

2.1 Has God Revealed Himself To Us

1. Intro

One common challenge to the Christian world view has to do with God's apparent hiddenness. How many times have we heard people say they prayed for God to help them and nothing happened? How many times have we prayed for someone to be healed or someone's suffering to decrease or for someone to come to know God and nothing seems to change?

We are told He is a loving God, all powerful. Yet, we see lots of suffering in the world. We fall on our knees, crying out to him for help. And, yet, most of us don't literally hear a comforting voice telling us everything is going to be OK. For physical beings such as ourselves - who rely on our senses to engage with the world around us - a being who is unable to be touched, heard, smelled, or seen is easy for us to miss.

But, God has revealed himself to us since the beginning. And continues to do so.

How, though, has God revealed Himself? I'd wager that most of us have never had a direct encounter with God in the same way Abraham, Jacob or Moses did. So, how does God reveal Himself to us today?

The answer to this question lies in what is called the doctrine of Revelation.

2. What Is Revelation?

Revelation can be defined as:

"an uncovering, a bringing to light of that which had been previously wholly hidden or only obscurely seen."

To me this definition conjures up images of a magician on a stage with something on a table, covered by a black cloth. We can vaguely make out a shape, and we see something moving underneath it. Then, when the magician whips the black curtain from the table in front of him he shows us what has been moving underneath it.

3. How Has God Revealed Himself To Us?

We can say that God has revealed Himself to us through two different means - general revelation and special revelation.

Using our analogy from above, when the object under the curtain is moving, we can come to certain conclusions about it. Maybe we see its ears or hear it make a noise. And, even if we can figure out that it's a pig because we hear it oink, we still don't know what color it is, what breed it is, or if it's male or female. This is kind of like general revelation. We can know *that* God exists but we're still missing a lot of information.

For that, we need to have the curtain removed. That's special revelation. We get to see and know the details of the thing behind the curtain.

3.1 General Revelation

General revelation is so named because it is general in two senses.

First, it is general in the sense that it is generally available to mankind as a whole. This is a revelation which is universal. Everybody is a recipient of God's general revelation. Everyone has access to it.

Second, it is also general in that it provides merely general knowledge or information about God, not specific information about God. For example, we can know that God exists, but not know that He is a Trinity. We can know that there is a Creator, but not that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Through it, we get a general monotheism – common to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and deists even

3.1.1 Forms of General Revelation

General revelation is given to us in a few different forms. The first, and arguably the most obvious, is nature. If we look at the world around us like a detective looks at a crime scene to try and determine who the suspect is, we can easily see that God has left his fingerprints all over the proverbial crime scene. *And* footprints. *And* dozens of other calling cards.

Rom 1,20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

After our discussion on God's attributes, we will get a bit into what is called natural theology. We will look at some of the philosophical arguments for God's existence and many of those arguments use scientific evidence to point to God. For example, the scientific evidence points to a universe that came into existence out of nothing. Things don't just pop into existence unless something makes them pop into existence. In other words, the Big Bang needed a Big Banger.

This is an argument that is available to everyone. I didn't need to go into Scripture to give evidence for God. It's generally available.

I've also come to consider human nature as part of God's general revelation. When you look at the things humans do, and you compare them to how some animals perform similar functions, the differences between humans and animals are drastic. For example, humans aren't the only creatures that build structures. But, only humans build things to such a dramatic scale or intentionally add beauty to the things they build purely for the sake of creativity. We should look at what humans do compared to other creatures and realize just how different we are. This should lead us to see that we are a special creation that required a creator. And, that creator is God.

I will dig a lot deeper on this idea when we talk about the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of man, but for now, let's just say that just like we can learn a lot about a sculptor by the statues they create, we can learn about God through humanity - his greatest creation.

The third way God has revealed Himself to everyone is through our conscience. We can understand the moral law that God has planted within all of us.

Rom 2,14-18 **14**For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. **15**They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them **16**on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. **17**But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God **18**and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

In this passage, Paul talks about the non-Jews (Gentiles) who do not have the law, but seem to know what the basics of the law requires. Even without knowing the Ten Commandments, people have a basic understanding of right and wrong.

A common statement made is how similar all religions are so it doesn't matter which one you follow. On the surface, they *do* all seem similar. Their moral codes are similar to a certain degree; don't steal, don't murder, be honest. They seem similar because all of humanity has God's general revelation written within them. But, the deeper you look at them, the more differences will bubble up. And, you see they aren't very similar at all.

Because people have this basic law written on their hearts they are held morally responsible for acknowledging the existence of God, so also all persons everywhere are held responsible for the demands of God's moral law upon them.

I would also argue that a third way God has used general revelation is by creating a God-shaped hole in all of us. We are wired for worship. We all end up worshiping something.

In a recent IPSOS survey of 26 nations across the globe, only 15-20% of the people in the world are atheist^[1]. So 80-85% of people feel there is a higher power of some sort out there somewhere.

During a period known as the Enlightenment – which was largely focused on promoting reason and philosophy over religion - the people in France revolted and overthrew the church.

Ironically, after the Catholic church had been banned in France, some of the people formed what would come to be known as the Cult of Reason. They took over the churches, removed the religious imagery, put up their own imagery and sayings, and would hold services with their own liturgy. Rather than images of saints and of Jesus, they had busts of great philosophers. So, they supplanted one church with another.

But, people even have a tendency to get religious over non-spiritual matters. Think of how people who get swept up in social causes or their politics act. They have their prophets, their preachers, and their saviors. They have their holy texts. They gather in large numbers when their saviors speak. And, if any of their members dares to question or say something that goes against official dogma, they are ostracized. Sounds pretty religious don't it?

This isn't to disparage those who feel the need to have their voices be heard. I'm just pointing out how religious in nature it is and how it can be the thing we worship if we're not careful.

Even athiests have become religious. In the UK, Athiest churches have started popping up - where they get together on Sundays, sing songs (usually pop songs) talk about moral ideals, and relish being in community with one another.

We are made with a God-sized hole because it needs to be filled by God. We get thirsty because our body lacks fluid. And the thing that makes us not be thirsty anymore is by drinking something. We get lonely because we lack companionship. The thing that stops the lonlines is when we find friendship or love. We get hungry because our body needs food. So, too, do we yearn for God. And, just like many of us fill the need for food with ice cream or Doritos rather than good foods, many fill their God-sized hole with other religions - spiritual in nature or otherwise.

3.1.2 Functions of General Revelation

General revelation serves a number of purposes. First, it show's God's glory.

Psa 19,1-4 1TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. 2Day to day pours out

speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. **3**There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. **4**Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

The more we learn about the universe around us and about life itself, the more in awe we should become of the world we live in. and the Creator who made it.

Next, general revelation serves to render people morally culpable before God.

Rom 1,19-20 **19**For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20**For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

General revelation serves to remove any excuse that people might have for their unbelief in God's existence. It renders them culpable or responsible before God for acknowledging his existence. No one can say "well, nobody told *me* about God. Or what the rules were." True, we can't know *all* of God's requirements through general revelation. But, general revelation points us in the direction to start looking for them,

Rom 2,15-16 **15**They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them **16**on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Here Paul says that people will be judged on the basis of their innate knowledge of God's moral law. God's moral law is written on our hearts. So there will be no excuse that people might have before God in not knowing that he exists or that they are guilty of breaking His law.

It may not seem fair - that people who have never heard of Jesus will be held accountable. But, think about this. We all have that internal compass and we know pretty well what is right and what is wrong. A lot of times, we even make up our own personal code to live by. I come up with rules for myself to live by all the time. I'll never lie to my kids. I'll only have 2 sodas a day. I'll only eat one Oreo a week. And, even when I make up my own rules, I can't keep them! I always find excuses to break the rules I made up for myself. So, if I was my own judge, I would be guilty. By the Measure of the Law I made up.

My point is, if we are honest with ourselves, we would find ourselves guilty all the time of breaking our own rules. This should make us see the futility in trying to think we can go it on our own. And, that we need someone to pay the debt that we can't pay.

Can people be saved through general revelation? Well, God is fair. If you can lead a morally perfect life, then you can stand before God guiltless. There is fairness on God's part. It's just that none of us can do it.

Thirdly, general revelation functions in stabilizing human society. 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. We all have built into us a kind of mutual agreement about the worth of human persons and that getting along in society and functioning well works better than every man or woman for themselves.

3.2 Special Revelation (or The Word of God)

While general revelation serves to point us in God's direction, there is much about God we can't know unless He tells us directly. For instance, you wouldn't know that God is a trinity unless He revealed it to us. And you wouldn't know the details of the End Times unless they were revealed to us directly.

The Word Of God As A Voice

Special revelation is given to us by words - God's words. The Word of God has been given to us in a few different ways.

The first way God revealed Himself was through His voice. God decrees things in Genesis 1 and powerful things happen. God speaking directly to people is all throughout Scripture – to Adam and Eve, Moses, Abraham, the kings, the prophets, etc, etc. At Jesus' baptism God, the Father spoke from heaven and people heard it ([Mat 3.17](#)).

The Word Of God Through Prophets

The Word of God also comes as Speech through human lips. God speaks through prophets [Deu 18,18-20](#); [Jer 1.9](#); [Jer 1.7](#); see also [Exo 4.12](#); [Num 22.38](#); [1Sa 15.3](#), [1Sa 15.18](#), [1Sa 18.20](#); [1Sa 20.36](#); [2Ch 20.20](#) ; [2Ch 25,15-16](#); [Isa 30,12-14](#); [Jer 6,10-12](#); [Jer 36,29-30](#)

Saying you are a prophet is a serious thing. Anyone who claimed to be speaking for the Lord but who had not received a message from him was severely punished ([Eze 13,1-7](#); [Deu 18,20-22](#))

In recent years, a kind of cultural tradition has been handed down in the church (maybe mostly in the American churches) where we use the phrase "God told me" or "God said to me" when we are telling people about certain feelings or promptings we may have had. It's especially egregious when people say "God told me to tell *you*". Greg Koukl at Stand To Reason has done a lot of great work on this topic, so I won't rehash that here.

I want to caution us to take these phrases out of our speech. When you say things like that you are talking like you are a prophet. Have a look in the Scripture at what happens when people say they speak on behalf of the Lord and they really aren't. It doesn't usually turn out well for them.

I'm not denying the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Nor am I someone who thinks the spiritual gifts have ceased. I'm just asking us to be cautious about the language we use.

In the Scriptures, God's word spoken through human lips is just as authoritative as God's words of personal address. So, we need to be very careful with that notion.

The Word Of God Through Jesus Christ

By far, the most significant way God has revealed Himself to us is through the person of Jesus Christ.

Rev 19.13 **13**He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

Joh 1.1 **1**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Heb 1,1-3 **1**Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, **2**but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. **3**He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,

Over and over in the Scripture, Jesus is referred to as the living Word of God. We will make the case for why Jesus is God later. For now, let's just accept that He is God in the flesh. So, everything Jesus said was the literal words of God. God was speaking directly to the people around Him.

Most of the content we will cover in this class will be based on the written word of God. But, the truth is, Christianity isn't based on the Bible. If all of the copies of the Bible, and all of the manuscripts we have suddenly vanished, Christianity would still be true. Because Christianity is based off of the historical events recorded *in* the pages of the Bible. History happens whether it's recorded or not. And whether it was recorded or not, God still came in the flesh 2000 years ago, lived amongst them for over 30 years, and spoke His words to them.

Now, of course, if we didn't have the written word of God in 2024, we wouldn't know with as great a detail the words and acts of Jesus. We no longer have access to Him in person.

The Word Of God In Written Form

So, that leads us to the final way that God has revealed Himself to us directly and that is through written words. When we hear the phrase "the Word of God" the first thing that probably comes to mind is the Bible. This is the Word of God in Written Form. This is the form most accessible to us today. Jesus isn't here in person, all the apostles are gone. But, we have everything we need to find salvation and live a life pleasing to the Lord in the pages of Scripture.

The first written word of God was the Ten Commandments.

Exo 31.18 18And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Exo 32.16 16The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

Exo 34.1 1The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.

Exo 34.28 28So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

Moses wrote the law from the beginning of the formation of the nation of Israel. He also wrote on other mediums - not just stone. This book, which Moses wrote, was then deposited by the side of the ark of the covenant:

Deu 31,24-26 24When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, **25**Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, **26**"Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you.

Further additions were made to this book of God's words.

Jos 24.26 26And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

Isa 30.8 8And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

Jer 30.2 2"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you.

In the New Testament, Jesus promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance the words which he, Jesus, had spoken.

Joh 14.26 26But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Paul can say that the very words he writes to the Corinthians are "a command of the Lord"

1Co 14.37 37If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

2.2.1 Benefits Of The Written Word

Having God's Word in written form has a number of benefits. First, it's a much more accurate preservation method for future generations compared to oral tradition. Can you imagine having to memorize the entire Bible? I definitely think we should spend more time memorizing more Scripture. But, if we were forced to memorize it, think how much of it would be inaccessible to us until we did.

You think people argue about translations now? Think about what would happen if nobody got to see the other person's version of Scripture because it only existed in their minds. At least if it's written down, you can both look at the same words and talk about them. But, if they only exist in your mind, who knows whose is correct?

Second, if it's written down, we can constantly review it for study and learning. It's easy for us to refer back to passages we haven't read in a while.

And finally, it makes it more accessible to people. Otherwise, the only one's who would have access to it would be the ones who had it memorized. And we all commanded by God to know

Scripture. If we didn't have it to read, we would have to trust that the person giving us the teaching is telling us what God really said.

Another thing we are commanded to do is to test the spirits. That means the parishioners are supposed to review what the teacher or pastor says and compare it with what God's Word says. And, if you didn't have Scripture written down, that would be pretty tough. But, since it's written down, any one of us can say "see. it's written right here".

Along those same lines, since we have God's written word, we can read it whenever we want. Imagine if we had to wait to be around someone who had it memorized. I couldn't get God's Word whenever I felt like it - when I wake up, on my drive into work, before I go to bed. I would only get it at the appointed time that was most convenient for the memorizer.

Of all the forms of the Word of God, the focus of our study in the systematic theology parts is God's Word in written form, meaning the Bible. This is the form of God's Word that is available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion. It tells us about and points us to the Word of God as a person, namely Jesus Christ, whom we do not now have present in bodily form on earth. Thus we are no longer able to observe and imitate his life and teachings firsthand. So, we have to rely on the eyewitness testimony of those who were there and have written it down.

Followup

We started this lesson asking if God had revealed himself. The answer to that is an emphatic yes. In a quite a few ways. He has revealed himself in the creation (through scientific evidence and philosophical arguments), through the moral code written in all of us, through the God-shaped hole we all have in our lives that we desire to fill, and directly through His words.

This lesson was meant as just an overview of the two categories of revelation. In regards to general revelation, we'll get into the specifics of that after we discuss God's attributes. We'll present arguments for the existence of God as well as examine some of the scientific data that points to His existence.

We'll spend the next several lessons talking about special revelation in the form of God's written Word; meaning the Bible. Because much of what we will be discussing comes from the Bible, I think it's important that we establish why we should trust it, how it came together, and how we ought to study it. More on that next time.



1. Boyon, Nicolas. Global Religions 2023: Beliefs Across The World. 2023, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023->

