

BASIC DOCTRINE – THE FUNDAMENTALS

PART 2: REVELATION – GENERAL REVELATION

In the great summery of faith, found in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the author says: *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Heb 11:6)*

Here, we see that for any relationship to be acceptable to God it must be anchored in at least two convictions: God is (that is He exists) and that He blesses those who seek (or follow after) Him. But in order to possess such a commitment we must first be aware of God's existence and convinced of some of His characteristics, especially that He is good, which gives us confidence as we seek Him. But how do we come to this understanding of God and has He provided any sources that we can use to know Him?

The saving truths of Christianity are built on the belief that our knowledge of God is not found in earthly wisdom such as philosophy or science but by the realization that God has made Himself known to us through the means of revelation.

Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? (Isa 53:1)

The Hebrew word used here for *revealed* is “*galah*” (gaw-law') which means to uncover, expose, or to disclose. Easton's Bible Dictionary defines revelation as: “an uncovering, a bringing to light of that which had been previously wholly hidden or only obscurely seen.” By revelation God has uncovered what was previously hidden from our minds and what we could not find when left to ourselves. Revelation is something that God does, for it is His prerogative and under His control. God is the revealer, and we are the receptors of what God desires to disclose.

In order to know God, revelation from God is necessary for several reasons.

1. God is the Creator who is infinite and unlimited, knowing not only His own thoughts but ours as well. We, on the other hand, are part of what God has created (Gen 1:26-27), finite and limited, dependent totally upon Him for our existence. Being in the image and likeness of God we are capable of a personal relationship with Him, but we are dependent upon God to disclose Himself to us so that we can know Him and relate to Him. This is why Paul tells the Corinthians: *For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (1 Cor 2:10-12)*

2. Because of the Fall, sin entered the lives of our first parents and ruptured their (and our) relationship with God and brought corruption into their (and our) physical and spiritual natures. So we are no longer physically and spiritually what we were meant to be. Sin has left its ugly mark of moral and rational darkness upon our minds. Our reason, though not totally destroyed, is hampered with distortion and unbelief, which is unable to comprehend the things of God for they are now foolish to us. Paul, commenting upon this fallen condition, says: *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor 2:10)*

Thank God that we, who were once dead in our trespasses and sins, have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, have been freely forgiven and are now made alive! Nevertheless, we know we are not perfect; we know deep in our hearts that, although we are now no longer what we used to be, we are still not yet fully what we are going to be. So we look forward to the fruits of progress in our relationship with God, but we are still in need of God's self-disclosure.

3. We have an enemy who delights to befuddle our minds and wants to keep us chained in spiritual ignorance. Thus Paul writes, *But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, (2 Cor 4:3-4)*

Pastor Bruce Milne writes: "There is no road from our intellectual and moral perception to a genuine knowledge of God. The only way to knowledge of God is for God freely to place himself within range of our perception, and renew our fallen understanding." (Know the Truth). We must always remember that before the Holy Spirit enters us, we have no natural desire for God's self-revelation through Scripture and our hardened heart has even blinded itself to God's self-revelation through nature and history. Since by nature we are fallen creatures limited in knowledge, living in moral and mental obtuseness, and blinded by Satan, revelation from God is necessary in order to grasp what we need to know.

Without revelation from God, our thinking always leads us in the wrong direction. As Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus reminding of the new life as compared to the old one: This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. (Eph 4:17-19)

God's revelation has come to us in two different ways: General Revelation and Special Revelation. The Bible is obviously the best source of information about God and this we call Special Revelation because, although all human beings can

read it, provided it is translated into a language they understand, not all accept the truths found therein. The Holy Spirit must first illumine the individual to understand and accept the truths of scripture. Does this mean that those who have never had a chance to hear about the God of the Bible or read about Him in Scripture have absolutely no knowledge of God? Absolutely not, as Paul in the first chapter of Romans makes clear. This is what we call General Revelation, and it is what we look at first.

General Revelation

General Revelation is that revelation which God has given to all human beings throughout all of history. General revelation does not lead to the knowledge of a saving relationship with Christ, but it does reveal God's existence, His glory and His basic moral requirements. It is commonly taught that General Revelation comes in four forms: creation, inward sense of morality or conscience, our inward sense of God, and the action of God in history.

1. Creation

The natural world speaks of the power of God and His wondrous work in the created order. The Psalmist says that all of nature demonstrates the reality of God.

The heavens declare the glory of God;

And the firmament shows His handiwork.

Day unto day utters speech,

And night unto night reveals knowledge. (Ps 19:1-2)

When preaching the gospel to the people of Lystra Paul points to the goodness of God in creation saying that: *you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." (Acts 14: 15-17)*

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul teaches that through the evidence of the natural world all humans have been granted some awareness of God's attributes and qualities to the point that they have no excuse for failing to acknowledge Him and to give Him thanks and honor.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, (Rom 1:20-2)

2. Our inward sense of morality or conscience

Paul makes it clear in Romans that all people have an in-built perception of right and wrong.

For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel. (Rom 2:14-16)

This law “written in their hearts” is known in theology as natural law. That is, from the beginning, God created human beings in His image and likeness. This means that God instilled in the very nature of what it means to be a human being an instinctive knowing of right and wrong. Because of this in-built awareness, God will hold all people accountable for their actions. It is the comprehension of this moral obligation that should lead all people to acknowledge their Creator who is also their lawgiver and ultimate judge.

3. Our inward sense of God

Along with an in-built moral awareness, God also gave us an awareness of Himself. It is usually acknowledged that all people throughout history have shared a common need for the supernatural and the need to worship a god or gods of some kind that cannot be suppressed either by atheist teaching or by command and threat from government.

We have a telling example of this in western culture in the 1960's when many begin to disregard time honored biblical beliefs of Christianity and the belief in the one theistic God. Even Christianity was tainted by this, particularly the liberal mainline Protestant denominational seminaries that used books about the so-called "death of God" to train their pastors. But instead of turning to Atheism, western society began to look to new, non-Christian, ideas of spirituality and reverted back to ancient pagan beliefs such shamanism, the occult, mysticism, idolatry and eastern beliefs.

In other words, they rejected the God, as revealed in the Bible, but they couldn't reject the inward need for Him. And instead of turning to Him they turned to what could give a sense of spirituality (though a false one) but allow them at the same time disregard the moral standards set by God.

4. God in History

The General Revelation of God in history consists of such things as the fulfillment of the prophecies recorded in the Bible, the creation, and continuation of the Jewish nation and the church, and God's hand on history in general. For example, God made a covenant with the Jewish people beginning with the patriarch Abraham to be His special people with a purpose for God's glory. As the pagan prophet Balam, who under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, prophesied in the book of Numbers:

How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him, And from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, Not reckoning itself among the nations. (Num 23:5-9)

One cannot deny the realization of this prophecy being fulfilled in history. In spite of Israel's frequent rejection of God's will and His prophets, the destruction of their nation in the first century, and anti-Semitism from other nationalities, the Jewish people have endured as a separate people with the nation of Israel being reestablished in 1948.

Although the voice of General Revelation is not enough to save us, it is still substantial enough to render us without excuse in our duty to acknowledge and honor God. According to scripture, the refutation of this revelation can be contributed only to a willful act of rejection and resistance to the outward and

innermost awareness of a deity and common moral obligations. We find glimpses of this in the Psalms.

The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God. (Ps 53:1)

For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire; He blesses the greedy and renounces the Lord. The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts. (Ps 10: 3-4)

The denial and rejection of General Revelation renders all people guilty before the judgment of God and leads ultimately to wrath and rejection from God. Thus Paul writes: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, (Rom 1:18-20*

Bruce Milne notes, in regarding the sufficiency of General Revelation: "God has not left himself without testimony. In the totality of their entire life experience God addresses all people. If the light he gives is extinguished, the responsibility for the subsequent darkness remains theirs. 'Let God be true though every man be false' (Rom. 3:4, RSV). (Know the Truth)

It also goes without saying that with the dismissal of General Revelation there is little if any check on a person's eventual spiritual and moral decline that degenerates from rebellion to a path of spiritual darkness, idolatry, moral depravity, self-worship, and sexual perversion. Inevitably the family breaks down and with it comes a complete civil breakdown.

We see this path mapped out by Paul in the first chapter of Romans.

Spiritual Darkness: but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, (Rom 1: 21-22)

Idolatry: and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man — and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. (Rom 1: 23)

Moral Depravity: Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, (Rom 1: 24)

Self Worship: who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1: 25)

Sexual Perversion: For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. (Rom 1: 26-27)

Loss of Civil Restraint: And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Rom 1: 28-32)

Thus, General Revelation, while by no means perfect and in need of further revelation (namely, the Bible and personal witness of the Holy Spirit), does serve an ultimate and good purpose. It gives all human beings a basic awareness of God's existence along with moral responsibility, provides a check on a human being's natural inclination toward wickedness and, as we will see when we cover Special Revelation, prepares the heart for repentance by directing us to the realization of guilt and a future impending judgment, which may lead to salvation

if the Gospel message is preached. Praise God! We can take heart from the words spoken by the Apostle Paul:

He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:25-31)