

§ 2. Doctrine of Revelation

Lecture 3

Natural Theology and Special Revelation

We have been talking about general revelation. Last time we looked at some of the functions of general revelation. Today we want to turn to the topic of the relationship of general revelation to natural theology.

Natural theology is that branch of theology which explores justification for God's existence apart from the resources of authoritative divine revelation. Set aside what we know about God from his authoritative revelation in Scripture, for example, and what can be known about God simply on the basis of human reason alone? The project of natural theology is to construct various arguments for God's existence. The question we want to ask now is: What is the relationship between general revelation in nature and the project of nature theology of arguing for God's existence?

The question that arises in this context is: how should we understand what Paul says in Romans 1 about the knowledge of God that is available through his revelation generally in nature and in conscience? Namely, is this revelation such that it is an inference to God's existence from, for example, the order in nature or just the existence of the creation or the moral law written on our hearts and our grasp of objective moral values and duties? Do we then infer that God exists? Is there a sort of argument here that Paul is presenting? Is he endorsing, in other words, the project of natural theology in Romans 1? Or, rather, is the knowledge of God that is available through general revelation more like perception? That is to say, as you look at nature you just sort of see that it was created by God. It is not an inference to God's existence. It is not an argument. It is more like an insight. You look at nature, or you sense the moral law within, and you simply perceive in that God's existence and goodness.

It seems to me that either of these is a defensible interpretation of Romans 1. But let me point out some reasons to think that this is not just a perception but that this is, in fact, an inference. Notice that Paul says in Romans 1:20, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." What Paul says in the Greek here is that these invisible things are clearly perceived through reflection on the things that have been made. It is by reflecting on the creation that one does perceive that this is created by God. This would suggest that indeed there is a sort of inference involved here. We do perceive God in creation, but it is through rational reflection upon creation that God's existence is perceived.

Moreover, it is very interesting that this passage in Romans 1 bears a great resemblance to Greek philosophical thought about God and how God can be known through creation.

The Greek in this passage is among the clearest examples of classical Greek to be found in the New Testament which suggests that it bears the imprint of Hellenistic or Greek philosophy. For example, the word *aidios* for God's eternal nature – when it speaks of God's eternal nature being perceived – is a Greek word which is found only two times in the entire New Testament.¹ It is not part of the normal vocabulary that you would find there. Similarly, the word *theotes*, which signifies the divine nature, – when it says his eternal nature has been clearly perceived – is a word which is found only here in the New Testament. It is unique. It is a Greek word referring to deity – the nature or essence of God.

Moreover this passage in Romans 1 bears a clear resemblance to an inter-testamental Hellenistic Jewish work called *The Wisdom of Solomon*. This is not part of the Bible. It is not actually written by Solomon. It is an inter-testamental work that is ascribed to Solomon but is in fact an example of Greek or Hellenistic Judaism that existed during the inter-testamental period prior to the advent of Jesus. I want to read to you verses 1-9 of *The Wisdom of Solomon* chapter 13. Notice the similarities between this passage and what Paul says in Romans 1:

For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if men were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is he who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator. Yet these men are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. For as they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful. Yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things.

That sounds like an echo of Romans 1 (or better, Romans 1 is an echo of this passage)! The author here speaks of how all people are without excuse for not recognizing the existence of the Creator because of his marvelous works through reflection on which one can perceive their Creator. So it is folly – it is inexcusable – to worship the works themselves or to think that these were formed by gods rather than to worship the

¹ 5:12

transcendent Creator who formed these works. In *The Wisdom of Solomon*, clearly the author is talking about a reasoned inference from the created works back to God as their Creator. It is through the creation – through his works – that one can infer that God exists and all men are responsible for making such an inference.

This would suggest that what Paul is talking about in Romans 1 may well be an inference to God as the Creator and Designer of the universe and the source of the moral law written within. So this would be an endorsement of the project of natural theology.

Moreover, look over at Acts 14:17. This is a description of Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Lystra.² The men of that city, seeing the miracles that they had wrought, think that the gods have come down from heaven. The priest of the temple of Zeus comes out to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas thinking that these are gods. What Paul says is that this is not true. Notice what he says in verse 15, "We also are men, of like nature with you, and bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." This is the Creator of the universe that they ought to turn to. Then in verse 16, "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways." This is people who had only general revelation. God had not specially revealed himself to them. They had not heard of Christ. He permitted the nations to walk in their own ways. But, in verse 17, "yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Here Paul says that the seasons and the fruitfulness of nature, God's revelation in creation, is a witness even to these Gentile nations who had not yet heard the Gospel. So he had provided evidence to them even as he had overlooked them in not yet bringing the Gospel to them.

It seems to me that we do have in Paul's thinking an endorsement of the project of natural theology; that it is quite legitimate to construct arguments and evidence for God's existence.

If that is right, what is the relationship then between general revelation and the arguments of natural theology? Clearly they are not identical. The arguments of natural theology are man-made products. They are human creations and formulations. They will need to be redone every generation as people continue to think and explore and reflect on these matters. It is not a static project that is once and for all finished. Every generation needs to reflect upon these matters in formulating good arguments for God's existence. But general revelation has been there from the beginning. General revelation, I think, is as it were the traits of the artist in his artifact. You can recognize a Rembrandt through the traits of the artist; that is, in his paintings. Similarly with other artists. Or the fingerprints of the potter that are left in the clay. God is revealed in the created world that he has

² 10:17

made. This then produces the stuff upon which human beings can reflect and formulate arguments for God's existence. So arguments for God's existence are fallible and revisable and you can feel free to reject them if you are not convinced by them. But that doesn't affect God's general revelation of himself in nature and conscience which is sufficiently clear to render all men inexcusable for not recognizing the existence of an eternal, powerful Creator and the demands of his moral law upon their hearts.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What was that reference – *The Wisdom of Solomon*?

Dr. Craig: It was *The Wisdom of Solomon* 13:1-9. I am sure you can just Google that and it will bring up a copy of it on the Internet for you to read.³ It is a fascinating passage I thought, isn't it? It is just remarkable. There are also passages in Aristotle where he reflects upon how God is revealed in the created world that just sound like Romans 1. Paul was clearly in touch here with Greek philosophy, I think, and what Greek philosophers had said about how God's existence is evident through the created world. But *The Wisdom of Solomon* is certainly a striking Jewish passage on this.

Student: I am trying to read this in Romans 1:18. It is saying, "so was uncovered the anger of God from heaven on all irreverence. The unright of men, the ones the truth and unright holding down, therefore the known of God is evident in them." So it is saying that general revelation – everybody has some degree of truth from it, and God holds you accountable for suppressing that and living it out in your life. That is the evidence. Not that everything is so plain but just what we know we are held accountable for (what we can see in it).

Dr. Craig: What he says is that it is plain. He says in verse 19, "God has shown it to them." Then in verse 20 he says, "It has been clearly perceived and therefore they are without excuse." But you are quite right in saying in verse 18 he says that people suppress this truth. In their wickedness and moral darkness they suppress this natural knowledge of God that is available through general revelation.

Student: So the eternal power is plain and the splendor is plain, but what you are held accountable for is what you are suppressing because that is proof that you know it – because you are suppressing it.

Dr. Craig: That seems right. Yes. He says that God's deity (his invisible deity) – and then he specifically names his eternal power – as being perceived in the things that have been made. Then also over in chapter 2 you get the moral law that is written on the hearts of all people as well. So you get attributes of God from creation but then also these moral attributes of God, too, from conscience. So it is a fairly significant knowledge of God, I

think, that is available through general revelation alone. The idea that you only know about God through special revelation – through the Bible or the Gospel – I think is completely foreign to the New Testament, indeed to the whole Bible, which says that there is a general revelation of God in nature as well as conscience that is available to everyone.

Student: Just a comment. I see the connection between this view of inferring God's existence from general revelation to God's desire for man to seek him out later on in Acts. I think there is a connection there where God really wants us to think and try and reach out to him and find him in that way.

Dr. Craig: Let's look at that passage in Acts 17 because it is also relevant to what I quoted from Paul in Lystra where he says, "God has not left himself without a witness." In Acts 17:22ff you have Paul's address on Mars Hill in Athens, and specifically identified in the group of listeners to him are Stoic and Epicurean philosophers – ancient Greek philosophers who have come to hear Paul!⁴ As the questioner pointed out, what he says here is in verse 24,

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything.

Here this is the God of Jewish monotheism that he is proclaiming to these Greek pagans – the God revealed in nature who has created the world. He says that he has then fixed the places that everyone should live in verse 27, "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us for 'In him we live and move and have our being.'" So Paul is saying that even to these Gentiles who haven't yet heard the Gospel there is this knowledge of God that is available. Notice again in verse 30 we have this same expression, "The times of ignorance God overlooked." He overlooked this time of ignorance, but he hasn't left himself without a witness, right? Then he says, "now he commands all men everywhere to repent," and he proclaims the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. So even during this time of ignorance, as Paul calls it, when God overlooked the sins of prior generations that had not yet received a special revelation from him he hadn't left himself without a witness. And that is the witness of general revelation that reveals God to us so that, as Paul says, every one of us is not far from him. We live and move and have our being in him, and God's hope is that we will seek him, reach out, feel for him, and perhaps find him, he says.

END DISCUSSION

Let's turn to a discussion of special revelation. In what sense is special revelation special? What do we mean by the word "special" in this context? Again, two things.

1. It means that God reveals himself more clearly than he has in general revelation.
2. It is a fuller revelation of himself to human beings.

So special revelation is given with a clarity and a fullness of the nature and purposes and plans of God than can be had through general revelation alone. Here we have greater clarity and more information about who God is.

What are the various types of special revelation? Typically, theologians will say that God's special revelation comes through his Word. It is through the Word of God as opposed to nature that God specially reveals himself. That Word can take two forms: either the living Word (Jesus Christ, who is the full revelation of God), or else Holy Scripture which is the written Word of God.

Concerning Jesus Christ as God's Word, see John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then in verse 14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." Then verse 18, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." In fact, the best manuscripts of verse 18 say, "The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." So here Jesus Christ is declared to be the Word of God, the very expression of God, in human flesh to reveal to us God's grace and truth in this fuller way than is available through general revelation.

As for the revelation of God in Holy Scripture, see 2 Timothy 3:16.⁵ Here Paul writes, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The notion there of being inspired means literally "God-breathed." Scripture is God-breathed. So it becomes God's Word to us.

So special revelation can take the form of Jesus Christ who fully reveals God the Father to mankind, but then also God's revelation in Holy Scripture.

As I say, that is usually as far as folks go with regard to special revelation. But it seems to me there is a third form that special revelation can take, and that is what I would call particular revelations. These would be revelations in dreams, visions, prophecies, and so forth. It seems to me that these fit our definition of what a revelation is. Remember that we said a revelation is the unveiling of something hidden so that it can be seen and known for what it is, or more generally, a revelation is a communication from God. Scripture, I think, abundantly testifies to the fact that God communicates to people via

⁵ 25:04

dreams, visions, prophecies, and so forth, that are not in Holy Scripture and are obviously not Jesus Christ. For an example of this, look at 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-30. Here Paul is laying down regulations for how worship should proceed in these New Testament churches when they gather together. There would be prophets who would claim to have a revelation from God and would speak in these assemblies. Paul gives some regulations here about how these prophets are to behave. 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-30 says,

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. . . . Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent.

Here Paul uses the word “revelation” to describe these New Testament prophets who communicated some word from the Lord. Paul gives advice on how these prophets are to behave. He tells the people who are sitting there to listen to them critically to weigh whether or not this really is a word from the Lord, whether or not this is a genuine revelation or prophecy.

So it seems to me that there are these particular revelations. What differentiates them from Holy Scripture is, I think, that even though God’s revelation in Scripture is special in that it is clearer, it is fuller, nevertheless it is still general in the sense of its applicability. It applies to everyone. The truths that are laid down in Scripture are applicable universally. So the revelation in Scripture is universally applicable. But these particular revelations are not universally applicable. These are made at a specific time and a specific place for the people involved there. If God, for example, gives someone like Paul a revelation to come over into Macedonia and preach the Gospel, that is a revelation given just to Paul that he is obligated to obey. That doesn’t mean that you are obligated to go to Macedonia and preach the Gospel. These particular revelations are not universally applicable but are intended just for the time and place and persons that were there and received them.⁶

These seem to be the ways in which God specially reveals himself in addition to general revelation: through his Son Jesus Christ who is the full revelation of God the Father, through his revelation in Holy Scripture, and these particular revelations through prophecies, dreams, vision, and so forth.

START DISCUSSION

Student: It seems like in the early days that you would have to have more particular emphasis on special revelation because the Scripture wasn’t written yet. So Paul, when he says “my Gospel,” he is giving them an oral tradition when he relates that. It would seem

⁶ 30:07

like that would be in use before Scripture was penned. Then afterward Scripture becomes the standard by which you test these . . .

Dr. Craig: I think you are making a very good point. You notice that I didn't address the issue whether or not these particular revelations still occur today. Our charismatic brethren believe that God does give these kinds of special words to people. Other Christians would say, I think as you did, that once the canon of Scripture was given and we had God's revelation in the New Testament that then there was no further need for these particular revelations which would have been very important prior to Scripture's being written down and widely disseminated. I am leaving that an open question at this point. I am just looking at the New Testament material on this question. It does seem to me that, at least in the New Testament period, that (and I would say in the Old as well) God on occasion did specially reveal himself in these ways whether or not he still does so today.

Student: There are so many people that are saying they are getting messages or revelations or prophesy from God based on dreams and things that they are having. What is your take on that? What is your philosophy on these types of individuals?

Dr. Craig: I think my attitude is an attitude of humility with respect to people claiming these things. The New Testament teaches that these sorts of things did occur in New Testament times. I am not convinced by the arguments that say that they've ceased. When you look at the so-called cessationist arguments, they are not very convincing, I think, to say that God doesn't do this anymore. So I feel, who am I to say that God hasn't spoken to someone in a special way? Giving them a dream or a word or something of that sort. I am not in a position to judge. I can only judge whether or not *I've* been given such a word or revelation. Of course, if this person claims to have some word from God that is contrary to Scripture – for example, I know cases of people who say, “God told me it is all right to divorce my wife and marry this other woman in the church. This is his will for me.” That is contrary to Scripture. You know then that that is this person's own subjective impression because God doesn't contradict Scripture which is the universally applicable revelation. But in other cases where someone says, for example, – you hear this all the time – “God told me to speak to this person sitting next to me on the airplane or in the restaurant, and I shared with him and this person came to Christ.” Who am I to say that God didn't do that? Maybe that was just a prompting from the Holy Spirit. Certainly, that could take place. But in other cases people do claim to have actual information from God. I just feel like I have to be open to it, but not so open-minded that my brains fall out.⁷ You are open-minded but that doesn't mean you have to be gullible about these things.

Student: I agree with you. Ephesians talks about the oneness: the one Spirit, the one God. The oneness is that all communication with God are consistent. So whether it is special revelation or it is the living Word or Scripture, they are all consistent. I don't think God is boxed in by human minds, say, you cannot go beyond what is already written. God can still work in ways beyond our understanding, but it is all consistent. It is consistent with the living Word, it is consistent with the Scripture, so everyone can, as you say, judge or discern whether it is of God or not.

Dr. Craig: Yes. I want to second what you said about the importance of discernment here. Let me just quote from 1 John 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." So we are called upon to be discerning.

Student: One support of particular revelation in the present day is the fact that many, many Muslims are coming to Christ in the Middle East. I follow this because of my interest in prophecy in the Middle East. This is from many different countries and from sources that I trust. They have visions, and they are saved. They come to Christ. They are saved just as you and I are. And they got that from a vision. Well, they don't have Scripture there – it is illegal and a threat to their life. As someone brought up earlier, in the early days we didn't have Scripture. For them we are kind of back like the early days. I think we are getting particular revelation.

Dr. Craig: Thank you. I think that does relate to what I said last week about the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant not occurring instantaneously worldwide, but it occurs as the Gospel message geographically spreads from first century Palestine throughout the world. So people such as who you mentioned are in a sense still living in this earlier period – these times of ignorance that God overlooked – where these sorts of special revelations as well as general revelation might be more important.

END DISCUSSION

Next week we will talk about Scripture. We will look at theories of the inspiration of Scripture with a view toward formulating a defensible theory of how God has inspired Holy Scripture.⁸

⁸ Total Running Time: 38:30 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)