

(D)

WEEK 2

IDENTITY

KNOWING GOD



LESSON 2 - KNOWING GOD

The Doctrines of General and Special Revelation

My proposal is this. You will know how Bunyan's pilgrim, when called back by his wife and children from the journey on which he was setting out, "putting his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, eternal Life." I ask you for the moment to stop your ears to those who tell you there is no road to knowledge about God, and come a little way with me and see. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and anyone who is actually following a recognized road will not be too worried if he hears nontravelers telling each other that no such road exists. - J.I. Packer¹

Summer 2011

How do you know God?

The focus of this lesson is how do we know who God is and how do we grow in knowledge of him and the world he made. For the non-Christian in western culture, the question of knowing God is probably one of the biggest challenges today. People don't have a problem with anyone having faith. What is difficult to understand is the insistence that one particular God has made himself known over and against any other kind of god and that this God has made himself known to particular people. For the Christian, they have a strong desire to know him and to be like him. The doctrine of God's self-revelation aims to give a framework to answer these questions. It is classically divided into two related categories: universal or general revelation, i.e. that which is revealed to all people at all times by God's common grace; and particular or special revelation, i.e. that which is revealed to particular people at particular times and places for the purposes of salvation.

SCRIPTURE

Read and reflect on the following passages: Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-23; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:16-21; Jn 14:1-14

REFLECTIONS

- What can *everyone* know about God? How?
- What distorts our knowledge of God?
- How has God revealed himself most directly and clearly?
- How have you experienced God's revelation?
- How would you describe your view of the Bible and your experience of it? What role has it played in your relationship with God?

PRAYER

“Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise; then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word. And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules. I will keep your law continually, forever and ever, and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts. I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame, for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.” (Psalm 119:41–48, ESV)

PRACTICE

Prayer is a response to God's grace that we may commune with God personally. On one level scripture is God speaking to us and prayer is us speaking to God. There are a number of different kinds of prayer, or styles or orientations that you may have come across, intercessory, healing, contemplative, etc. But scripture has always served the church as the launchpad or the catalyst for prayer. The Psalms are a book of prayers. Commit yourself to not only reading them, but praying through them. Five a day will take you through an entire month.

Other helpful things to consider, do not pray more than you are ready for at a time and suffer from “spiritual indigestion.”¹ The spiritual life works just the same as the physical life, there is a sense of progression. You have to learn to walk before you can run. Gradually work yourself up to

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We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

longer periods, more advanced forms of prayer, but begin with the model for prayer we have in scripture. At times we our minds are filled with many things and it is difficult to focus. Begin by praying through about your distractions. Give them to the Lord and then you can move on to the prayers you intended to pray.

Fundamentally, prayer is about connecting with God not merely giving him a grocery list of your desires. It is crucial to cultivate a sense of adoring God for who he is not

General Revelation

General revelation refers to what can be known about God apart from his direct revelation, that is especially through Scripture. The great theologian John Calvin said that knowledge of God as Creator is made available to all but God is not known as Savior apart from special revelation.² Examples of what is known about God through general revelation is that the vast majority of humanity since the beginning of time has believed that some divine being created them. Atheism is by far and away the minority view in human history. Hence, the Bible considers God’s existence self-evident, especially in light of his acts in history (Gen 1:1; Rom. 1:18-23). Humans as his image bearers have a sense, in a way that other living things do not, that we are made like one who is existence and qualities are beyond our own. Yet though we hunger for the divine, we are also repealed to receive any substitute to replace the only one who will satisfy our thirst.

There are three points of focus for general revelation: nature (Ps. 19:1-6), history (Is. 10:5-13; Dan. 2:21), and the moral and spiritual qualities of humanity (Rom. 2:11-16).³ Nature points to a Creator. Poetic language is used to say the creation itself praises God and testifies to his goodness (Ps. 19:1-6; Is. 55:12; 1 Ch. 16:33; Ps. 98:7-9). It affirms his power and our limitations (Job 38). It affirms his providential hand (Acts 14:17; 17:24-27). Nature affirms the reality that God is infinite, eternal, and omnipotent, even though our knowledge and acceptance of

God and the created order is corrupted by sin (Rom 1:19-23). Nature reveals that God is a God of order and not chaos (Gen. 1). History reveals his providential hand and limitless power through the rise and fall of nations (Is. 10:5-13). He has preserved the people of Israel through millennia and he will continue to preserve the church (Mt. 16:18). Certain events in history were improbable and whose impact is extraordinary, e.g. evacuation of Dunkirk, Spanish Armada, Battle of Tours. The human impulse that history is going somewhere and has some greater narrative serves as a sign that is providentially governed by a divine hand. Human qualities also reveal something about God. People are aware of their need for law and morality (Rom 2:14-15), their basic sense of right and wrong. What is key here is not that most cultures agree on specific moral issues but that they all have moral qualities regardless of the specifics.

General revelation serves as a foundation for belief in God and the basic relationship he has to creation. Religious worship of a superior being is a common experience in human culture and indeed worship of something seems intrinsic to human nature. The purpose of general revelation in Christianity is to provide common ground for communication of God's redemptive plan to anyone through the shared understanding and experience of human beings and the created order. Without general revelation, God's ability to communicate to us and our ability to share the gospel with others would be near impossible.

There are several implications that are worth considering briefly. It's important to recognize Christianity does not deny but in fact teaches that some generic sense of God can be known by everyone. If this were not so, communicating a saving knowledge of God would not be possible. We see this in scripture when it uses metaphors from our creaturely experience to make an analogy about God or his ways. General revelation serves as the foundation for the ability to contend for the faith and show faith in God is rational. It also enables evangelism to people in other cultures by tapping into their generic sense of God and their observations about life in this world.

Much of the goodness in life and creation is a result of what theologians call God's common grace. Everyone experiences some measure of grace but they do not all experience saving grace. Common grace affirms the good every human experiences by God's providential hand and the good of any realm of human knowledge such as science, woodworking, art, astronomy, anthropology, psychology, archaeology, modern medicine, etc. Common grace also reminds us that no person or culture is all bad. There is always some things that can be affirmed, some that need to be rejected, and some things that need to be redeemed.

But Christianity denies this generic sense of God is the same as knowing God in a way that saves us. Thus we have need for God to reveal himself personally that we may be saved.

Special Revelation

Special revelation is how God has specifically, consistently, directly and progressively revealed himself in history through acts, speech, and people. God spoke to people directly (Gen 12:1-4; Ex 3:1; Is 6:8; Mt 3:16-17; Acts 9:3-6) and through dreams and visions (Gen 37). He has revealed himself through his actions in the world (Ex 7-10; Jn 6:11; 10:32), through people, and through angels (Acts 5:19-20) and he tells us the interpretation of his acts in the world which has been recorded in scripture.

Special revelation serves to interpret general revelation, divine encounters and complement other occurrences of special revelation. It serves to bring people into a redemptive relationship with God through the perfect revelation of Jesus Christ through whom we know God himself (Jn 14:5-14, Col 2:9; Heb 1:1-3). The Holy Spirit can make particular things known to particular people through some of the same means as in the past but this is not common. The Spirit speaks most clearly through the Scriptures. However, all revelation must be consistent with the character of God and what has been revealed in Scripture. We must “test the spirits,” (1 Jn 4:1-6). Ultimately, Jesus Christ is the revelation of God (Jn 1:18). Scripture is God’s words to us so that we can know Jesus Christ and God’s redemptive plans.

There are three clear ways God reveals himself: Jesus Christ, the Bible, and debated but recognized by some on rare occurrences is the miraculous (visions, dreams, miraculous acts, etc.). The Bible is the supreme authority about who God is, what he is like, who he created us to be, what went wrong, and how He intends to redeem humanity. God has most clearly and specifically revealed who He is in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Bible itself is about Jesus Christ (Jn. 5:39; Lk. 24:25-27). The Bible then is the primary means that God has given his self-revelation to us. Other supernatural acts of God today must be consistent with prior revelation (1 Jn 4:1-4). God does providentially prepare all kinds of people and cultures for reception of the gospel through general revelation and common grace. Examples exist in stories of Muslims receiving a vision or dream of Christ or unreached people groups being visited by an angel telling them of coming missionaries. Often legitimate stories include an encouragement to find a Bible or a Christian for further understanding, by not new revelation previously unknown. One must be careful for Satan masquerades as an angel of light to bring false revelation in contradiction to scripture.

"The Bible is the cradle wherein the Christ child is laid."

- Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 35*

SCRIPTURE

It should be clear then that the Bible is the *primary source* of special revelation as interpreted through Christ. The Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and communicated through human personalities (Dt 18:18; 2 Sam 23:2; Is 8:11; 2 Pet 1:20-21). The Bible was not dictated directly without human involvement. It was not created by humans speculating on the divine. It was written by God using his servants as they were carried along by the Spirit. As such, there are four main things to remember about the nature of scripture: inerrancy, authority, clarity, and sufficiency.

Inerrancy is that it is without error in the original autographs down to the original words and grammar. It does not cover human mistakes in translation or transmission though God has providentially preserved it accurately. It contains various genres of literature (narrative, poetry, prophecy, letters and apocalyptic). Inspired by the Spirit through over forty authors, over

1500 years, on three continents, in three languages (Hebrew, Greek and some Aramaic), and through a variety of cultures.



Authority means it is true on all matters on which it speaks as they are properly interpreted with respect to the particular context and genre in which they were revealed (2 Tim 3:16). Scripture is the *norma normans* and the Holy Spirit guides us in its meaning and reminds us of its teaching (Jn 16:13). The Spirit works through the church, the pillar of truth

(1 Tim. 3:15) to guide us in its proper interpretation. It is sufficient and authoritative in its content of both testaments to accomplish God's purposes (Is 55:11; 2 Pet 1:19).

Clarity (often called perspicuity) means it contains consistency and unity in all that it says. Scripture is internally coherent in all 66 books of the canon and its central message of who God is and the means by which he redeems humanity (2 Pet 3:15-16; 1 Tim 5:18). Clarity does not mean all passages are equally clear. We use the clear teachings of scripture, the things it majors on (the "weightier matters of the law," cf. Mt. 23:23), in order to understand minor points that are difficult to understand.

Sufficiency means that scripture contains all we need to know for knowing God and salvation through Jesus Christ. Scripture is not exhaustive of all human knowledge (e.g. it doesn't

contain a manual on how to fix your car). Sufficiency does not mean we should use *only* the Bible and ignore good human wisdom obtained by God's common grace. The Bible is special revelation thus it authoritatively contains all that we need to know for belief in God as savior and for faithful living. Perspicuity and sufficiency does not mean the Bible is always easy to understand but the main point of knowing Christ are *clear enough* and *sufficient* for a life of godliness.

There are a couple of wrong ways to read scripture. One is to distort the clear meaning of the Bible, that is the message of salvation in Christ. We must let scripture interpret scripture and let clear passages shed light on unclear ones. The Holy Spirit certainly works through one's reading of Scripture but it cannot mean for you what could not be affirmed by other Christians in history. He may lead people to different applications dependent on their context but not contradictory meanings of its essential message. Another false way of reading scripture is to find principles and morals for how one should live their life apart from reliance on God's grace. This is called *moralizing* and is what the Pharisees did whom Jesus condemned (Jn. 5:39). The Bible does have principles for our lives and inspiring words that encourage us but they are always in light of and in response to God's grace. *Scripture is about Jesus*. Study, reflection and prayer should lead us to see him and his salvation by grace through faith alone. Living a good moral life is an outgrowth of a relationship with Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit sanctifying the believer to live for, and out of, Jesus' righteousness.

It is important to speak to the nature of the Biblical canon as opposed to the Bibles used by Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and the so-called "lost" gospels. Canon is derived from Hebrew and Greek for "measuring rod." The canon of Scripture was closed with Malachi for the Old Testament (Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6) and with Revelation for the New Testament (Rev. 22:18-19). It is not to be added to or changed (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:18-19). There were three basic tests for the canon of Scripture that became the criteria for the early church whom *recognized* the inherent authority of Scripture: orthodoxy, catholicity, and apostolicity. The early church did not determine the canon to squelch dissension or maintain power. Orthodoxy refers to whether a written work was consistent with "the rule of faith," i.e. consistent with what God has previously revealed (contra Islam and Mormonism which sees later revelation as superior and overriding prior revelation). Catholicity is whether the early churches universally recognized it as divinely inspired and authoritative. Apostolicity is whether an apostle or close associate of an apostle, who were a witness to the life of Jesus, was the author. The Protestant canon is derived from combining the Jewish canon for the Old Testament with the early church's consensus on the New Testament. The Catholic canon contains additional books in what is referred to as the *Apocrypha* which even they recognize as deuterocanonical, or "secondary canon." Meaning, they are not as author-

itative as the rest of the Bible. They contain important and somewhat historical information about the Jews between the two testaments but are not a part of the Jewish canon and were not in Jesus' OT Bible while he was on the earth.

Some question the trustworthiness of the Bible and have created corrupted translations or sought to include other ancient documents as equal in authority to the canon. The *New World Translation* used by Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormon Bible are corrupted translations of the original text and the best manuscripts. The "lost" gospels (Gospel of Thomas, Barnabas, Mary, etc.) are not really gospels at all but records of the divergent teaching of something called Gnosticism. They were written centuries after the time of Jesus and the apostles and contain many legends and myths. Gnosticism (which comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge) taught that the physical world was corrupted and evil and that the spiritual world of ideas was pure. Many of the early church fathers knew of these writings. The divergent teaching of these other ancient documents is obvious and none of them were ever considered as part of the canon. The debate was not whether to make the canon bigger but smaller. Books like Hebrews, whose authorship is not known nor was it widely distributed in the west, Esther, James, Jude, 2 and 3 John were also debated. They were accepted on account of the criteria above: orthodoxy, catholicity, and apostolicity. Good translations of Scripture abound today in the English speaking world and two of the most popular in the U.S. are the English Standard Version (ESV) and the New International Version (NIV) but other to consider for study or personal use are the NASB, NET, NLT, and CSB.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*

Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*

F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, Crossway, 2012.

¹ Richard Foster, *Prayer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 13.

² Calvin, 1:2:1.

³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1998), 179.