

Function 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.

The question would be then: does general revelation 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? The book of Hebrews says, "He who would come to God must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). So one of the purposes of general revelation is to fulfill that first condition: believe that God exists. This is a *praeparatio evangelicum*; it is the preparation for the Gospel to make people disposed to believe the Gospel when it comes.

But what if due to the exigencies of history and geography, the Gospel do not come to a people? Is it possible through general revelation for them 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. 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.¹

So on Cottrell's view, the purpose of general 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

¹ Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about God the Creator* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1983), pp. 341-346.

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.

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 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. 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. 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 when there weren't yet any Messianic prophecies given at all. They were simply faithful to the revelation that God had given them.

Could this scenario also apply to people who were not Jews? Again, I think the Old Testament 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 offered sacrifices to. He was called the priest of the most high God. He wasn't a Jew. Yet Melchizedek was a priest of God. Or in Genesis 20 we have the king of one of the small Canaanite clans, King Abimelech, to whom God speaks in a dream and whom God preserves from the sin of 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." Maybe they were given dreams, as Abimelech was, or other 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.

It would follow that even today people who have never heard the Gospel could avoid condemnation through their positive response to the revelation that they have received in nature. and conscience. The switch from the old covenant to the new covenant didn't occur instantaneously worldwide when Jesus died on the cross. Rather, this transformation progresses geographically as the Gospel spreads throughout the world. So people who are still living 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 persons did before Christ came. They would be judged on the same 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.

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. There is salvation accessible for that person. But unfortunately few apparently seem to actually access salvation in that way.

3. So my third point here in the functions of general revelation is to say that *it provides 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.

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.

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 whereby you simply see that God exists via his revelation?