

## The End of Natural Revelation

The end of natural revelation then is to introduce the human person to the existence of God, how to identify Him, and why we need to seek Him out. By instinct, we know very early on in life that there is no point to life outside of pleasing Him. This is what leads us to appreciate the world around us as a guide to God. In fact, this is why religion and concern with God are so ingrained in human nature that atheism is an aberration. Even in places where people tend to treat spiritual matters very lightly (e.g. Japan), they still entertain them and give them a nod because of how natural the concept of God is to human reasoning.

<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; <sup>25</sup> nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; <sup>26</sup> and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, <sup>27</sup> that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; <sup>28</sup> for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'  
Acts 17:24-28 (NASB)

Ultimately, of course, what God wants is that everyone who wants Him will find Him, but the goal of natural revelation is not to reveal Himself in a personal, intimate way to anyone. It is only to encourage the human heart to seek after Him.

Some have taken issue with this and spoken of the unfairness of God in not giving all the knowledge about Himself that anyone needs to be saved to everyone equally. Their feeling is that those who are born into cultures that are more deeply in tune with God, that is, born to Christian parents or in predominantly Christian cultures or to practicing Jews or in predominantly Jewish cultures are at an advantage and those who lack such a heritage are at a disadvantage. They feel that this is why it is not fair for God to send such people to Hell since they would never have heard the Gospel.

Obviously, this argument only distracts from their own responsibility to respond positively to the Gospel since they themselves **have**, in fact, heard

the Gospel. This is important since anyone who is truly concerned for their eternal well-being will, like the man being saved from drowning, want to assure themselves of their own safety before seeking the safety and welfare of others that he cannot save anyway since he lacks any meaningful footing of any kind to save them. It is a weird thing to hear someone in a fire reject help to pull them out because they worry that others are not getting the help they themselves are being offered.

Nonetheless, God has always looked out for everyone. The concern that these people have is ill-conceived. Just by the act of creation, all human beings belong to God and He has both the right to feel compassion for every one of us and the actual compassion that they are concerned about. In fact, it is precisely because of this compassion that He gave everyone natural revelation so that all of us will seek to know Him. However, that compassion leads to the generosity that God demonstrates in giving us all a free will so that only those who do want to will use the witness of natural revelation to find Him and get to know Him and be reconciled to Him. Those who would rather have nothing to do with Him do not then have a relationship with Him foisted upon them.

Let us consider this a little bit. If God wanted absolutely everyone to be in His eternal family whether they want to be or not, who really could resist Him? No one. However, God is not at all like that. Although He has the power to have it any way that He wants, He does care whether anyone wants to be "stuck" with Him eternally or not. He does not want anyone who does not want Him to be forced to tolerate His rule for all eternity. For that reason, He leaves it an open question for each of His free will creatures to resolve. This is why natural revelation was made by God as a separate thing from special revelation. Thus, natural revelation is structured by God to be something that anyone can do with as they please.

That is not to say that natural revelation lends itself to any old interpretation anyone chooses to make of it, no. Rather, it is to say that while it tells everyone enough to be able to identify God when we find Him, it doesn't give us all the information about Him that we might want. That is deliberately to lead us to seeking. But it does not stop anyone from either making up gods in place of the true God or adopting any made-up god that they prefer. Obviously, there is enough information to tell anyone whether their god is the true God so that there is no excuse for idolatry, but the

absence of information about God's specific identity can be exploited—even if only wrongly—by those who would rather not seek God.

Again, natural revelation, while being available to everyone to respond to as they please, is perfectly designed to give each one of us—regardless of how smart or dumb we or others think we are—an accurate description of God so that we can pick Him out of a lineup of gods, so to speak. We are not given His precise identity or told His entire plan or overwhelmed with details that we would struggle with. All we have is a “picture” that can help us tell whether any given “god” is Him and whether any given philosophy or story we hear is really the truth or the solution to our situation as sinful human beings. This is yet more of God’s compassion showing itself to us.

However, it is true that some of us are born in “more fortunate” circumstances than others in a spiritual sense. Some of us are born almost straight into a relationship with God. Consider the Jews, for example. If anyone can have a natural claim upon God because of the fortunes of their birth, no one has it more powerfully than the Jew. But is this truly an advantage? Yes, it is, but not in the way that the bellyachers think that it is. To be born to more intimate knowledge of God than natural revelation does give some of us a running start, but everyone still has to work it out in their own hearts as to why everything they are taught in whatever circumstance is to be believed. This is, in fact, why it is so obvious that many people brought up in Christian homes don’t remain Christians forever. They do, in fact, walk away from the faith of their parents and guardians as they get older. Those who do remain often do so after “taking their own journey into the far country” and consequently understanding why their parents and guardians believe what they believe and why they should too. This is also the entire story of the Jewish nation which began with patriarchs that were gung-ho for God but which is currently and for very many centuries has been hostile to the same God that their forefathers lived and died for. There is no guarantee at all that being born and raised with greater knowledge of God than others will result in a love for God.

Someone might argue that the Bible says that if a child is trained up in the way that he should go, he will not depart from it. This is in fact what the Bible says in Proverbs 22:6, but it is to be understood to be a principle rather than a prophecy, just as many other proverbs are. That is, the principle of parenting is to give a child a template to live within or a standard

to live up to, something that he will always compare his eventual choices to. Parenting does not remove free will, which is another teaching of the Bible (Genesis 1:26-27; Psalm 82:6; Deuteronomy 30:19-20), so we are not right to understand that verse to mean that children can never be different than they were taught to be by their parents. This is what we actually see in everyday experience with children. They may be raised by godly parents and yet turn out utterly rotten and unworthy to be associated with their parents (see Cain son of Adam, Esau son of Isaac, Joel and Abijah the sons of Samuel the prophet, Absalom son of David, and Manasseh son of Hezekiah as some examples of this). The converse is also true. In some ways then, it may seem to turn out to the disadvantage of some of those born in such privileged circumstances because they might feel force-fed information that they don't yet (and might never) recognize a need for. Those who are born farther off can more easily see what is missing and go looking for it. Those who are born with it tend to miss the forest for the trees. Of course, this is not to say that the advantage is a disadvantage, but it does mean that it is no guarantee and therefore does not demonstrate unfairness on God's part since the people in those situations still have to appreciate the same things that others outside of them have to appreciate for themselves and respond organically to.

So, we are not saying that natural revelation is a hurdle that God has placed on the road to salvation. No, not even remotely. The Bible is insistent that God wants everyone to be saved (Ezekiel 18:23,32; 33:11; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). So, in fact, natural revelation is given to **help** us toward salvation. It tells us not only of God's existence, but also of how to identify Him, and why we need to seek Him. These are all helps and encouragements rather than hindrances. The issue is only that He does not want to force salvation on anyone. He wants it to be something that the receiver actually wants. For that reason, it is according to His lovingkindness that He gives such a strong witness of Himself in creation and in human nature itself so that all may be persuaded to come to Him and be saved while still making it possible for those who don't want to be saved to choose not to come to Him if they prefer that. How great is the wisdom of God that this should be! In calling all to know Him and be saved, He makes it possible for everyone to come to Him freely of their own choice rather than under compulsion.