SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: REVELATION AND GOD
Week Two: General Revelation

Introduction

This is the second session in a twelve week study of the doctrines of revelation and God.

Our topic for this week is God’s general revelation of himself through creation.

What’s the Big Idea?

We worship a God who wants to be known and who reveals himself to his creatures.

God’s “word” = “his powerful, authoritative self-expression” (John Frame)

God’s word is communicated to humanity through a variety of media.

General revelation vs. special revelation

General revelation (natural revelation) is God’s revelation of himself through nature in a way that is accessible to all rational people.

What do the Scriptures Say?

Four key passages help us to understand God’s general revelation.

Psalm 19:1–14

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.
Acts 14:8–18

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we 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. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

Romans 1:18–32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.
Romans 2:12–16

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 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. 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 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

What Has the Church Said?

Patristic Era: Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine – God’s natural revelation was present in certain schools of pagan Greek philosophy

Medieval Era: Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas – strategies for proving the existence of God without any reference to Scripture and the natural law tradition

Reformation Era: Martin Luther and John Calvin clarify medieval tradition:

1) God’s existence may help remove intellectual barriers to the gospel, but it doesn’t address moral barriers, which remain our root problem

2) The natural law, while useful for framing just laws in a virtuous society, isn’t sufficient to lead someone to faith in Christ

Modern Era: evangelicals – general revelation provides enough information to convince us that God exists and to make us accountable to him, though general revelation can’t communicate saving knowledge of God

Importance of apologetics

What Should We Believe?

Russ Moore:

The act of asking what the Bible says about general revelation indicates human dependence on special revelation to bring into focus general revelation. Scripture nowhere treats general revelation as the “natural” insight of autonomous human beings. Indeed, the Apostle Paul affirms that truths about God are available to all human beings precisely “because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19)…. Like special revelation, general revelation communicates truths—truths for which human beings must give an account. Like special revelation, general revelation is intended to unveil the purposes of God for his creation and its human rulers.
In keeping with the Scriptures and the best of the Christian tradition, we affirm that God has revealed himself through his creation, which testifies in a foundational way to his existence as Creator, his power as Sustainer, and his goodness as Ruler. The basics of God’s law are written upon the heart of all people, and this means there are certain things we can’t not know. However, it still takes Scripture to clarify and expound upon God’s law so that we can more fully know his will for his creatures. General revelation does not in any way save us, but it does form the basis upon which all people will be held accountable.

From natural revelation, sinners come to know God as an enemy, not as a friend. The \textit{wrath} of God is revealed against them (Rom. 1:18). Natural revelation tells us much, but it doesn’t tell us how to be saved. It gives us law, not gospel.\textsuperscript{3} (John Frame)

Human beings cannot entirely suppress their sense of God and his present and future judgment; God himself will not let them do that. Some sense of right and wrong, as well as of being accountable to a holy divine Judge, always remains. In our fallen world all whose minds are not in some way impaired have a conscience that at some points directs them and from time to time condemns them, telling them that they ought to suffer for wrongs they have done (Rom. 2:14ff.); and when conscience speaks in these terms it is in truth the voice of God.\textsuperscript{4} (J.I. Packer)

\textbf{How Then Should We Live?}

Evangelism

Apologetics

Cultural engagement

Worship

\textbf{Recommended Resources}


“This Is My Father’s World,” lyrics by Maltbie Babcock (1901).

\textbf{Coming Next Week . . .}

The doctrine of biblical inspiration
Notes:


3 Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, p. 53.