

## GOD'S UNFATHOMABLE WISDOM

A key factor in Christian growth is trust in God's wisdom: Paul wrote, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out" (Romans 11:33)! Do we really believe that God's wisdom is deep and rich toward us? When we, like Paul, are convinced that God's wisdom is truly unfathomable, only then will we really trust in His guidance and providence in our lives.

Let's define "wisdom." Random House Dictionary says "wisdom is knowledge of what is true and right coupled with good judgment." J. I. Packer stated, "To be truly wise, in the Bible sense, one's intelligence and cleverness must be harnessed to a right end. Wisdom is the power to see and the inclination to choose the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it" (Knowing God, 80).

So wisdom consists in the union of three ingredients...

1. Wisdom is goal-oriented: it's motivated by a great purpose.
2. Wisdom is knowing what is right: the end of wisdom is always righteousness.
3. Wisdom is choosing the right course to attain its goal.

The wisdom of God, then, knows what's right for our lives and chooses the best means to attain it.

**Wisdom is exemplified in a well-known incident in the life of Solomon.** Two women appeared before Solomon to argue possession of an infant: "Now two women who were harlots came to the king and stood before him. And one woman said, 'O my lord, this woman and I dwell in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. Then it happened, the third day after I had given birth, that this woman also gave birth. And we were together; no one was with us in the house, except the two of us in the house. And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. So she arose in the middle of the night and took my son from my side, while your maidservant slept, and laid him in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to nurse my son, there he was, dead. But when I had examined him in the morning, indeed, he was not my son whom I had borne.' Then the other woman said, 'No! But the living one is my son, and the dead one is your son.' And the first woman said, 'No! But the dead one is your son, and the living one is my son.' Thus they spoke before the king" (First Kings 3:16-22).

Solomon's answer to the problem is characteristic of true wisdom. Wisdom sometimes appears as foolishness: "'Bring me a sword.' So they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, 'Divide the child in two, and give half to one and half to the other'" (First Kings 3:24-25). Was Solomon crazy? Didn't he know that that would kill the child? This seemed foolish! Sometimes the wisdom of God in our lives may appear to us as utter foolishness, but we shouldn't be too quick to judge the circumstances of our lives as God's lack of concern!

**Wisdom is based on knowledge:** "Then the woman whose son was living spoke to the king, for she yearned with compassion for her son; and she said, 'O my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him!' But the other said, 'Let him be neither mine nor yours, but divide him'" (First Kings 3:26). Solomon knew the protective love of a mother: the true mother would never allow her child to die just to prove a point; in the heart of the impostor, her child was already dead, so the life of someone else's child wasn't her concern. The wisdom of God working in our lives is based on a profound knowledge of our needs and personalities; He knows how we think and react, so He sets the best course for our lives.

**Wisdom is always right in the end:** "So the king answered and said, 'Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him; she is his mother.' And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had rendered; and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer

justice" (First Kings 3:27-28). The real mother was being tested: she did what she knew to be right and was rewarded in the end. So the way of wisdom always prove to be right to those who do right, even if at first it appears foolish.

God's wisdom isn't without its tests in our lives: some of the most difficult and trying times of our lives are tests permitted by God's wisdom—He's asking, "Do you trust Me?"; and if we only respond by doing the right thing, we'll eventually realize His wisdom in our lives. Do we trust God's wisdom to guide our lives? Let's consider the wisdom of God in ordering human lives.

### **The wisdom of God is realized in the life of Abraham.**

Traditional wisdom would've voted Abraham the "least likely to succeed." Consider Abraham's background: "Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord God of Israel: "Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River [and] led him throughout all the land of Canaan"' (Joshua 24:2-3a). His origins suggest that, before his call, he trusted in idols! Strike One!

**Consider Abraham's call:** "Now the Lord had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Genesis 12:1-3). God promised two things which required children: Abraham would be the progenitor of a great nation and through his offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed. But Abraham was childless, and his wife was incapable of bearing children: "Then Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai.... But Sarai was barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:29-30). Strike Two!

**Consider Abraham's age:** "Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed Haran" (Genesis 12:4b). How can such an old man be expected to change? How could he be expected to leave behind the security of his roots and venture to...only God knew where? Strike Three!

So traditional wisdom would have passed right by Abraham, yet it was this man God's wisdom chose to become the father of the blessed.

**In Abraham's life, God's wisdom was eventually realized by Abraham.** God called Abraham to leave his kindred (Genesis 12:1). The intention of this, no doubt, was to separate him from the evil influence of idolatry, but Abraham wasn't ready to accept God's wisdom in this—He brought along his nephew, Lot (verse 4a). God, not satisfied with this situation, caused Abraham and Lot to part ways on friendly terms (Genesis 13:5-12). Later Abraham had to come to Lot's rescue (Genesis 14:13-16). Abraham was trusting his own wisdom when he chose to bring Lot along, and Lot turned out to be more trouble than he was worth. But God accomplished His purpose in the end: Abraham was forced to separate from Lot. This was Abraham's first recorded lesson in learning to trust in God's wisdom.

**God sent a famine in order to test Abraham's trust:** "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Genesis 12:10). God had promised to curse those who cursed Abraham and to bless those who blessed him (verse 3). But did Abraham believe in God's promise to protect him? He must not have because upon entering Egypt, Abraham feared for his life: "When he was close to entering Egypt he said to Sarai his wife, 'Indeed I know that you are woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, "this is his wife"; and they will kill me, but they will let you live'" (Genesis 12:11-12). Again he relied on his own wisdom to insure his protection by instructing Sarah, his wife, to lie (or at least be deceptive) about her identity: "'Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you'" (Genesis 12:13). However, after the Pharaoh had taken Abraham's wife, God demonstrated His power over those whom Abraham feared: "But the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. And Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister?' I might have taken her as my wife. Now therefore here is your wife; take her and go your way'" (Genesis 12:17-20). Abraham received his second recorded

lesson in learning to trust God.

**God made Abraham wait 25 years for the birth of his promised heir:** Genesis 12:4 tells us he was 75 when he left his homeland, then Genesis 21:5 tells us that he was 100 when his son came along. This 25 year span proved too long for the impatient Sarah and Abraham, so after ten years, they set aside God's wisdom for a plan of their own. Another woman came into the picture: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, 'See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (Genesis 16:1-4a). So Hagar conceived just as planned, but the resulting family turmoil revealed the foolishness of Abraham's plan: "And when she (Hagar) saw that she had conceived, her mistress (Sarai) became despised in her eyes. Then Sarai said to Abram, 'My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The Lord judge between you and me.' So Abram said to Sarai, 'Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.' And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence" (Genesis 16:4b-6).

**God didn't allow Abraham's aspirations for Ishmael, his son by Hagar, to alter His original plan for Abraham. Abraham had yet to learn trust in God's promises and wisdom in bringing those promises to fruition:** "Then God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings and peoples shall be from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said in his heart, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child'" (Genesis 17:15-18)? Ishmael, the fruit of Abraham's wisdom, was rejected in the end for God's original plan. God fulfilled His promises in His own time and in His own way in order to teach Abraham to trust Him. Isaac's birth was a miracle, proving to Abraham that God has the power to keep His promises: "Then God said, 'No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him'" (Genesis 17:19). "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord (her husband) being old also?' And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son'" (Genesis 18:11-14). Thus Abraham received his third recorded lesson in learning to trust God. Did Abraham ever learn to trust God?

**God's greatest test of Abraham's faith came in the command to sacrifice his son, Isaac:** "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, saying to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him" (Genesis 22:1-3). Abraham appears to respond in immediate obedience. But does he have his own plan in mind to avoid this difficult task? A conversation between Abraham and Isaac may reveal Abraham's plan: "But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' Then he said, 'Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.' So the two of them went together" (Genesis 18:7-8). Was Abraham merely trying to quiet some suspicion in his son? Or was he half-expressing yet another plan to improve on God's instruction? By this time we've learned to expect such from him, but we shall see: "Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son" (Genesis 18:9-10). Wait! This isn't characteristic of Abraham! Is he really going to kill his son? Indeed he is! He had learned by repeated experience that God's wisdom is right! Every time he had tried to improve on God's plan, he had fouled things up. With his son's life hanging in the balance, this was no time to worsen the situation by using his own wisdom. He had finally learned by experience

that God is sufficiently powerful to keep his promises. On every previous occasion, no matter how he had altered God's original plan, God's purpose was still accomplished in the end. Abraham learned to trust God's way: to sacrifice Isaac was a bazaar request, but Abraham knew God would fulfill His promise through Isaac no matter what He had to do: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:17-19a). Abraham passed the test—Isaac didn't have to die after all: "And He (God through an angel) said, 'Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me'" (Genesis 22:12).

As we observe the shaping of this man of faith, we observe the wisdom of God in ordering human lives. God began with the least likely candidate and carefully shaped him into the epitome of faith and trust. Truly God's wisdom is unfathomable! But this is only one small part of a larger picture: God's wisdom in shaping Abraham was looking beyond Abraham to a far greater purpose and goal.

### **God's Wisdom is fulfilled in the death of Jesus, His one and only Son.**

Jesus has always been "the big picture," while all other things were merely "details": "When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). "In the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (Ephesians 1:10).

If we were to stand at the end of a platform at Grand Central Station, we could watch a constant succession of engine and train movements, but our viewpoint would not reveal the main plan in the movements of the trains. However, if we were privileged to enter the signal-tower, we would see on a long wall a diagram of the entire track layout for several miles in each direction with little glow-worm lights moving as the trains move. At once we see the entire picture through the eyes of the men who are in control. Now we can understand the purpose behind the movement of each individual train—something we couldn't understand while on the lower platform.

For centuries God showed to men only some "details" of His plan—never "the big picture." The life of Abraham represents only one train in the station; there were many more involved in the big picture: Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Esther, and others, and each life God's wisdom shaped with the same care Abraham received. Only after Jesus died on the cross did God invite man into the signal-tower to see the higher plan referred to as "the mystery," which reveals how God's wisdom provided for man's salvation through the death of Christ: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which when you read you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body and partakers of His promise in Christ through the Gospel" (Ephesians 3:1-6).

The end for which Christ died was to create the church—the body of the saved. The death of Christ was the focus of history: Jesus died to purchase the church, because in it Jews and Gentiles are united and sinners find salvation. The very existence of the church makes known "the manifold wisdom of God": "To make all people see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:9-11). As the body of the saved, it's a witness of God's ingenious plan to save sinners. As the pillar and ground of the truth, it's God's voice to the world expressing His wisdom. As members of the Lord's church, we're part of God's wise plan to save the lost.

Like Abraham, we're trains on God's track; we're parts of "the big picture." We must see the purpose of our lives involved in God's purpose for the church: to declare the Gospel, to reveal God's wisdom, and to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ: "To me (Paul), who am less than the least of all the saints,

this grace was given, that I should preach the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8).

## **Conclusion**

God's wisdom is far above us and is unfathomable; therefore we should trust Him, even when the events of our lives appear to be foolish.

God's scheme for our lives is not only for our own good, but also for the good of His cause: we're parts of the big picture in some way; we all contribute to what is right.

[Leland Byars, 1985.]

[Adapted/Revised by Tony Denton, April 1990.]