



THUS SAITH THE LORD

A STUDY OF GOD'S WORD



Revelation – How can we know God?

“What is truth?” a cynical Pilate asked Jesus during Jesus’ trial. That question has plagued human history for millennia. Where is truth to be found? The curious child may want to know “why,” but the frustrated philosopher wants to know “how.” How can we know for sure what is true and what is not? Some thinkers have looked to observation and experimentation as a guide to ultimate truth. Others have looked to philosophy or religion. For thousands of years man has been trying to figure out what is true and has come up with a confusing array of competing and often contradictory answers. So how do we discover truth?

God is the ultimate source of truth. God created the world, and since He created the world He knows how it works. God has graciously chosen to show us that truth, or to use the term the Bible uses, “to reveal” that truth. In this series we will be studying what the Bible has to say about the Bible. The first step in that study, however, requires us to take a step back and ask how it is that God reveals truth to us.

Theologians use two categories to describe the ways by which God makes Himself known. These are called “general revelation” and “special revelation.” General revelation includes things that can be known about God at all places and all times; things that are available to a *general audience*. Special revelation, on the other hand, involves things that God makes known to a *special audience* at a special time, normally through speech. In this lesson, we’ll spend some time thinking through these two ways through which God shares His truth with us.

Why do people still search for truth if God has revealed it?

General Revelation

As we said earlier, general revelation is called general because it is available to a general audience. God's truth is not limited to those who hear Him speak or have records of His speech. Certain things are available to all, even the native living in the jungle who's never met an outsider. That truth falls into three primary categories:

God Reveals Truth through Creation (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-23)

What types of things can people learn about God from nature?

What types of things can people not learn about God from nature?

Psalm 19 tells us that the world God has created shouts the glory and existence of God. This is a universal language, that goes out into all the earth. David then takes the sun as a particular example. Many people throughout history have worshipped the sun, but here we are told that the power of the sun is actually a testimony to God's greatness and power. Paul makes a similar argument in Romans when he states that God's wrath has been revealed against humanity because people can see from the creation God's eternal power and godhead [i.e. divinity]. Instead of being thankful for all that God has done, however, they switched Him out for the creation and worshipped the creation rather than the Creator. Both of these passages argue that creation testifies to the fact that there is a God, that He created everything, and that He must be very powerful.

Why do you think it is that people can look at creation and either replace Him with an idol or decide that He doesn't exist because of "science"?

God Reveals Truth through His Sovereignty

Another way that God reveals truth is through the ways in which He interacts with people. His sovereign dealings in bringing good and in directing history are ways in which we can know about God.

- **God's sovereignty is seen through His providence (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:15-17).**

Jesus and Paul make the surprising assertion that everything good that happens to people comes from the hand of God. God gives even wicked people sunlight and rain to grow their crops. The joy of life and the provision of the earth are a testimony of God's existence to everyone, even those who have never heard the name of Jesus.

In what other ways is God's kindness seen to everyone, even those who don't know Him personally?

- **God's sovereignty is seen through history (Psalm 47:7-8; Daniel 2:21; 4:35).**

God is sovereign over the happenings of kings and countries. Although we can't always tell what He is up to when we are in the thick of it, Scripture affirms to us that everything that is happening happens by the Lord's command.

God Reveals Truth through Humanity

Our last source of general revelation is perhaps a little surprising: people. When we look at people and even at ourselves, there are some things we can learn about God.

- **The image of God in man reveals truth about God (Genesis 1:26-28).**

When God created man, He created someone who was supposed to be an "image" or representation of Him. That means that in

some ways man reflects God. Although theologians debate exactly how this work, most would agree that man shows what God is like more than anything else in creation.

In what ways do people reflect God?

- **The conscience reveals truth about God (Romans 2:14-15).**
This is related in some ways to the previous point, but it receives special attention in Scripture. In Romans 2 Paul argues that Jews who break God's law will be condemned, especially when non-Jews who don't have God's law keep it anyway because the law is "written in their hearts." Although our conscience has been damaged by the fall, and sometimes it warns us something is wrong that isn't wrong or fails to warn us something is wrong that is wrong, the conscience itself is still a witness to truth that God has placed inside every person. The belief that some things are right and wrong comes from the divine lawgiver who has stamped His law on their heart.

The Problem with General Revelation

General revelation is given by God and is good and important, but general revelation alone is not enough. General revelation teaches us a lot, but we need more than just general revelation to live for God and to be saved for several reasons:

Why do you think that general revelation would be insufficient as a source of truth?

1) General revelation is ignored.

Paul's point in Romans 1 is that God's wrath is revealed because the revelation He gives is rejected and replaced by idols. Rather than worshipping the Creator, people look to the creation to fulfill their needs. While it isn't idolatry in the same way, people today

still replace the Creator with the creation when they hold to materialism [i.e., the belief that physical material is all that exists]. General revelation is sufficient to prove God's existence, but because of the corrupting influence of sin people reject this knowledge and replace it.

2) General revelation is injured.

We've seen that God reveals Himself in nature and in humanity, but neither are what they originally were when God created them. Nature has been subjected to the curse, so that now the creation groans awaiting our redemption (Romans 8:22-23). People have been twisted by sin so that the way they think and behave is not the way God intended (Ephesians 4:17-19). Because of that, looking at people or at nature has the potential to give us a distorted view of God. The Mona Lisa would still show the artistic genius of Da Vinci even if it was covered in graffiti, but it would certainly be harder to see. Likewise, although nature and humanity still testify to the greatness of God, that witness has been clouded over by sin and the fall.

3) General revelation is incomplete.

What types of things cannot be learned from general revelation?

Paul is clear about what general revelation teaches: God's eternal power and godhead [i.e. divinity]. It doesn't teach us about His grace or His kindness or His plan of salvation. To know these things, we have to something more: special revelation.

Special Revelation

When we talk about special revelation, we are talking about God revealing truth directly and clearly. There are several ways throughout time that God has given us more truth than that which is commonly available to everyone.

God Spoke Directly

The simplest form of special revelation is when God Himself speaks. This happened especially in the OT, where God spoke to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, and others. Moses is someone who talked with God face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11). This appears to have happened more frequently during the period of Genesis and Exodus and have been less frequently the case afterwards.

Why do you think God does not speak directly more often? Why does God use any other method at all?

God Spoke through Angels

Throughout God's Word we often see angels bringing God's message, in fact the word angel means "messenger." Frequently in the Old Testament we see "the angel of the Lord" giving God's message, a mysterious character that many argue might even be the Lord Jesus before He took on human flesh. Regardless, throughout much of Scripture we have angels frequently communicating God's message to people.

God Spoke through Prophets

God eventually began to raise up special men and women through whom He spoke with others. Although these extend back to the time of Abraham (Genesis 20:7) and Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15), these are most often associated with the kings of Israel. Many of these prophets wrote their messages or had others write them down (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, etc.), but some we only hear about in the historical books (such as Elijah, Elisha, and others). Prophets predicted the future, yes, but more often they simply spoke on God's behalf reminding people of what God had already said.

What kinds of messages did the prophets normally bring to God's people?

God Spoke through His Son (Hebrews 1:1-3)

“What is truth” a cynical Pilate asked Jesus. Little did Pilate know He was sitting across from Truth. The author of Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God to us. Christ would tell a frustrated and confused Philip that whoever had seen Him had seen the Father (John 14:8-9). It is through the ministry of Jesus that we have come to know the character of God and the plan of salvation with far more clarity than at any other point before.

In what ways does Jesus give us a fuller understanding of God than what the prophets did?

God Speaks through Scripture

Finally, the Old and New Testament is the way through which God's message continues to the next generation of His followers. God does not commission prophets today. Angelic visits are not all that frequent. Christ and the apostles are no longer on the scene, but God's Word continues as a witness to the actions and deeds of God's work in history. The Scriptures are the testimony of the apostles and prophets throughout the ages who have seen God work and have seen Christ Himself (cf 1 John 1:1-3). However, God's Word is not simply a history book, it is living and active even today (Hebrews 4:12). Psalm 19 teaches us that God's Word is perfect, sure, right, pure, and clean and that it converts the soul, makes the simple wise, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, and endures forever (Psalm 19:7-9). God spoke through prophets, angels, and His Son, but He continues to speak today through His Word.

How is it that God is able to speak through a document written 2,000-3,500 years ago to people living today?

How has God spoken to you through His Word?

God cannot be fully known. He is so much bigger than us that He explodes all our categories. But that does not mean we can't know anything about God. You see, while we cannot know God completely, we can truly know Him. Some things can be known about God by simply looking at creation, history, and humanity, but this will result in a fuzzy and incomplete picture of what we need to know about God. So to fill out this picture, God speaks. He speaks directly, through prophets and angels, and ultimately through His Son. All of this speaking has been written down in a divinely commissioned record of those who speak on His behalf. He has supernaturally authenticated these messengers both with miracles and accurate predictions. But how is it that the words of these men and women were recorded and brought down to us today? That is a question we will study in our next lesson.