

## § 2. Doctrine of Revelation

### Lecture 2

#### More Functions of General Revelation

We have been talking about God's general revelation in nature and conscience. I pointed out that general revelation serves a number of functions which we want to continue to talk about today.

1. The first function of general revelation is *to reveal God's glory*. In the marvelous universe around us we see the majesty and the greatness of God revealed.
2. As a result of this, Paul says that *this renders all persons culpable before God*. All persons are responsible to recognize God's existence based on his revelation in nature and his moral law and its demand upon them in light of the moral law implanted on their hearts.

So if we turn to Romans 1:20 we read, "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Then over in Romans 2:15 Paul says that the Gentiles who do not have the law "show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them."

So all persons are held responsible for believing in an eternal, powerful Creator of the universe, and for recognizing the demands of his implanted moral law upon their lives.

The question would be then: does this provide information about God that is sufficient for a person to come not merely to a knowledge *that* God exists but to come to a saving knowledge of God? Is it possible through general revelation to come to know God in a redemptive way and not simply as the Creator before whom one stands morally fallen and guilty?

This is a matter of considerable controversy. For example, Jack Cottrell, in his book *What the Bible Says about God the Creator*, argues that the purpose of general revelation is to provide information about God's grandeur and power. It is not to provide redemptive knowledge of God, and therefore general revelation is not a source of redemptive knowledge. This is what Cottrell writes on pages 342 and following of his book:

The Bible nowhere teaches that a person can be saved from sin and condemnation through his response to the light of creation alone. General revelation simply does not give us any knowledge of redemption or of the redeemer. . . . Does this mean [people] are condemned on account of their ignorance? Not at all. This would be very unjust. True, they do not know the Gospel, but they are not condemned for not knowing the Gospel. Why then are they condemned? Because they do know

general revelation and have not lived up to it. They do know God, and they do know that they should honor him as God and give him thanks, but they do not do this. This is why they are condemned. Not because of what they are ignorant of, but because of what they know. That they have not heard the Gospel is besides the point. When a person is condemned for his abuse of general revelation, the condemnation is just. . . . General revelation grows solely out of the work of creation. It is a revelation of God as Creator, not God as Redeemer. It speaks to man as creature, not to man as sinner.<sup>1</sup> This is how it was intended to function from the beginning, and this is how it still functions. From the beginning man has been able to respond either positively or negatively to this revelation. By responding positively, man is able to avoid condemnation. By responding negatively man comes under God's just condemnation. The fact is that mankind uniformly responds negatively and thus all are without excuse. Does this mean, then, that general revelation has only a negative function? That it only damns and does not save? No, to put the question in this way is to renew the fallacy that such a revelation is not a function of creation but somehow has an intended purpose for the post-fall world. The point is that general revelation was not intended either to save (positive) or to condemn (negative). It was intended only for the positive purpose of declaring the glory of God the Creator and giving general guidance to the creature.<sup>2</sup>

So on Cottrell's view, the purpose of revelation is simply to show forth the glory and the power of the Creator. It doesn't serve a redemptive purpose. Nevertheless, if a person shuns the light of general revelation that he has and ignores God and plunges himself into immorality, he is culpable and condemned before God because of his rejection of general revelation. God will judge those who have never heard the Gospel not on the basis of what they've done with Christ but rather what they've done with general revelation. So in that sense general revelation has the effect of condemning people – leaving them condemned before God – but not saved.

At the same time, however, did you notice that Cottrell says that by responding positively to general revelation man is able to avoid condemnation. That is a very interesting admission. That puts a very different perspective on it. He says by responding positively man is able to avoid condemnation. What that would suggest is that even if no one does, in fact, access saving knowledge of God through general revelation, nevertheless they could. It is possible. One is able to avoid condemnation by responding properly to God's general revelation in nature and in conscience.

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<sup>1</sup> 5:03

<sup>2</sup> Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about God the Creator* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1983), pp. 341-346.

I want to be clear about what this means. This does not mean that a person would be saved through his own good deeds or righteous living. It would rather be that he accesses the salvation that is wrought by Christ but without having a conscious knowledge of Christ. General revelation simply serves as a channel by which he comes to a knowledge of God, and by his positive response to it, just as a positive response to the Gospel brings salvation, so here it could help this person to escape condemnation.

In fact, I think there are some reasons to think that that is possible. Look at Romans 2:7. Here again Paul is speaking to those who are apart from the Jewish law – non-Jews. In verse 7 of chapter 2 he says, “to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.” I take this to be a *bona fide* offer on God’s part. If someone will respond in a positive way to God’s general revelation in nature and conscience seeking God and his glory then God will give him eternal life. Does that mean that a person can be saved apart from Christ? No! It would simply mean that he would be saved without having a conscious knowledge of Christ. Is that possible? Clearly that is possible because that is true of Old Testament saints.<sup>3</sup> People like Abraham and Moses and King David never heard of Christ and yet obviously they were saved only through Christ’s atoning death. So the example of Old Testament believers shows us clearly that a person doesn’t have to have a conscious knowledge of Christ in order to be a beneficiary of Christ’s death.

Now you might say, “But they looked forward to Christ” or, “They looked forward to the Messiah.” While that may have been true with respect to some of the prophets, that couldn’t be said with regard to, for example, Abraham or some of the very early Jews where there weren’t yet any Messianic prophecies given at all. They were simply faithful to the revelation that God had given them.

Could this apply to people who were not Jews? Again, the Old Testament, I think, gives us the clear answer to that question. Yes. There are certain figures in the Old Testament who are non-Jews and yet who clearly have a saving relationship with God. Sometimes these are known as the Holy Pagans of the Old Testament. Whom am I thinking about here? I am thinking, for example, of Job. Job was not a Jew. He was from Uz in Chaldea. Yet if anyone in the Old Testament had a proper relationship with God it was Job. God refers to him as “my righteous servant.” Clearly Job knew God and was rightly related to him even though Job was not a Jew. Another example is this mysterious figure of Melchizedek that Abraham met and then offered sacrifices to. He was called the priest of the most high God, king of Salem. He wasn’t a Jew. He wasn’t obviously a descendant of Abraham – he met Abraham. Yet Melchizedek was a priest of God. Or in Genesis 20 we have the king of one of these small Canaanite clans, King Abimelech, to whom God speaks in a dream and God preserves him from sin. He preserves him from the sin of

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adultery, of marrying Sarah whom Abraham had lied about saying that she was his sister so that Abimelech took her to be his wife. God prevented him because God didn't want Abimelech to fall into this sin. Here we have examples of people who are non-Jews in the Old Testament that seem to be rightly related to God.

One might say, "Perhaps God offered them special revelations of a different sort." They clearly didn't have Scriptures, right? But maybe they had dreams, as Abimelech did, or special revelations. That is possible, I think. We just don't know for sure. But I think it is at least suggestive that a person who is not Jewish but who does properly respond to the revelation and the light that God has given him can thereby access a saving knowledge of God. God could then apply to him the benefits of Christ's death.

So I think what Cottrell says is correct; namely, that through a positive response to general revelation a person can avoid condemnation but, as Cottrell points out, scarcely anybody does so. The sad fact of the matter is the mass of humanity do not respond to God's general revelation in nature and conscience and so find themselves condemned before God. This is what Paul indicates in Romans 1:20ff. Three times in the passage he says God gave them up, God gave them up, God gave them up. He then describes how they were filled with all manner of immorality and disobedience. Then in verse 32 he says, "Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them." So the picture here is not a cheery one. I think that we could say that through general revelation it is possible to avoid condemnation. No one is going to hell simply because he was born at a time and place in history where he failed to hear the Gospel.<sup>4</sup> There is salvation accessible for that person. But unfortunately few apparently seem to actually access salvation in that way.

So my second point here in the functions of general revelation is to say that it does render people culpable before God.

3. But then thirdly *it can provide access to salvation*. Not that it does provide salvation to many, but there is access there at least. There is fairness on God's part.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I guess it would follow that even today where so many have heard of Christ but many have not they could avoid condemnation through response to the revelation that they have received in nature. Is that a true statement?

*Dr. Craig:* I think that is true. That would be my view. It seems to me that the switch from the old covenant to the new covenant doesn't occur instantaneously worldwide when Jesus died on the cross for example. Rather, this transformation progresses geographically as the Gospel spreads throughout the world. So people who are still living

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in, say, central China or northern Siberia where they have no access to the Gospel whatsoever in effect still find themselves in the condition that these pre-Christian persons did before Christ came. They would be judged on that sort of basis. There is probably around 15%-25% of the world's population that has yet to hear the Gospel for the first time. So there still are people that find themselves in this so to speak pre-Christian era.

*Student:* What about folks who have heard of Christ but have heard only a distorted view of Christ. Where would they fit in?

*Dr. Craig:* I think you are absolutely right. In Latin America, for example, the Christo-Paganism that is dominant in many of these Latin countries – a kind of syncretism between Roman Catholicism and pre-Christian pagan superstition – is a distorted and twisted image of Christ. When a person rejects that he is not really rejecting the Gospel. He is not rejecting Christ but something else. So I would say in cases like that God is loving, he is fair, and we can trust him to judge that person on the basis of his response to the light that he did have. At least these persons have the light of general revelation in nature and conscience.

*Student:* What you are describing sounds a lot like the Roman Catholic doctrine of implicit faith. I am not sure, now that we have the special revelation that Christ gave us when he came, that we can then compare ourselves to the Old Testament saints like Noah, Melchizedek, and the others that you have identified. Because now God has revealed himself to the world through Jesus Christ.

*Dr. Craig:* The question for us is: did that transition occur worldwide instantaneously like the flip of a switch, or is it a transition that occurs gradually as the Gospel expands geographically. It seems to me that the latter makes more sense. These persons have never heard of Christ – the ones we are talking about – so they find themselves in a situation that is not qualitatively different from the people who were chronologically prior to Christ even though, as you say, Christ has come and God has revealed himself in a special way and in the Scriptures now. But they haven't got the Scriptures, they've never heard of Christ. So at least in a qualitative sense, it seems like they are more like the people who existed before Christ came than those after.

*Student:* I hear what you are saying. I am also thinking about Romans 10 – which is further down in Romans – verse 13 where it says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Then it is addressed – “How, then, will they call on him whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him whom they have not heard?” It goes on, and the answer is “How beautiful are the feet of those who preached the good news.” That is where evangelism comes in. That is why Philip had to go and explain to

the Ethiopian eunuch what he was reading.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise it would not be necessary for Philip to have done that.

*Dr. Craig:* Remember what I said. Even if this is possible, very few do, in fact, access salvation in this way. The mass of humanity is described in Romans 1 as lost in sin and therefore, as you say, desperately in need of hearing the Gospel. The Gospel communicates the saving knowledge of God with a clarity and power that general revelation cannot do. So it will be far more effective in bringing people to salvation than just leaving them to languish in spiritual darkness with only general revelation to go by. So, yes, Romans 10 is right. They desperately need to hear the Gospel if they are going to be saved.

*Student:* I'll just close by saying it is my personal belief that if someone is responding to general revelation and they are truly seeking then God will (supernaturally if necessary) provide the special revelation of the person of Jesus Christ to them.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. You are saying that if a person were to respond positively to general revelation then God will bring him more light. He will bring him a dream or he will bring him a missionary or a Gospel tract, and if he responds to that God will bring him more light. So there are a number of different ways of dealing with the problem of the unevangelized. That would be one of them. I think we will come back to this problem later on when we talk about the problem of Christian particularism – that is to say, how can salvation be only through Christ? Isn't this some way unfair or unloving to those who never get the chance to hear about Christ? We will revisit this question.

*Student:* Would possible examples of response to general revelation leading to salvation be on Paul's second missionary journey – Acts 10. That wasn't a missionary journey but before that when Cornelius responded to what he knew, and Peter came to him. It said his family feared God and he was praying. Peter came and presented to him the Gospel. Another example might be – this was on a missionary journey – Lydia in Philippi. She heard Paul at the river. It says that she worshiped God. Then Paul explained to her the Gospel and she responded.

*Dr. Craig:* These are great examples, I think, of what earlier we were talking about. In Acts 10, living in Caesarea is this Cornelius who is a centurion, part of a Roman cohort, and yet he is described as a God-fearer. He believed in the God of Jewish monotheism but he wasn't a Christian yet. But God knew that Cornelius was someone who would respond to the Gospel and so he sends Peter to him, and lo and behold the Gospel is received and the Holy Spirit bestowed on the Gentiles. That is a perfect example of where God does exactly what the earlier questioner was imagining.

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*Student:* It seems to me in reading Romans 1 that general revelation applies to today also because the atheist and the deniers are the evolutionists. They are denying God in that they are denying that he created all of these things. Therefore when they deny God then it follows they deny Jesus also. If they deny that God created, they are denying everything else that follows. If you deny that God created things and all the beauty of the world and all the living creatures – if he didn't create anything – then you don't go beyond that.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that is exactly right. If there is no God then obviously he doesn't have a Son. Right? So the description in Romans 1 is very apt for contemporary atheism in certain respect. Perhaps not the polytheism, but certainly in the denial of the creator, thinking that there is no Creator behind the world that we perceive.<sup>6</sup> And also, I think, in rejecting the moral law. Many naturalists would see moral obligations as just societal conventions that have been ingrained into us by parental and societal conditioning, but they are not really objective. The opening chapters of Romans, I think, are very applicable to the contemporary situation.

*Student:* I am with the earlier questioner on these revelatory instances. Sometimes missionaries will have this where they will come and see people that are completely counter-cultural and really being persecuted in their context because they have a vision of God that is different than what is going on around them. But even if you take Abraham and Melchizedek; Melchizedek, I think, is a form of theophany because it says he paid tithes to him and Hebrews tells us Melchizedek had no father, mother, no beginning of days but is like the son of God. So clearly he is something different than a human.

*Dr. Craig:* Maybe. What you are referring to is the description of Melchizedek in the book of Hebrews which is very different from what you read in Genesis. The question there, I think, is when he says, "He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life"<sup>7</sup> does he literally mean that Melchizedek is an eternal person that has existed forever? Some would say, yes, he is pre-incarnate Christ. But it just may be that what the author means is that his genealogy isn't listed in the narrative. He has no description of his beginning of days, end of life, mother, or father. It doesn't say he was "the son of . . . the son of . . . the son of." So in that case it is not what one might think with regard to his divinity.

*Student:* This may be just a slight variation but it seems to me one of the purposes of general revelation is to sort of pave the way, if you will, for accepting something. In other words, if you really ponder and you really are open and you really assess the world around us and the creation, there is a logical leading toward a Creator. It is just sort of a natural evolution if you will (sorry for the word, but); it would follow that it would have to be with the balance of life and the understanding of how fragile it is and what kind of

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<sup>6</sup> 25:07

<sup>7</sup> c.f. Hebrews 7:3

environment would be required for the world to exist and even the universe. It seems to me then the mind and the heart becomes more open to carry you to the next level or the next step. I think either through God bringing some instrument into your life or your acceptance of a Creator in your own mind you are then in discussion with, and I think open to, an understanding of salvation.

*Dr. Craig:* I don't know how I could have overlooked this point! I am almost embarrassed. Of course you are right about that! The book of Hebrews said, "He who would come to God must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him."<sup>8</sup> So one of the purposes of general revelation is to fulfill that first condition: believe that God exists. So you are right. This is a *praeparatio evangelicum*; it is the preparation for the Gospel to make people disposed to believe the Gospel when it comes.

### **END DISCUSSION**

4. Let me just say one more thing before we close, because I like to end on the joints rather than in the middle. That is the fourth function of general revelation would be its function in *stabilizing human society*. The notion here is that God's general moral law is written on the hearts of all persons, and this serves then to allow human society to exist and function in a stable way instead of being every man for himself – a sort of mad house option. You have here a kind of mutual agreement about the worth of human persons and getting along in society and functioning well. So general revelation would also have this stabilizing effect upon human culture and society.<sup>9</sup>

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I think since China has a lot of great philosophers and it comes down to whether their conscience is one of the fear of the heavens, an abstract concept, or you can kind of divide all humanity into an obedient or rebellious conscience. So those obedient consciences will eventually seek out truth and will never reject Jesus when they hear the Gospel. But the other side will stand against it. That is why Jesus comes as a dividing factor. Then the Gospel comes basically dividing the two and allows the obedient half a tool to use as a converting and second chance and redemptive plan.

*Dr. Craig:* That is very helpful, especially with regard to this last point that I just made about stabilizing human society. In Confucianism, or pre-Communist Chinese society, there was this idea of an abstraction heaven which is a kind of vague divinity concept or something. But the problem is now in the post-Marxist era, that has been sort of lost in materialism and atheism with Marxism. When Jan and I were in Fudan University at a conference of philosophers there, the Chinese philosophers (not the Americans, the Chinese philosophers!) were saying Confucianism is dead, Marxism has nothing to offer,

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<sup>8</sup> c.f. Hebrews 11:6

<sup>9</sup> 30:17

if modern China is to go forward with a social fabric for our society that will make it function and cohere we need Christianity to provide that moral fabric for society. They said we should not be afraid to embrace this because Christianity is an indigenous Chinese religion. It has been here for centuries. They were freely advocating Christianity precisely for this fourth reason, which I thought was just mind boggling.

### **END DISCUSSION**

That completes our lesson for today. Next time we will ask the question: Is perceiving God through general revelation a matter of inferring God's existence? Is it an argument for God's existence? Or is it some sort of insight where you simply see that God exists via his revelation?<sup>10</sup>