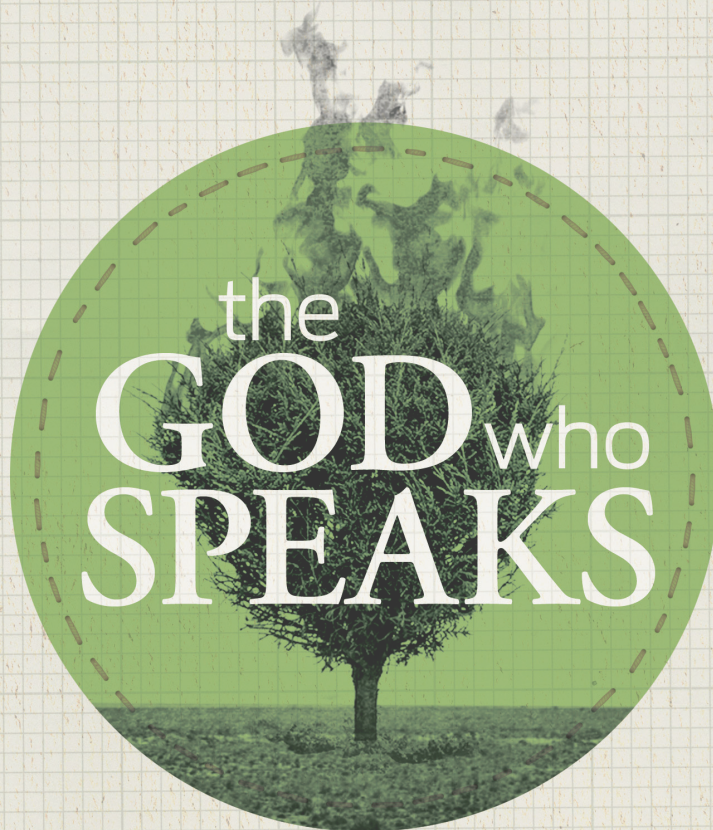


THE
GOSPEL
PROJECT
FOR ADULTS



FALL 2012: *Personal Study Guide*

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LifeWay | Adults

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Theology is “the study of God.” But unlike academic disciplines where the acquiring of knowledge is viewed as a good thing in and of itself, studying truth about God has a specific purpose—that we might know the God who has shown us grace in the person of Jesus Christ and that we might make Him known. Theology, in the Christian sense, is knowledge about God that leads us into deeper knowledge of God. The gospel is what makes possible this knowledge, and a life of mission is to be the outcome.

The Gospel Project is a curriculum now three years in the making. Churches have expressed their desire for a theologically driven curriculum that is biblical and accessible. The development of this new curriculum has taken place with the input from an advisory council (see names on page 4) and insights offered from churches willing to test the material. I am excited to see a new curriculum that will assist small communities within the church to include a solid theological and missional focus in their discipleship process.

Theology, gospel, and mission. Our goal has been to incorporate each of these important elements in *The Gospel Project*. As we learn more about the grand narrative that the Scriptures tell, we see Christ’s death and resurrection as the focal point of the story line. The good news of Jesus then empowers us—God’s people—to live on mission, representing Christ to those around us and proclaiming His name to the world.

Trevin Wax

Managing Editor—*The Gospel Project*
Author of *Counterfeit Gospels* and *Holy Subversion*



Contemporary society is a clamor of competing voices. From the TV to the Internet to the social media that floods our cellular devices, we are awash in information. But in the midst of all the noise, God still speaks. He has revealed Himself in the world around us, in His written Word, and most fully in the Living Word—the Person of Jesus Christ.

In this quarter we look in detail at the truth that the God who made us has chosen to reveal Himself to us. Along the way, we’ll learn about how we have rebelled and continue to resist God’s revelation. Then we’ll see how Jesus—God’s Word in flesh and blood—has come to obey God perfectly and to suffer the consequences of our disobedience. As God’s redeemed people, we are now enabled to take a posture of humble submission to the authoritative, inspired, and perfect Word of God, even as we open this Word to the world.

Our prayer is that the words in these lessons will draw you deeper into the inspired Word of God that continues to speak to us today. May you hear the voice of Christ and faithfully follow the King!

The Gospel Project

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We believe that the Bible has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter and that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. For our doctrinal statement, visit www.lbc.net/lbfn.

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UNIT

1

GOD

The God Who Speaks

Writers

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The God Who Speaks

significant speech

God is. The Scriptures do not begin by making the case for God's existence. Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The biblical story line begins with a basic assumption: God exists.

But that's not all that the earliest Scriptures tell us about God. Moments later, we are introduced to another truth: **God speaks:** "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (v. 3). The God that exists is not silent. He talks! And when He talks, things happen. Light pierces darkness. His words send planets spinning and stars whirling. God's speech is powerful.

The creation story leads us to a truth more glorious yet: **God speaks to us.** Once God created the first human beings, He "blessed them, and God said *to them...*" (v. 28). This indescribable, untamable, all-powerful Creator God stooped down to whisper to His creatures. And the same God still speaks today.

At the heart of Christianity is the truth that God reveals Himself to us. We call this the "doctrine of revelation." This doctrine matters. Our choices, our relationships, our careers, our attitudes—all of these are challenged and shaped by the truth that God has spoken to us.

In this week's lesson, we will dig deep into the glorious truth of God's self-revelation. Pray that God will open your ears so that you may hear Him speaking to you through His Word.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- One of the foundational beliefs of Christianity is that God has revealed Himself. What human responsibilities accompany God's self-revelation?
- Do you think most Christians truly understand the truth that God speaks? Why or why not?
- What might be some reasons people don't want to believe that God has spoken?

The God Who Speaks

Graced

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul warned the early Christians about the danger of thinking too highly of themselves: “What do you have that you didn’t receive?” he asked (1 Cor. 4:7). The anticipated answer to that question, of course, is *nothing*. We have nothing that we did not receive. In other words, everything is a gift, a result of unfathomable grace.

Many times we think of grace only in terms of salvation. But the Bible teaches of grace that goes back to the dawn of creation. “Let there be light!” (Gen. 1:3) is grace in action. Our very existence is an undeserved gift.

Here’s are some questions to ponder: Did God have to create the world? Was God lonely? Did He *need* creation to exist in order to fill some hole in His being? The answer to all three of these questions is a resounding NO. God was under no obligation to create the world.

Now let’s go a step further: When God created the world, was He obligated to speak to us personally? Did He have to invite us into a relationship with Himself? The answer to these questions is also NO. God could have made us without ever revealing Himself.

Do you see? Grace goes deep. Yes, salvation is all of grace. But beyond that, the fact that God speaks to us is also an act of grace, as is the very fact that He created us. *To be* is to be *graced*.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- How does the truth that God owes us nothing affect your understanding of God?
- Turn Paul’s question around and answer him by listing several things you have received.
- Read Colossians 3:12-17, and reflect on how this grace-centered lifestyle would affect your relationships.

The God Who Speaks



God speaks. From the beginning of time and in the pages of Scripture, God reveals Himself as a God who speaks. His speech is a demonstration of His power, grace, and authority. Because of this truth, there is nothing more important in life than hearing God and obeying His voice.

Helen Keller was only 19 months old when a childhood illness left her deaf and blind, a prisoner to a world of incomprehensible sensations and inexpressible thoughts. “Light! give me light!” was the wordless cry of my soul,” she

would later write.¹

Helen Keller’s parents hired a teacher, Anne Sullivan, who sought to break into the six-year-old’s world of silent darkness. Sullivan’s breakthrough came when she taught Helen how to sign the word “water.” The story of Helen Keller reminds us of the power of communication.

In the upcoming weeks, we will examine the ways God reveals Himself. Theologians have divided the methods of God’s revelation into two categories: **general revelation** and **special revelation**. General revelation refers to that which comes to all people everywhere (through creation, for example), whereas special revelation refers to that which is available to specific people at specific times and in specific places (through God’s covenant with Israel or the sacred Scriptures). We will look at these categories in detail in future weeks. For now, let’s focus on the truth that God makes Himself known.

In today’s lesson, we will look at three truths that flow from the reality of God as Speaker. The goal of our lesson is to appreciate the goodness of God we see in His revelation to us and then to spread the news that He has spoken by aligning our lives with His will and telling others of His grace.

1. The God who speaks has authority (Gen. 1:1-3).

Let's begin by looking at Genesis 1:1-3.

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Notice the power of God's word in this passage. There was only nothingness until God made His intentions known. With just words spoken by God, light came into existence. God created by speaking. He spoke the world into existence. And the result of His speaking demonstrates how powerful His speech is.



In what ways does the impact of a word of encouragement or criticism change depending upon the source?

Words change things. When a pastor stands next to a gushing groom and a beaming bride and says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," their status changes. They become united before God. They are ushered into the union of holy matrimony. The spoken word changed them forever because it was spoken with authority.

But words have no authority in themselves. Words are only powerful when spoken by someone with power. The Word of God is powerful and authoritative because it is God who has spoken.

The truth that God speaks is what separates Him from all idols. In the Old Testament, we see frequent showdowns between the true God of Israel and the false gods of pagan peoples. Whether it be the plagues God sent on Egypt (corresponding with the Egyptian gods; Ex. 7-12) or Elijah calling down fire on Mount Carmel (after the prophets of Baal cried out in vain; 1 Kings 18), the writers of the Bible delight in showing the power of



Voices from Church History

"Just as at the beginning God called things into being by His word, so by His word He will in the course of the ages bring into being the new heaven and the new earth, in which the tabernacle of God shall be among men."²

—Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)



Voices from the Church

"The God of the Bible in the very first chapter is not some abstract 'unmoved mover,' some spirit impossible to define, some ground of all beings, some mystical experience. He has personality and dares to disclose himself in words that human beings understand. Right through the whole Bible, that picture of God constantly recurs. However great or transcendent he is, he is a talking God."³

—D. A. Carson

God over against idolatry. In Psalm 115:3-5, we read: “Our God is in heaven and does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.”

The contrast is clear. God is spirit. He has no physical mouth, and yet He speaks. The idols, on the other hand, are physical. They have mouths but are silent. God alone has authority. God is the God who speaks.



How does our belief that God has spoken affect our view of Scripture? The world we live in? Our day-to-day behavior?

2. The God who speaks is merciful to reveal Himself to us (Ex. 3:2-6).

In Exodus 3:2-6, we are given a glimpse of how God revealed Himself to Moses in the form of a burning bush.

² Then the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire within a bush. As Moses looked, he saw that the bush was on fire but was not consumed. ³ So Moses thought: I must go over and look at this remarkable sight. Why isn't the bush burning up?

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called out to him from the bush, “Moses, Moses!”

“Here I am,” he answered.

⁵ “Do not come closer,” He said. “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ Then He continued, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

This account shows us that mercy is at the heart of God’s revelation to us. Notice who initiated the conversation. God is the One who came to Moses. He mercifully revealed Himself and then identified Himself as the God of Moses’ forefathers.

Humans have no right to demand an audience with God. God is not accountable to us; we are accountable to Him. God would have been fully just and righteous to create



Voices from Church History

“You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”⁴

—Augustine (354–430)

this world and leave it to natural processes, never to intervene, never to communicate with His human creatures, and never to involve Himself with our human plight. There is nothing about our existence that forces God to be a God who reveals Himself.

God was under no obligation to pull back the curtain and let us see aspects of His character and evidences of His power. He could have spoken the world into existence and never spoken again, leaving us in ignorance about our Creator and our purpose.

Here we see the good news of the gospel! The gospel is the story of a God who issues a call to helpless sinners. In our blindness and deafness, we are imprisoned by our own sinfulness. We cannot see the goodness of God until He gives us new eyes. We cannot hear the voice of God until He opens our ears. Like Helen Keller, we struggle to make sense of the world around us—why we are here and where we are going.

But God—out of sheer grace—chose to enter our world of darkness through the Person of Jesus Christ. John 1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (v. 1). And then, “The Word became flesh and took up residence among us” (v. 14). Jesus is God’s Word to us, breaking through our dark, silent prison and saying, “Let there be light!” (“Life was in Him, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it” [vv. 4-5].) In His perfect life and sacrificial death, Jesus revealed God to us. He showed us God’s character. He demonstrated the love at the heart of the Father’s authority.

God created us out of mercy. He has spoken to us out of mercy. He became one of us out of His mercy. And He calls us to Himself out of His mercy. Just as Anne Sullivan broke through to Helen, the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of our heart so we can see His goodness and His glory and respond with gratitude.

3. The God who speaks gives us tasks (Gen. 1:27-30).

If it is true that God has spoken, then there is nothing greater we can do than listen to what our Creator has said.



What might be some of the reasons people don’t want to believe that God has spoken?



Voices from Church History

“No real faith was ever wrought in man by his own thoughts and imaginations; he must receive the gospel as a revelation from God, or he cannot receive it at all.”⁵

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

Once we recognize the authority of the God who speaks and the mercy from which He speaks, we are then responsible to lovingly obey God's commands. The command has been issued. What will our response be?

In Genesis 1:27-30, God told the first humans, Adam and Eve, what He expected of them.

²⁷ So God created man in His own image;

He created him in the image of God;

He created them male and female.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth."²⁹ God also said, "Look, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the surface of the entire earth and every tree whose fruit contains seed. This food will be for you,³⁰ for all the wildlife of the earth, for every bird of the sky, and for every creature that crawls on the earth—everything having the breath of life in it. I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

Notice the progression again: God created (authority). Then He blessed (mercy). Finally, He gave tasks. Out of His authority, God created Adam and Eve. Out of His mercy, He blessed them. Then God's mercy led to His tasking Adam and Eve with cultivating His good creation.



Why do you think it is important that we understand this progression? What might happen if we seek to understand the task apart from God's blessing?

Too many times, we get the order backwards. We begin with the tasks of the Christian life and seek to receive God's blessing as a result of our obedience. But the gospel turns these expectations upside-down. God first blesses His children. Only then does He task them with ruling wisely over the earth.

This pattern is seen in other places in Scripture. God first delivered the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and then gave them the law on Mount Sinai. In the New Testament, Christ died to save us from our sins and rose again to new life, and then He reminded us of His authority as He commissioned us to take the gospel to all nations.

When we begin with the task rather than the blessing, we cut ourselves off from the very power that is necessary to fulfill the tasks God has given us. The blessing of the gospel—the gift of undeserved grace—should motivate and drive our obedience. As we embrace the gospel, the gospel then empowers our love for God and for our neighbor.

When we begin with our obedience instead of God's blessing, we invert the gospel. We begin to think we can somehow put God in our debt: If we do enough good works, God will bless us. This is humanity's futile attempt to keep control. We'd rather think that God owes us. As long as we think someone owes us, we maintain a sense of control.

Grace, in contrast, is scary! When we come to understand that fulfilling our task is made possible only by God's initial blessing of grace, then there is nothing God can't ask of us, nothing He owes us. We owe Him everything—our very lives.

Voices from the Church

"Religion operates on the principle of 'I obey—therefore I am accepted by God.' The basic operating principle of the gospel is 'I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ—therefore I obey.'"⁶

—Tim Keller

Conclusion

After Anne Sullivan communicated with Helen Keller, she taught her to communicate with others. Anne did not speak to Helen just to keep her company. Anne saw Helen's potential for communication. Helen later became an author and activist. The power of that initial communication led to places no one would have imagined.

God does not speak to us so we might keep Him company or merely be friends. He speaks to us, lavishes His grace upon us, so we might get to work fulfilling all He has called us to do. The God who speaks also gives tasks. God communicates His commands and then breathes His Spirit into our hearts, enabling us to learn, live, and love.

Has God spoken to you through His Word in the past few months? What blessings have you received from God in the past few months? What tasks has God presented to you as a result of these blessings?



Prayer of Response

*"Lord Jesus Christ, Fill me with your Spirit, that I may be full of His presence. I am blind—send Him to make me see; dark—let Him say, 'Let there be light!' May His comforts cheer me in my sorrows, His strength sustain me in my trials, His blessings revive me in my weariness, His presence render me a fruitful tree of holiness, His might establish me in peace and joy, His incitements make me ceaseless in prayer, His animation kindle in me undying devotion."*⁷

—Puritan prayer

Session 1: Respond in Your Life

The God Who Speaks

Blessed to Bless

In this week's lesson, we saw that God blessed Adam and Eve and then gave them the responsibility to cultivate and create culture (Gen. 1:27-30). God spoke to them with the intention that His blessing would spread through them to the world.

A. J. Jacobs made headlines when he decided to follow every rule in the Bible as literally as possible. He stopped shaving. He threw out any clothes with mixed fibers. He began playing a 10-string harp. He changed his diet. The outcome was a book called *The Year of Living Biblically*.

Obviously, Jacobs' practice was a gimmick, driven by a desire to show that the Bible is just a collection of archaic rules. But Jacobs was both right and wrong. He was right to understand that if indeed God has spoken through the Bible, Jacobs' life must be radically different. He was wrong to miss the bigger purpose of God's revelation.

God hasn't spoken to us so that we can take up strange habits and be the oddball in a crowd. God's revelation has a redemptive purpose. In his book *God Has Spoken*, J. I. Packer asks why God has chosen to speak to us: "The truly staggering answer which the Bible gives to this question is that God's purpose in revelation is to make friends with us."⁸ God's purpose is relationship, not rules. And if God's purpose in speaking to us is relationship, then the way we speak to others should have a redemptive purpose as well.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- How should hearing from God motivate us to share the gospel of Jesus with others?
- What are some character flaws and sins you need to let go of in order to hear God more clearly and to speak of His love more effectively?
- How does God's gracious revelation lead to missional engagement in your life?

God Is Not Hiding

Seeing

2



Romans 1:20: “For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made...”

An interesting paradox. God’s *invisible* attributes have been clearly *seen*? How so? One way we “see” things that we actually can’t see is by noticing their effects. What does wind look like, for instance? We don’t know. We can’t see the wind itself, but we can certainly see its effects. We can see it in the trees, the dust, and the empty swings on a playground.

The Bible teaches that God has made His presence known through the created order of the world. We call this “general revelation.” We can’t see God in the general revelation of creation, but we can certainly see His effects.

We might see His “eternal power” in the majesty of the mountains or the roaring of the sea or the expanse of space photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope. We might see His “divine nature” in the pull our hearts feel toward something beyond ourselves upon witnessing a glorious sunset or paying special attention to the way winter gives way to spring. None of these natural “witnesses” are divine, and we ought never trade the Giver for one of His gifts, but these effects are meant to draw us to the cause—God Himself, to whom is due all glory and honor and worship and praise.

This week, we will explore the Bible’s special revelation of God’s general revelation. Prepare your heart now to receive God’s Word with gladness. Pray that He would help you love Him more deeply as you wonder at His wonders in creation.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- What does creation say about our Creator?
- What are some dangers in the idea that God reveals Himself through His creation?
- When do you most lose sight of God’s presence?

Session 2: Ready Your Heart

God Is Not Hiding

God Wants Glory

Why did God create the world, knowing ahead of time that Adam and Eve would sin? The answer to this difficult question goes back to God's ultimate aim: to glorify Himself. In *The Explicit Gospel*, Matt Chandler shows how central God's glory is to the story line of the Bible:

"For the sake of his name, God did not destroy Israel in the desert (Ezek. 20:5-9). God saves men for his name's sake (Ps. 106:8). Pharaoh's heart was hardened for the glory of God (Ex. 14:4,18)...Israel became great and powerful among the nations because God was 'making himself a name' (2 Sam. 7:23). God did not destroy Israel when it deserved to be destroyed, because he did not want his name blasphemed among the nations (Isa. 48:9-11)...Jesus's life and ministry was about the glory of God (John 7:18; 17:4). You and I are saved to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:3-6)."¹

As it pertains to general revelation, Psalm 19:1 tells us, "The heavens declare the glory of God." So what we learn from the special revelation of the Bible is that God created the world to provide the general revelation of His glory.

Although we may never understand the mind of God in allowing Adam and Eve to disobey Him, we know through the lens of the Bible's story of redemption that God decided that His glory would be best demonstrated through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel gives God the glory He wants in a way that man never sinning doesn't.

PR Pause and Reflect

- How does it affect your faith, your perspective, and your sense of security to believe that God's ultimate goal is His own glory?
- In what ways do the heavens proclaim the glory of God?

God Is Not Hiding

The God Who Reveals Himself Through Creation



In the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey plays Truman Burbank, a generally cheerful insurance adjuster in a cozy island town whose days run like clockwork—until the day a stage light falls out of the heavens and crashes near his car. As Truman begins paying attention to the world around him, he discovers little by little that he is the unwitting star of a reality television show. Looking back through his life and at the world around him, he sees the clues to reality were there all along.

The Truman Show is just a movie, of course, but it is still a good metaphor for how billions of people live their lives in this world every day. They go about their routines, sometimes suspecting the world around them is trying to tell them something about itself and what's outside of it but failing over and over again to put those clues together. Meanwhile, billions of other people see the signs in daily life (the sun's rising, the sea's swelling, the changing of the seasons, the clockwork of the solar system, the intricacies of DNA) as if they are peeks behind the stage. The world is telling us something; we just know it! It's telling us something about itself, about us, and about what's behind it all.

But what? What is it saying?



What are some of the hints and clues we see in creation that point us to the existence of a Creator? Conversely, what are some of the aspects of creation that cause some people to believe that no Creator exists?

According to the Bible, the world around us is testifying to all within it that there is a Creator. Furthermore, the world around us is telling us what the Creator is like, and it is telling us something of His plans. We call this reality **general revelation** because it refers to the general way God reveals Himself to people everywhere.

In this lesson, we will see that God has created the world for our good and His glory. By observing God’s handiwork in creation, we gain awareness of His existence, His attributes, and His benevolent intentions. Our response to God’s general revelation should be celebration of His kindness in giving us creation as a signpost that points us to Him, the source of lasting joy.

1. God reveals His existence through creation (Ps. 19:1-6).

One of the most direct references to general revelation in Scripture is Psalm 19:1-6.

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky proclaims the work of His hands.*
- ² Day after day they pour out speech;
night after night they communicate knowledge.*
- ³ There is no speech; there are no words;
their voice is not heard.*
- ⁴ Their message has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun.*
- ⁵ It is like a groom coming from the bridal chamber;
it rejoices like an athlete running a course.*
- ⁶ It rises from one end of the heavens
and circles to their other end;
nothing is hidden from its heat.*

According to this passage, the created world is constantly saying something about its Creator—or more accurately, the Creator is constantly saying something about Himself through His created world. The picture we receive from the psalmist is of a world that acts as a loudspeaker, a stage, and an art gallery—all pointing to God’s glory. The sky proclaims that all this work has a Designer’s hands behind it.

The sense we receive in verses 1-2 is of continual revelation. Creation never presses “pause” on its proclaiming that it is an effect, not a cause, and that it has an Originator.

Verse 3 can be difficult to sort out, but the context of the passage gives us two most likely interpretations. The first is that despite the nonstop speech and communication, some people simply ignore it as if it doesn’t exist; the voice is not



Voices from Church History

“The voices of visible creation...are equally clear to everyone...giving everyone the one message, that they were made by someone and do not exist of themselves.”²

—Diodore of Tarsus
(ca. A.D. 380)

heard. Nevertheless, they cannot say they were not told, only that they did not listen.

? Think about the ways people attempt to guard themselves from God's revelation. What are some of the most common ways we try to hide from God's voice? What are some of the common ways we try to drown it out?

The second possible interpretation of Psalm 19:3 is simply that David is noting the nature of general revelation, which is to say, it is not a speech that comes in audible voice or literal words. The communication and knowledge is proclaimed, but not in the way direct, special revelation is. A watch tells us it has a watchmaker, but not in the same way as does shaking the watchmaker's hand and hearing his voice say, "I made that."

Verse 4 tells us that the "message has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." In other words, no place is absent general revelation. Nature's "music" points us to look for the Conductor. Nature's beauty points us to look for the Artist. The vastness of the Sahara Desert and the Arctic tundra and the mighty oceans, in making us feel small and vulnerable, point us to God, the strong Tower.



Voices from Church History

"The heavens show forth the glory of God' not by speaking in a voice audible to sensible ears but by manifesting to us through their own greatness the power of the Creator, and when we make comments about their beauty, we give glory to their Maker."³

—John of Damascus
(ca. 650-750)



Voices from Church History

"God's speech in nature is not to be confused with the notion of a talking cosmos, as by those who insist that nature speaks, and that we must therefore hear what nature says as if nature were the voice of God. 'Hear God!' is the biblical message, not 'Listen to nature!' Nature is God's created order, and in nature God presents himself."⁴

—Carl F. H. Henry
(1913-2003)

2. God reveals His attributes through creation (Rom. 1:20).

Suppose you came home to find a package with this note attached: "These are the personal effects of your twin brother Joe, recently deceased." Once you got over the shock of discovering you had a twin brother you never knew about, you'd open the package and look at the contents, hoping they might tell you something about this brother.

If the package contained a leather jacket, a set of brass knuckles, and some cigarettes, that wouldn't tell you everything about your brother, but it would certainly give you a general impression, wouldn't it? And if the package contained instead a set of watercolor paints, a beret, and a tin of organic breath mints, that would give you an entirely different impression, wouldn't it? The package's existence would tell you that you had a brother, but the package's *contents* would tell you a bit about him.

In the same way, the created world tells us there is a God, and it tells us some general things about Him. By seeing the general revelation of "the heavens" and the rest of the world, we can get a sense of God's glory, the sum of His attributes.

What knowledge of God's character do we gain by looking at creation?

In Romans 1:20, Paul writes:

²⁰ For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made. As a result, people are without excuse.

In this passage, Paul teaches that general revelation does not tell us everything there is to know about God, nor can we hear the specific gospel message of salvation in the declarations of the heavens. Still, enough is communicated that "people are without excuse." Paul says the visible world reveals God's invisible attributes, namely, His "eternal power and divine nature."

We see God's eternal power revealed through the vastness of the cosmos and through the mighty forces at work in nature. The expanse of space or the unfathomable depths of the ocean ought to humble mankind. The same is true of an eruption of a volcano or the strength of a tsunami. These shows of power give us an otherworldly and overwhelming sense of being in the presence of the divine Being. As Matt Chandler has said, "Nobody stands at the base of the Rocky Mountains and says, 'Remember that time I benched 300 pounds in high school?'"




Voices from Church History


"In all things visible, clear reminders of the Benefactor grip us."⁵

—Basil of Caesarea
(ca. 330–379)

What does the complexity and variety of nature tell us about God?

How is God’s “divine nature” revealed through what we see? Because we are creatures made in God’s image, we have innate senses and compulsions that point us to the reality of God’s divine nature. Of course, we are not divine ourselves, and after the fall of mankind, the image of God in us is obscured and broken. Still, we can see that mankind’s generally innate sense of justice and fairness, compulsion to create, ability to express and experience love, and frequent appeals to conscience all point away from our being the evolved result of a random electric current in a primordial goop.

 If God is revealing Himself through creation and created things, what might the implications of this be on our own creativity?

 Name some of God’s attributes revealed in the Bible. How might some of these be communicated in the visible world? Where and how do we see them proclaimed in nature, including in general human experience?

3. God reveals His intentions through creation (Acts 14:15-17).

In Acts 14, Barnabas and Paul are in Lystra when a priest of Zeus begins to lead a crowd in making sacrifices to them. Barnabas and Paul interrupt the proceedings:

¹⁵ “Men! Why are you doing these things? We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them. ¹⁶ In past generations He allowed all the nations to go their own way, ¹⁷ although He did not leave Himself without a witness, since He did what is good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and satisfying your hearts with food and happiness.”

What did Barnabas and Paul want the people of Lystra to know? As the pagan demand for more sacrifices to a dead god continued, Barnabas and Paul desperately wanted these people to know the good news that Jesus has made the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, and He did so to honor the will of a Heavenly Father who had been far better to the unsaved people of Lystra than Zeus had been. The missionaries pointed to the evidence: “You have a witness that this is true!” they cried. “He has given you rain and harvest and good food and happiness.”

 What does the description of Paul and Barnabas’ actions in Acts 14:11-18 tell us about evangelistic motives, demeanor, strategy, and message?

When we look at the world around us, we recognize that this place is broken but there is pleasure to be had. This is the concept of “common grace,” which we also see in Matthew 5:45: “For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

God intends for the happiness we experience in marriage, parenting, and other good gifts to point us back to Him. The gifts people enjoy in this life lead to the Giver. Yet not everyone has eyes to see. When Thanksgiving rolls around, families who do not acknowledge God sit around the table and share things they are thankful for. I always want to know: To whom are you thankful? To whom are you giving thanks for a healthy family? The very impulse to “be thankful” points to a Giver who is due our thanksgiving.

The general revelation we receive in the created world evinces the Giver’s fingerprints everywhere. And these tell us something of His intentions. We cannot receive the gospel message in general revelation, but we can certainly see its echoes. Things like the metamorphosis of the butterfly can help us illustrate Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection—and ours in response. Even the cycle of the seasons—from the death of winter to the newness of spring—helps us see the imprint of the gospel.

Conclusion

The Reformers thought of the world as a grand theater in which God showcases His glory. One thing we must say about this theater, of course, is that it is not itself the story but the stage for the story. Like a good stage set, it tells us something of the story before the players even enter and begin their lines. But it is the script that really reveals.

Thankfully, while God does communicate His presence, His attributes, and His intentions through the gift of general revelation, He wants to be even clearer than that.

What are some other general revelation “signposts” we find in creation that illustrate the gospel of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection? Why is it wrong to think that “experiencing God” in nature is enough? How will the truth of general revelation help or otherwise affect your mission to be a witness to the gospel of Jesus?

Voices from the Church

“The created realm (creation) is a spectacular theater that serves as the cosmic matrix in which God’s saving and judging glory can be revealed. God’s glory is so grand that no less a stage than the universe—all that is or was and will be, across space and through time—is necessary for the unfolding of this all-encompassing drama.”⁶

—James M. Hamilton Jr.

God Is Not Hiding

God's Goodness

In this lesson, we learned about how Barnabas and Paul were so disturbed by the “ministry” of the priest of Zeus in Lystra that they couldn’t help but interrupt (Acts 14:11-18): “Men! Why are you doing these things? We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.”

We learn three things from this incident about God’s mission through Paul and Barnabas:

1. Paul and Barnabas were grieved by the idolatry of the lost. They were so moved and disturbed that they tore their robes and shouted. This helps us see the passion of the missionaries for the gospel and for the lost, and it helps us see what they thought the stakes were.
2. Paul and Barnabas were confident in the gospel. They did not preach their own goodness, and in fact, they made it a point to deny the projections of divinity cast upon them. Instead, the missionaries proclaimed the good news.
3. Paul and Barnabas made it a point to point to God’s goodness and love. The gospel message is also about God’s holiness, His justice, and His wrath, but the context for Christ’s substituting Himself in our place to measure up to holiness, satisfy justice, and absorb the wrath is that “God loved the world” (John 3:16).

P&R Pause and Reflect

- Do you have a heart for those lost in idolatry and sinful behaviors like Barnabas and Paul did? If not, pray that God will give you one.
- How can you show someone this week the goodness of God in a way that “advertises” the gospel?

God Is Not Mute

Complete

3

Perhaps the most well-known instruction on Scripture in Scripture is Paul's word to his protégé Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

We know that if God had not given us His words in the Bible, we would not be complete and equipped for every good work. If all He had given us was His general revelation found in creation, we would be like treasure hunters following a map with no X marking the spot.

Notice in Paul's words the progression taken to get to "complete, equipped for every good work." He starts by saying the Bible is "profitable for teaching." What greater profit is there than to be exposed to the unsearchable riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus?

Then he says the Bible is good for "rebuking." Once we hear the gospel of Jesus, then we are rebuked for the sin that Jesus died for and commanded us to repent of. Then comes "correcting." After we repent of our sin, there are still bad ideas and ignorant assumptions to be relieved of. This is something the Bible above all other sources of wisdom is best suited for. Then comes "training in righteousness," in which the grace revealed in the Bible empowers us to follow Jesus and become more like Him.

All that the special revelation of the Bible does works powerfully as the Spirit's means of sanctification in our lives so that we might be presented before God on the day of judgment as "complete."



Pause and Reflect

- What does the special revelation of the Bible say about God and His intentions?
- What might be the difference between "rebuking" and "correcting"?
- If the Bible is truly the Word of God, what should be our response to it?

Session 3: Ready Your Heart

God Is Not Mute

Glorious Love

“The Bible is God’s love letter to you.” “Jesus would have died for you if you had been the only one alive to die for.”

These statements are, on the surface, true. But they fail to represent the real point God aims to get across in both the Bible as a whole and the good news of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection in particular.

While the “love letter” statement tries to convey the vital truth that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), classifying the points of Scripture this way can be dangerously misleading. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, what we really see is that God’s chief concern is for His own namesake, His own renown, His own glory.

Consider Paul’s words in Colossians 1:17-18: “He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together. He is also the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything.”

The subtle danger in focusing on the Bible as God’s “love letter” to us or believing that Jesus would have died for us if we’d been the only ones is a self-centered discipleship that leads us away from the supremacy and preeminence of Jesus Christ. The Bible is *for* us, but it’s not ultimately *about* us. Characterizing it or reading it in a self-focused way might lead us to believe that we are entitled to God’s love. But we don’t deserve God’s love, and God doesn’t owe us a single thing but wrath, and God has no need for anything.

These truths make the love of God given to us in Jesus Christy that much more astonishing.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- What are some specific ways we make ourselves the center of the Bible’s story?
- Why is it not wrong for God to make His own glory His main goal?
- What are some ways the gospel message glorifies God?

God Is Not Mute

The God Who Reveals Himself Through His Word



Last week we considered general revelation—the way in which God reveals Himself to us through His creation. A wristwatch reveals something about the watchmaker: he has a keen eye and an expert hand. But whatever the watch tells us about its maker has to be deduced. And looking at the watch doesn't tell us some of the most critical things about the watchmaker—his name, for instance.

Thankfully, God has not left us to deduce all we need to know from His general revelation in creation alone. He

also gets straight to the point by providing what we call **special revelation**. Special revelation is different from general revelation because it refers to the way God reveals specific things about Himself and His plan for the created world—including us—in His written Word. The general revelation of creation is reflecting God's glory, but in the special revelation of the Bible, God is proclaiming His glory Himself.


1. God is the Author of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This short passage reveals to us a few things about itself and every other verse in the Bible. First, it tells us that every word of Scripture comes from God Himself, that they are “inspired” by the Holy Spirit. But what does this sort of inspiration mean?


When we say God inspired men to write the Bible, we don't mean it in the same way that a man may write a poem because he was inspired by a beautiful woman or a waterfall. The inspiration that the Holy Spirit provided in revealing the Word of God was direct, not indirect.

Also, the inspiration that the Spirit provided in the revelation of the Word of God did not turn the human authors into automatic dictation machines. They weren't possessed—at least not in the sense of losing control over their own faculties. God used men to write the Bible, but He did so without overriding their personalities.

 **What does the truth that God chose not to override the personalities of the Bible's authors say about our own personalities? In what ways can God use our circumstances and personalities in our proclamation of His truth?**

Second Timothy 3:16-17 also tells us something else. Because all Scripture is authored by God, all Scripture has authority over us.

The words “complete” and “every” mean there is nothing necessary for us to know that the Bible lacks to show. And since the Bible's help for us in these areas is comprehensive and exclusive, it is therefore authoritative. We should neither need nor want to look outside of the Bible to find out what God deems as “need to know” knowledge. And because the Bible is authoritative in this way, we don't need experiential wisdom to authenticate it or supplement it.

 **In what ways might Christians be tempted to supplement the Bible's authority with something else? How can we demonstrate our belief that the Bible is sufficient to guide our lives?**



Voices from Church History

B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) explained the difference between general revelation and special revelation in the sense that the former is natural—nature speaking for God to “man as man”—and that the latter is *supernatural*—God speaking for Himself to “man as sinner.”¹

In other words, in the special revelation of Scripture, God speaks directly and specifically.



Voices from Church History

“Each sacred writer was by God specially formed, endowed, educated, providentially conditioned, and then supplied with knowledge naturally, supernaturally, or spiritually conveyed, so that he, and he alone, could, and freely would, produce his allotted part.”²

—Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield (19th century)

In recent years, we've seen a number of books chronicling near-death experiences and visits to heaven and back. Depending on your perspective, these recollections are delightfully encouraging or dubious and discard-worthy.

But we can observe in the popularity of “visiting heaven books” a troubling sentiment about the Bible. Setting aside for the moment whether the stories in those books actually happened and the extra-biblical innovation some of them reveal, it appears that for many Christians those books “prove” the truth of the Scriptures. “See?” many say, “The Bible is true after all! This person went to heaven and back.”

But we don't need people outside the Bible to tell us that. The words inside the Bible tell us that quite plainly. Similarly, the excitement generated by these books, as if they somehow authenticate the Christian worldview and the narrative of the gospel, can reveal a lack of confidence in the Bible itself, which is authenticated and authoritative all on its own. The Bible doesn't need our fantastic experiences to verify it. It is the very Word of God from the very breath of God.

While the Bible is a message *for* us, it is ultimately a message *about* God. All that God does in the great history of redemption He does chiefly for His own renown.



Do you agree with the statement “In all God does, His first aim is to glorify Himself”? Why or why not? What are some ways that God's glorifying Himself is a benefit to us?

2. God clearly reveals His expectations for humanity (Ps. 19:7-11).

*⁷ The instruction of the LORD is perfect,
renewing one's life;
the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy,
making the inexperienced wise.*

*⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right,
making the heart glad;
the command of the LORD is radiant,
making the eyes light up.*

*⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are reliable
and altogether righteous.*

Because God is the Author of Scripture, we can be sure that it is:

1. Inerrant—In all that it affirms and denies, it is without error.
2. Infallible—It is entirely trustworthy and reliable.
3. Sufficient—It tells us all that God has decided we ought to know.
4. Powerful—The words of the Bible create order and save lives.
5. Perspicuous—On matters of eternal life or death importance, it is abundantly clear and easy to comprehend.

¹⁰ *They are more desirable than gold—
than an abundance of pure gold;
and sweeter than honey,
which comes from the honeycomb.*

¹¹ *In addition, Your servant is warned by them;
there is great reward in keeping them.*

Just like any author wants to be interpreted correctly, God expects His people to desire His Word and to properly interpret it by putting into practice all He commands.

We worship the God who interrupts us when we're trying to mind our own business; He tells us His name, His plan, and His complete set of instructions on what to do with them. The great I AM is not content to be discerned; He wants to be known.

God does not want us to fumble around in the shadows, trying to figure out the meaning of life. He tells us where we stand in relation to Him (sinners deserving wrath), how we got there (through Adam's sin, which we both inherit and embrace), and best of all, how we get out of it into a right standing with Him (through Christ's sinlessness, culminating in His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection). Thanks be to God that He does not expect us to piece these expectations together solely through the changing of the seasons or the pervasive injustice in the world or the metamorphosis of a butterfly! He tells us straight out.

But David goes further. In Psalm 19:7-11, he not only speaks of the reality of God's expectations in His declarations, he speaks of their *quality*. God's revelation is good for "renewing one's life" (v. 7), "making the heart glad" (v. 8), and "making the eyes light up." They are "more desirable than gold" and "sweeter than honey" (v. 10).



In what ways can God's instructions make the heart glad? In what ways can God's commandments make our eyes light up?

A popular allegory often used to illustrate how mankind "knows" things is Plato's cave. Plato reasoned that life for us is like living in a cave one's whole life, mistaking the shadows on the wall cast by a fire as reality. We simply grasp at and scrutinize the forms of reality (the shadows), remaining largely blind to true reality (the fire and life outside the cave). This sounds somewhat similar to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror..."

Without the special revelation of Scripture, then, we are like the "inexperienced" of Psalm 19:7, fumbling about in Plato's cave. We see the shadows in general revelation, which are proof enough of a greater reality. But thanks to God's special revelation, we are turned to the fire and our "eyes light up." We are moved from

indistinct vision to the radiance of God’s commandment, which ultimately reveals to us the Light of the world, Jesus Christ.



Reread Psalm 19:11. How is there great reward in keeping God’s commandments? How does your answer relate to the truth that we are saved by faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8-9)?

3. God reveals His plan for redeeming the world and bringing glory to Christ (Luke 24:25-27).

Many of us are not used to thinking of God’s commandments—and Scripture in general—as “sweeter than honey,” something that is delicious. Even if we can reckon with the idea of loving God’s law, we may have trouble figuring out how not to think of it in the context of a religious duty or a “chore chart” (something followed but not particularly enjoyed in my home!). But the Psalms speak of God’s children delighting in God’s law. How in the world do we get to that perspective?

The way we find God’s commands delightful and His instruction tasty like honey is by moving beyond what God requires of us and seeing what He has accomplished Himself. As we learned before, God Himself is the Hero of God’s story, and as it pertains to His desire to be known, He Himself bridges the communication gap we are unable to span ourselves. He does this first by speaking into the shadows of general revelation in the special revelation of Scripture. He does this savingly by speaking in the special revelation of Scripture the great announcement of the gospel of Jesus.

The point of special revelation, then, is to reveal the gospel. God’s written Word points to Jesus, the Living Word. Don’t take my word for it, however. Listen to Jesus Himself in Luke 24:

²⁵ He said to them, “How unwise and slow you are to believe in your hearts all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Didn’t the Messiah have to suffer these things and enter into His glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

After Jesus was raised from the dead, He caught up with a couple of disciples making a trek to Emmaus. He sidled up alongside them and preached the greatest Christ-centered, expository sermon from the Old Testament ever preached in the history of the world. “The point of all that,” Jesus essentially said, pointing to the varied wonders of what we call the Old Testament, “is Me.”



Reflecting on Jesus' revelation to His traveling companions in Luke 24:25-27, what might have been some of "the things concerning Himself" He showed them from the Old Testament?

Christ's footprints are throughout the sand of the Old Testament. And the further light of the New Testament helps us see Him most clearly. All of the stories the Bible tells tell the unified story of how God glorifies Himself through the redemption of sinners who are made right with Him through the saving work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Coming back to Psalm 19 and the delicious honey we find in God's commands, knowing the "big story" running through and connecting all the words of the Bible, we can see how we might move from duty to delight. When we receive the illumination of Jesus Christ, our eyes light up with the grace of God found in Him who is the radiance of the Father's glory (Heb. 1:3). When we receive Jesus as the Bread of life, we will taste and see that God is good. And when we are set free from our sins and the curse of the law's demands, we are finally free to obey God with joy and gratitude, delighting in His law rather than buckling under its weight.

Psalm 19:11 tells us there is "great reward" in keeping God's commands. We can't do that. But Jesus can and did. And there is great reward in Christ's righteousness for all who will repent of their sin, trust in His work, and thereby receive His goodness credited to their account.

Conclusion

Through His Word, God specifies His intentions for humanity and His expectations of us. He shows us how the glory of Christ is the purpose of world history. We are to respond to God's special revelation by aligning ourselves with God's expressed will.

What part of your life is working counter to God's intentions?

Does God's voice have a presence in your life? Are you instructed, rebuked, and corrected by the Word?

Is it possible to revere the Word and not read it? How might one discipline oneself to spend unhurried time in God's Word?

Resources to help you study the Bible in a more gospel-centered way:

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart

For the Love of God, two volumes by D. A. Carson

The Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones

Read the Bible for Life by George Guthrie

Session 3: Respond in Your Life

God Is Not Mute

Being Before Doing

As we seek to apply the Bible to life, it is important that we don't view the Scripture as an "instruction manual." The Bible does contain instructions, of course—lots of them. And we are supposed to obey without qualification or hesitation. But we will find our pursuit of obedience frustrating and exhausting if we don't put first things first.

The Bible is not as concerned with what we're to *do* as it is with *who* we're to *be*. For example, in His teaching, Jesus equates lust with adultery and malice with murder. Why? Because God's plan is not just for better people but *new* people. He wants to change us from the inside out. It's not our behavior He's after first but our insidest insides.

Consider this: "A good tree can't produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit" (Matt. 7:18). Real holiness is given to you through your belief in Jesus Christ, who alone is perfectly and eternally holy. It is His sacrifice that is satisfying and most pleasing to God. It is His righteousness, culminating in His atoning work on the cross, that is the propitiation for the wrath of God.

Knowing that we are already declared righteous before God because we have received Christ's righteousness credited to our account through our faith alone helps us obey God with confidence, with gratitude, with joy, and with freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:18: "We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit."

PR Pause and Reflect

- How does 2 Corinthians 3:18 say that we are changed?
- What are the practical implications of this truth for how we use the Bible?
- Why is it important to remember that being (who we are) precedes doing (what we do) when it comes to obeying God's commands?



UNIT

2

Our Fallen Response to God's Word

Writer

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In God We Trust?

Approaching God's Word

4

Genesis 1–2 is the beginning of God's self-revelation to us, and these chapters show that He is the primary "Actor" in this divine drama.

When coming to the text of Scripture, it is important to remember that our first and primary question should always be directed God-ward—"What does this text tell us about God?" Often what God is saying about Himself in the text relates to a secondary question—"What does this text say about humanity in general and me in particular?" Only after discovering what God is saying about Himself and about us as human beings do we then move on to ask, "What is this text asking me to do in light of these truths about God and myself?"

What Genesis 1–2 tells us about God: eternal, all-powerful, good, benevolent, trustworthy. What Genesis 1–2 tells us about humanity before the fall: image-bearers, worshipers, good. What Genesis 1–2 tells us to do: trust, worship, obey, steward God's creation.

Asking the right questions of the Word of God is critical. This is far different from what we will see unfold in Genesis 3 in this week's lesson, where the serpent twisted the words of God and led Adam and Eve to question the authority of the Word of God over their lives. God exercises His authority through His Word. We obey God by submitting to His will.

Prayer: "Lord...I am far gone from original righteousness...Through [Jesus] may I return to thee, listen to thee, trust in thee, delight in thy law, obey thee, be upheld by thee."¹

P&R Pause and Reflect

- How will you implement this approach of asking the right questions of God's Word?
- Pray that God would help you submit to the authority of His Word and recognize when you're beginning to question Him.

In God We Trust?

Promises, Promises

The real focus of temptations in life is the promise behind them. The serpent promised Eve knowledge that would bring greater happiness. But behind this deceptive promise of temptation was a devastating and ugly consequence.

That's always the case with temptations. It has been said that "sin will take you farther than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay, and cost you more than you wanted to pay!" Such was the case for Adam and Eve when they failed to trust and obey God, and so it is with us.

Pastor John Piper offers helpful counsel when it comes to battling this form of "unbelief": "Our chief enemy is the lie that says *sin* will make our future happier. Our chief weapon is the Truth that says God will make our future happier. And faith is the victory that overcomes the lie, because faith is satisfied with God."²

After God brought Adam and Eve out of their hiding, He promised to deal with the serpent and with their sin. It was a promise that set God's redemptive purposes into motion, which will culminate with a destroyed serpent and a newly restored peace. Over 2,000 years ago, God kept His promise by sending His Son to bear the consequences of our sin at the cross. There will come a day when all of creation will be renewed because of the gospel, and there will be no more pain, no more death, and no more curse.

Prayer: "O Lord...When I feel the serpent at my heel may I remember him whose heel was bruised, but who, when bruised, broke the devil's head."³

P&R Pause and Reflect

- Which promise are you going to believe today?
- How has God shown Himself faithful to keep His promises in your life?
- Whom will you tell of His faithfulness today?

In God We Trust?

God's Perfect Word and His Imperfect People



“In God We Trust.” This phrase was adopted as the national motto of the United States of America in 1956. Trust is a serious matter. But do we really trust God?

In the fall of 2008, the unthinkable happened: the “almighty dollar” (as many have dubbed it) was weakened through a series of economic trends. As the value of the dollar shrunk, it became apparent that many people had been trusting in *it* rather than God. The motto turned out to be mere words with little truth behind them.

? What do the words “In God We Trust” mean to you? Do those words accurately reflect the way you live? Why or why not?

The issue of trust goes to the heart of what it means to be human. As we have seen in previous lessons, God has revealed Himself through what He has created as well as through His Word. God is not silent. He has spoken to us. But are we listening? And when we encounter His Word, do we really trust Him?

Because God created by His words and because all that He created was “very good,” we know that *God’s words are the source of all that is good. Therefore, God’s words can and must be trusted.* Initially, God’s image-bearers, Adam and Eve, enjoyed a relationship with God as obedient worshippers trusting His good words. “In God We Trust” would have been an appropriate motto for those early days in the garden of Eden.

In this lesson, we will see how our fallen nature came from and results in the mishandling of God’s special revelation—His Word. Our goal is to believe the trustworthiness of God and His Word so that we might grow in worship and obedience through learning to handle God’s Word faithfully. By looking at the

actions of Adam and Eve, we can see our own propensity to rebel against God's written Word by putting our trust in ourselves rather than in God.

1. God's Word is trustworthy, but we question it (Gen. 3:1-2).

¹ Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden?'"

² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden."

Genesis 3:1 introduces a serpent and describes him as "the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made." Whenever we approach Scripture, our primary question should be "What does this text say about God?" This particular passage makes clear that the serpent was among the creatures that God made. We know from Genesis 1–2 that God made everything "good," meaning that everything originally functioned according to His purposes.

But this serpent entered the garden in order to disrupt the peace of God's creation. At this point, the Bible does not tell us where the serpent came from or who he is. What we do know is that the serpent is crafty. Theologian D. A. Carson notes that the word "crafty" entails "sneakiness...[or] someone who is wise and prudent." Part of the "goodness" God bestowed on the being later identified as "Satan" (literally, "the accuser") is wisdom or prudence. Carson expands: "The serpent, Satan, was crowned with more prudence than all the other creatures, but in his rebelling the prudence became craftiness; the very same virtue that was such a strength became twisted into a vice."⁵



What are some examples of how man has taken things that God made "good" and used them for evil purposes? What are some virtues that Satan twists into vices?

The serpent displayed his twisted wisdom by subtly attacking God's word and maligning God's character. Then the serpent spoke: "Did God really say?" The irony of this scene is heavy. The Bible began with God speaking all things into existence—



Voices from Church History

"Our thought habits [regarding God's Word] are those of the scientist, not those of the worshipper. We are more likely to explain than to adore."⁴

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

including the serpent. And now the serpent that was created by the word of God has questioned the authority of the One whose word created him! With this subtle question, he usurped the clearly communicated word of God.

“Did *God* really say?” the serpent asked. Some people do not obey God’s Word because they do not believe it to be *God’s* Word. They reject the Word because they see no authority behind it.

Imagine this scene: A group of schoolchildren are enjoying recess time on the playground. The teacher sits quietly on the bench near the swing set. When it’s time to go back to class, she tells one of the students to call the others inside. If the children are having a wonderful time, some of them will question the source of their classmate’s message: “Who said we have to go in?” they ask. “The teacher!” comes the reply. “Did the teacher really say we have to leave now? How do we know?” they persist. Their desire to remain on the playground will cause them to question the authority of the messenger.

In a similar manner, the serpent planted a seed of doubt in Eve’s mind regarding the source of authority: “Did *God* really say that?” He knew that if she sufficiently doubted the source of the command, she would disregard it.



What are some reasons people deny the truth that God inspired the Scriptures? Is it possible that some of us deny God’s authorship of Scripture because we do not want Scripture to have authority in our lives?

God’s word had not restricted Adam and Eve uncaringly; rather, His command offered amazingly abundant choices. In the garden, there was only one solitary possibility for disobedience. But it was at the point of the restriction that the serpent made his crafty attack. Eve’s response was at least initially hopeful, for she recognized the serpent’s subtle error and corrected him. She also maintained the source of the command as being from God. But we see in her correction something about ourselves.

2. God’s Word is true, but we belittle it (Gen. 3:2-5).

² *The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. ³ But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.’”*

⁴ *“No! You will not die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ “In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

As this conversation unfolded, Eve’s own doubts emerged in the form of her adding a harsh exaggeration to God’s word: “But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You must not eat it *or touch it*, or you will die’” (v. 3). Eve belittled God’s word by adding to it. Her addition to the word of God misrepresented God as a harsh taskmaster.

Some skeptics belittle God’s Word by *subtracting* from it. The third president of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson, created his own “Bible.” He described the process: “We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus...I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter...as diamonds in a dunghill.”⁷

Others reduce God’s Word by *adding* to it. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, added to God’s Word by claiming that an angel had given him *The Book of Mormon*.

These are extreme examples, but the error of both is the same as that of Eve. Her posture toward the word of God demonstrated her desire for independence. D. A. Carson writes: “A lot of people think that ‘sin’ is: just breaking a rule. What is at stake here is something deeper, bigger, sadder, uglier, more heinous. It is a revolution. It makes me god and thus de-gods God.”⁸



In what ways has our culture’s obsession with “being true to ourselves” or “being independent” affected our view of God and His Word?

When Satan can’t get us to undermine God’s Word through outright unbelief, he will try to get us to undermine it through misplaced trust. That’s why Eve began to speak authoritative words herself—words that painted God in a negative light. From this account we learn that one of the great dangers we face when handling the Word of God is the temptation to place ourselves in the seat of authority over it.

The encounter between the serpent and Eve continued as the serpent then openly defied God’s word: “No! You will not die,” the serpent said to the woman. “In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (vv. 4-5).



Voices from Church History

“God gives the man and the woman all creation to enjoy, with but one exception—everything they have and see is from Him—and even the one prohibition is explained by means of the penalty attached to it. But Satan suggests that God is essentially prohibitive, that He is not good, that He does not wish the very best of all worlds for His creatures.”⁶

—James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000)

Satan showed his cards. What started as subtle skepticism became outright rebellion. Satan implied that God is a liar. Furthermore, he undermined the character of God by leading Adam and Eve to believe that God was withholding goodness from them. As with most lies, there is an attempt to justify based on elements of truth.

Our postmodern infatuation with entertainment and social media highlights our desire to make our own truth claims. Today there is even a Web site that uses public opinion through voting to settle personal disputes about truth claims. The site boasts, “Have a disagreement with someone? Settle it here!” “Everything’s Debatable.” “Just upload your 30 second argument and let the viewers decide who’s right.” Just imagine for a moment how crazy things might be if God’s Word came to us with this kind of Web site as its medium! But then again, whenever we allow either personal preference or public opinion to shape our understanding of truth, we are standing in judgment over God in much the same way.

 How might both public opinion and personal preference negatively shape your understanding of God and His Word?

 In what way is questioning God’s Word different from asking questions of God’s Word?

It is always wrong to try to stand in judgment over God and His clearly revealed Word. When we begin to question and belittle God’s Word, we are already in fact disobeying God’s Word.

“The true hypocrite is the one who ceases to perceive his deception, the one who lies with sincerity.”⁹

—André Gide

3. God’s Word is authoritative, but we disobey it (Gen. 3:6).

⁶ Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

God had spoken very plainly to Adam in Genesis 2:17 regarding this prohibited tree. Often men will begin to play the “blame game”—“It was Eve’s fault!” We see this unfold in Genesis 3:12. Adam blamed Eve, and in some sense he also blamed God: “The woman *You* gave to be with me...” In 1 Timothy 2:14, it seems that Paul affirmed that it was Eve who was deceived. But Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 11:3 that man is

the head, or steward, over the woman. God had given the commandment to Adam—*before* Eve was taken from his side. It was Adam’s responsibility to teach and protect Eve. But when we look at Genesis 3:6, we find Adam standing nearby—silent and complicit.

We know that the serpent, Adam, and Eve all transgressed God’s command. Each of them was guilty of disobeying God’s word, as are we. And every time we choose to disobey, we are proclaiming to God that we are wiser than He is. We are “crafty” and we deserve condemnation.

What happened in the garden is replayed in our own lives every single day. Often when we are tempted, we wonder, *Did God really say?* Our answer to that question is illustrative of whom we really trust and whom we really worship. When Adam and Eve questioned, belittled, and disobeyed God’s word, they went from being awe-struck worshippers of God to being brazen idolaters worshiping themselves.

Worship is at stake in how we approach the Word of God. How we handle and respond to God’s Word will show whom we worship.



What are some examples of times in your life when you were forced to answer the question “Did God really say?” How did you respond to the temptation to distrust God?

Conclusion

There is only one person who lived a life that demonstrated without reservation the truth of this statement: “In God I trust.” He too was put to the test like Adam and Eve.

God placed Adam into a lush garden with endless possibilities to worship and obey and only one prohibition. God drove Jesus into the wilderness where He had no food, water, or shelter. And there Jesus came face to face with that crafty serpent who used the same game plan—to get Jesus to question, belittle, and disobey God’s Word.

How did Jesus respond? By affirming His trust in God’s Word. By uplifting the true intent of God’s Word. By obeying God’s Word. There in the wilderness, Jesus succeeded where Adam and Eve had failed. Jesus perfectly fulfilled God’s purpose *for us*—He worshiped and obeyed the Father by trusting His Word. And when Jesus laid down His life as an atoning sacrifice for us on the cross, His perfect worship and obedience were made available to us.

Whom are you trusting in today? Self? Public opinion? Jesus? How does the fall into sin affect the mission that God tasked Adam and Eve with? How does our sin keep us as Christians from carrying out the responsibilities God has entrusted to us? How do you plan to apply what you have learned in your daily approach to God’s Word?

Session 4: Respond in Your Life

In God We Trust?

Trust and Obey

“Did God really say?” Every time we are tempted, we answer the same question that was posed to Eve in Genesis 3:1. The serpent may be crafty, but he’s not very creative. He only has one trick up his sleeve—convince us to distrust and disobey God.

As we saw in this week’s lesson, neither Eve nor Adam handled the serpent’s question well. God had given them clear instructions with regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In reality though, it wasn’t really about the fruit—it never is. It’s about what God has said and done. It’s about whether or not you trust God.

If you find yourself in the bushes of sin and despair this week, it is because you have believed a lie. If you have believed a lie, it’s because you have distrusted God. And if your life is marked more by the skeptical questions of a slimy serpent than by the powerful and truthful words of the God who made you, then you need to once more hear the voice of God: “_____, where are you?” If you hear God’s voice calling your name, come out of the bushes! Return to Him, and learn once more what it means to trust and obey.

Prayer: “My Father, in a world of created changeable things, Christ and his Word alone remain unshaken...I am one with him by the Word on his part, and by faith on mine...form my heart according to the Word, according to the image of thy Son, So shall Christ the Word, and his Word, be my strength and comfort.”¹⁰

P&R Pause and Reflect

- In what ways have you been tempted to distrust God in the past?
- How might your trust and obedience be used by God to bring others out of the bushes?

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1. DEEP, BUT NOT DRY.

We believe it's best to expect a lot out of those who attend a small group or Sunday School class. We don't need to go only as deep as the least knowledgeable person in the group. When a child is still on baby food, a family doesn't stop eating steak and potatoes. As leaders, we want to provide a feast and let people draw the sustenance they need. We may have to "cut up the meat" for new believers and make sure the truth is accessible. But the key is to put the biblical ingredients together and provide the meal. The important thing is that everyone has been fed and is sufficiently nourished when we finish.

2. CHRIST-CENTERED.

We don't want a week to go by without Jesus being present in our lessons. God is the primary Actor in the grand narrative of Scripture, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the climax of this story. We hope to approach the Old Testament in a way that follows the model of Jesus on the road to Emmaus: all the Scriptures testify to Christ. We will approach New Testament ethics and commands by seeing them as implications that flow from the gospel announcement of Christ crucified and raised.

3. STORY-FOCUSED.

Being Christ-centered naturally brings our focus to the overarching story that the Bible tells in four parts: Creation / Fall / Redemption / Restoration. By focusing on the grand narrative of Scripture, we hope that this curriculum will help us connect the dots and think as Christians formed by the great story that tells the truth about our world. We also believe this approach will provide a hope-filled outlook on our world because of the future God has promised.

4. MISSION-DRIVEN.

Telling the story of the Bible is impossible without leading to mission, as the gospel reveals the heart of our missionary God and His desire to save people of every tribe, tongue, and nation. The goal is not to fill our heads with theological truth but to fuel our hearts with passion to join God on His mission to bring people to Himself. Keeping a focus on how the gospel leads us to mission is a crucial aspect of how we apply the Bible to our lives.