then take a surprising and unexpected turn. The kingship of Israel and Judah had lost its splendour, David's line had sunk into obscurity, when the virgin gave birth to the Child who was to reign forever on the throne of the universe. Often the means God uses to carry out his providential designs appear to be woefully inadequate, but this merely shows that God's 'foolishness' is wiser than that of human beings. The greatest revolution this world has seen was effected by unlearned fishermen whose character, rank, abilities and influence seemed totally inadequate to the task. Sometimes God's designs are accomplished by people who know nothing about them, and have completely different goals in mind. Nebuchadnezzar's aim was to satisfy his desires for conquest, but God used him as the rod of his anger to chastise his rebellious people.

God sometimes uses to accomplish his will people who not only have no intention of serving him but are constantly exerting themselves to oppose his purposes. God's wisdom is then demonstrated in overruling their plans and causing his designs to be directly fulfilled by their acts to defeat it. The Jews' persecution and crucifixion of Christ was meant to disprove his Messianic claims and end his life, but all their actions merely fulfilled the predictions of the prophets, and his death consummated God's plan to redeem the world. So God's wisdom in providence attains its goals by both likely and unlikely means, by the willing cooperation of some and the rebellious obstinacy of others.

God's wisdom is evident in the way he uses a variety of methods to save his people from their enemies. Those who oppose the church are often people of great intellect and great authority and power, yet God's wisdom still overwhelms them and baffles their designs. Sometimes God creates a diversion which causes his enemies to abandon their plans. The people of Jerusalem were saved from the attacking army when Rabshakeh had to return to his own land to sort out a difficulty that had arisen (2 Kings 19:7). David was delivered from Saul when the latter heard that the Philistines were attacking the land and was forced to discontinue his pursuit (1 Sam. 23:27). Sometimes God delivers his people by revealing the secret evil plans of the church's enemies and, in doing so, frustrating their designs. Whatever plan the king of Syria hatched in his bedroom, the prophet made known to Israel (2 Kings 6:11). At other times, God causes contradictory advice to be given to that which would have destroyed the church. Ahithophel's counsel was opposed by that

of Hushai (2 Sam. 17:5, 7) and David escaped; the Pharisees opposed the Sadducees, and so Paul escaped (Acts 23:7). When people intend to act craftily, God *'takes the wise in their own craftiness'* (Job 5:13), that is, he causes their own wisdom to recoil upon them like a gun that backfires and kills the person who pulls the trigger. Haman was hanged on the very scaffold he had prepared for Mordecai. Thus God causes his people to gain by their losses and ensures that the most terrible evils turn out for their good. This demonstrates his admirable wisdom.

It is important that we hold the truth of God's infinite wisdom as a part of our day-to-day faith. So many Christians go through life praying a little, planning a little, hoping, but never quite sure of things. There is a far better way to live than this! It is to believe fully in God's infinite wisdom and to believe that God is constantly causing circumstances to arise and things to happen in our lives that work for our present good and our everlasting wellbeing, irrespective of whether they appear good or bad to us. Oh, what joy and comfort would be ours if we could really believe this truth at all times! Let us hold fast to it and never let it go!

What should we do in times of trouble, or when we are opposed by enemies? Whenever we are at a loss or in difficulty, when we cannot see a way of escape, let us commit ourselves fully into God's all-wise care. *'Commit your way to the LORD, trust in him and he will act'* (Psa. 37:5). John Flavel says, *'Let God steer you in a storm; he loves to be trusted.'* When we are opposed by enemies, let us beg God to interpose his wisdom. This is what David did: *'LORD, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness!'* (2 Sam. 15:31). John Flavel says, *'Oh, it is the noblest and surest way to vanquish an enemy: it was but asked and done.'* So whatever our troubles, no matter how difficult or hopeless they appear, let us take them to God and plead that he will mercifully intervene.

Having committed our cause to God and pleaded for his intervention, let us rest our hopes on his matchless wisdom. We are commanded: *'Trust in the LORD and do not lean on your own understanding'* (Prov. 3:5). Therefore, let us exercise our faith to firmly believe that all the affairs of this world are in his hands; let us believe that the desires and plans of all people are subservient to God's wisdom, and believe that he has an underlying purpose in the apparently disjointed and confusing events that occur here on earth.

When Melancthon was deeply distressed about the concerns of the church, Luther told him

'Do not presume to be the governor of the world, but leave the reins of government in his hands who made it, and best knows how to rule it.'

So, let us not permit anxieties, fears and doubts to disturb our peace and unsettle us. When God acts mysteriously in the church, let us trust him. When we are deeply concerned with what is happening, when we cannot trace God's hand, let us rest in his wisdom. Though *'his footsteps are not seen'* (Psa. 77:19), he knows what he is doing. Though cunning enemies oppose us, we need not be afraid because God is with us. When our reason tells us that there is no way of deliverance, let us submit ourselves to God's wisdom. Whatever happens to us, let us trust him in full assurance that he will do what we will judge in a hundred years to have been the very best for us in our present situation. As the hymn says, *'Those who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.'*

Someone might object: *'I have cried out for a long time, but have not received an answer.'* It is often the case that, because God does not exert his great power to deliver us the moment we first begin to plead to him, we are ready to think that we will obtain no help from him. In doing this, we forget that he has deep and wondrous purposes to accomplish in our affliction and that he works out these plans in ways that are quite beyond our comprehension. We measure his actions by our own understanding but, in fact, his ways are *'past finding out'* (Rom. 11:33).

God is intimately aware of each of his people's capabilities and limitations, and deals with us as a Father towards his children. He knows that one Christian may safely endure a kind of suffering which another is unable to bear, so he apportions the burden to the shoulders on which he places it. He knows what form of affliction is most suited to do us good, he knows the right time to administer it, he will not go beyond our need, and he will withdraw the affliction and comfort us once it has achieved its purpose. And let us never forget that God's delays are not denials. God

does order and overrule everything for the good of his people, and if we will only wait and trust him, our experience will confirm this truth. Consider his delays in fulfilling Joseph's dreams and in bringing about David's rise to the throne; yet what blessing he bestowed on them in the end! In eternity, we shall have no cause to complain of his slowness to answer, but we shall forever bless him for wisely delaying and, in so doing, bestowing untold blessing on us.

A contemplation of God's wisdom should calm our minds in time of trouble. We may see only an overcast sky, and our conditions may appear desperate and pitiable to the world, but we can be assured that God's wisdom will overrule and order our situations for the best. Suffering is medicinal in his hands. If our time of hardship makes us more humble, patient and prayerful; if it makes our faith more lively; if it causes us to be more sympathetic to others; if it gives us a deeper sense of our own inadequacies and our need of God's presence; if it weans our desires from this world's fading splendours and centres our thoughts on eternity; if it makes us nobler, more Christ-like people, then suffering has been a friend to us, not an enemy. So, when sorrow overtakes us, let us find encouragement and comfort in the certain knowledge that God's wisdom oversees our lives, taking our greatest fears and troubles and turning them into the choicest mercies and blessings.

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