

4. Relation of General Revelation to Arguments for the Existence of God

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 involves an inference to God's existence from, for example, the order in nature or our grasp of objective moral values and duties? Do we 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 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 eternity is a Greek word which is found only two times in the entire New Testament. It is not part of the normal vocabulary that you would find there. Similarly, the word *theotēs*, which signifies the divine nature, 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 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.

Romans 1 sounds like 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 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. 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 in his paintings. Or the fingerprints of the potter that are left in the clay. God is revealed in the created world that he has made. This then produces the material 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.

C. Special Revelation

1. Sense of "Special"

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 less universally than he has in general revelation. Not all receive special revelation. It is for particular persons.

2. It is a fuller revelation of himself to human beings.

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.

2. Types of Special Revelation

What are the various types of special revelation? Typically, theologians focus on God's special revelation 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 fullest 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 a fuller way than is available through general revelation.

As for the revelation of God in Holy Scripture, see 2 Timothy 3:16. 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 are other forms that special revelation can take, and that is what I would call particular revelations. In the OT there are many varieties of special

revelation: e.g., casting lots, dreams and prophetic trances, theophanies, in which God is seen and heard, and the occurrence of revelatory historical events, whether miraculous or non-miraculous, often accompanied by a prophetic word. 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 dreams, visions, prophecies, and so forth, that are not part of 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.

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.

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.