

III

THE NATURE OF GOD IS REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is. 55:8-9).

It is obvious that God's thoughts and ways transcend our thoughts and ways. It is equally obvious, however, that God has from the very beginning sought to communicate with mankind.

In the Garden, God spoke to man. Someone has observed that no human being ever speaks until he is spoken to. Language is learned, not inherited. Psychologists analyzed a seven year old boy who had been raised by a pack of wolves. He did not speak at all, but only made sounds approximating the noises which he heard around him.

God longed to communicate with man. Ultimately, the words of God were reduced to writing. The spoken word became the written word. Naturally, something of God's nature would be communicated through His words.

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A word is a vehicle of communication. Again may I emphasize that Jesus Christ is the Word of God in the truest and clearest sense that man is capable of understanding. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. He longed for us to understand His nature. At sundry times and in different manners He spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken unto us by His Son.

The nature of God revealed in His Son is, of course, in complete and perfect harmony with the nature of God revealed in the Scriptures. Even a brief overview of the Scriptures will reveal that the nature of God transcends earthly law and human reasoning.

Cain and Abel

When Adam and Eve sinned they were promised that the "seed of woman" would triumph over the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

This was, no doubt, the subject of many conversations around the camp fire.

When Cain was born, he must have thrilled to these stories and may have even believed that he would champion the cause of humanity by crushing the serpent's head.

When his younger brother, Abel, was born, he found himself superior to him in many ways. Up to a point, an older brother is always physically and intellectually superior to his younger brother. A four year old, for example, is almost always bigger, stronger, faster, and smarter than his two year old brother.

God, however, did not accept Cain's offering, even though he was the first born. He had respect instead for the sacrifice of Abel.

The book of Hebrews informs us:

By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts, and by it he being dead yet speaketh (Heb. 11:4).

There is a sense in which no human being is righteous. Romans 3:10, for example, states: "There is none righteous, no not one."

The Scripture does not state that Abel was righteous, only that he "obtained witness" that he was righteous. Or as other versions put it, that he was "declared righteous."

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The story may actually be much like the story of the Prodigal Son which Jesus would tell many years later. The older brother excelled in many ways, but the younger brother was honored with rewards and a banquet. The prodigal was no more righteous than was Abel, but he obtained honor because of his submissive and humble spirit.

In both instances the older brother was angry. Each expected God to see things from a human point of view and to judge humanity from an earthly perspective.

God did not do so! And the record of His actions is recorded on the opening pages of our Bible to provide us with an index into the way that He thinks.

The story of Cain and Abel points us to the transcendent power of faith, and this is precisely the same reason why God gave us the Law of Moses. It was a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Abraham and Sarah

It is not our purpose to present a complete catalog of the heroes and heroines of the faith, but rather to briefly scan the Scriptures to show that in every age and dispensation, God has operated aloof from human law and reasoning.

There must have been thousands of women God could have used to perpetuate the sacred lineage and enable the "seed of woman" to ultimately triumph over satan. He deliberately selected, however, a barren woman who had passed the age of bearing. It was through faith that she received strength to conceive seed. It was through faith that Abraham staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief. Each became utterly convinced that what God had promised, He was able also to perform—regardless of the "laws" of nature. Their faith transcended earthly laws.

Ishmael and Isaac

When Isaac was born, the family faced a legal dilemma. In the event that Abraham had no children, his estate would pass to the steward in his household with the greatest seniority. In this case it would have been Eliezer of Damascus (Gen. 15:2).

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Ishmael, however, was born as the legal heir to Abraham. Even though his mother was a slave, he still had a legitimate and legal claim as the "firstborn."

Later it would be specifically written in the Mosaic Law:

Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength: the right of the firstborn is his (Deut. 21:16-17).

There was, however, a principle that transcended legal claims and human law. It was the principle of faith.

The promises of God to Abraham were not fulfilled through Ishmael, but Isaac. This story is not in the Bible by accident . . . God was obviously trying to teach us something.

Esau and Jacob

Isaac had two sons. Esau was unquestionably the firstborn, but again the sovereignty of God took precedence over legal considerations.

Before these boys were born, and before either of them had any opportunity to do either good or evil, God determined that the elder would serve the younger (Rom. 9:12).

Such a story is enough to give a lawyer a migraine headache. It baffles those who would reduce God to Someone we could shove around in court or coerce by a legal contract. It is, however, in perfect harmony with the way that God has revealed Himself throughout the pages of Holy Scripture.

Reuben, Ephraim, and Judah

Reuben was the firstborn of Jacob, Ephraim was given the right of the firstborn, and Judah prevailed over them all as the possessor of the sceptre and the progenitor of the Christ.

Note I Chronicles 5:1-2:

Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was

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given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright. For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler; but the birthright was Joseph's.)

Reuben was the firstborn, then came Simeon and Levi, then Judah. These four sons were born to Jacob through Leah. Next in the family were Dan and Naphtali, the sons of Jacob through Bilhah. Then came Gad and Asher through Zilpah. Leah then had two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun. Joseph and Benjamin were the last two sons to be born. It does not seem fair that Joseph would be granted the honor of having his son as Jacob's "firstborn" taking precedence and priority over his uncles who by law were before him.

The situation is made even more incredible by the fact that when Joseph stood his two sons before the aged Jacob, he carefully placed his firstborn before the right hand of the patriarch. Jacob then crossed his hands to confer a blessing.

Joseph remonstrated, "Not so, my father: for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head" (Gen. 48:18).

Jacob refused to do so! Ephraim, though younger, would be considered as the "firstborn" in spite of the fact that his brother Manasseh was legally the firstborn.

God determined that He would no longer reckon the genealogy of Jesus through the "firstborn," therefore, in His own sovereign wisdom, He selected Judah.

Genesis 49:10 puts it like this:

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.

Therefore, when Matthew chronicles for us the genealogy of Jesus, it is not through Reuben, or Ephraim, or Manasseh, but through Judah.

Surely God was trying to teach us something by all of this!

Pharez and Zarah

Judah's firstborn was named Er, and he died. His second son was named Onan, and he died. Both of these brothers had been married

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to Tamar. Judah's third son was named Shelah. The law of the land indicated that Shelah should also become the husband of Tamar. Later it would be recorded in Deuteronomy 25:5-6:

If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel.

Judah, however, refused, or at least neglected to give Shelah unto Tamar as her husband.

Therefore, she dressed up like an harlot, seduced Judah, and gave birth to twins. Not by any stretch of the imagination the most legal way to do it, but nonetheless, this was the way Jesus was born through the lineage of Judah.

Our human judgment is again shocked by which of the twins became the ancestor of Christ.

The legal definition of the firstborn was given to the child which first opened the womb. Therefore, when Tamar travailed to give birth the midwife correctly identified the firstborn by tying a scarlet thread about his hand and announcing, "this came out first." They named him Zarah, which means "dawn."

Zarah drew back, however, and his younger brother was born first. They named him Pharez, which means "breach."

Each time the genealogy of Jesus is given, it is always reckoned through Pharez and not Zarah.

Surely God was trying to teach us something by all of this!

Sons of Abraham

The Jewish people could trace their lineage back to Abraham. They took great pride in announcing to the world, "We have Abraham to our Father." They scrupulously adhered to the rite of circumcision. Their legal case was airtight.

The only problem was that God has always remained aloof from human thinking and Jewish Law.

It is true that God gave the law, but we must not forget that the law was not given so that man could take God to court and demand

his rights, the law was given as a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

John the Baptist probably beckoned with his hand to gentile territory when he announced:

And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham (Matt. 3:9).

After emphasizing the role of the law in bringing us to Christ by faith, Paul continued:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26-29).

The Advantage of the Non-Religious

This teaching is so absolutely radical that one has to be "born again" in order to see it. We have to be converted and become like little children.

As we have said before, the devout Jew began his religious studies by memorizing the book of Leviticus. Yet Jesus said of these men, "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you (Matt. 21:31).

It seems that the thief on the cross had greater insight into the kingdom than even the apostles of Christ. They thought Jesus had failed and that there would be no kingdom, but the thief saw something they had not yet seen. By faith he said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Lk. 23:42).

The disciples forsook Jesus and fled, but the thief heard the words, "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43).

Those who have accumulated what they deem as a great stockpile of information will find it difficult to come to Christ like a little child.

In reality, the knowledge and information in the brain of a newborn infant bears the same relationship to God as does the knowledge and information that was in the brain of Albert Einstein. 1×0 is exactly the same thing as $1,000,000 \times 0$. All human intelligence is in some

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respect the same when it is compared with the infinite wisdom and knowledge of God.

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!
(Rom. 11:33).

Hamaan and Mordecai

How vividly I recall an incident which occurred many years ago. I had spoken for a special meeting and the preacher had driven me to the airport where I was to take off in a private plane for home.

It was late at night and the little grass strip was deserted. He warned me that I should watch for deer which might be on the runway.

I sensed that he wanted to talk, however, and so we sat in his car and visited. Words are not adequate to express the feelings which I experienced that night. I came to love and appreciate that man in a new and meaningful way.

He, like Jacob, had wrestled with God and prevailed. The intense struggle had made a profound and lasting impression upon him. His insights into spiritual things were both incisive and profound.

Finally, swearing me to secrecy, he confessed that he had just completed a study of the book of Esther and concluded that he was Hamaan.

As a preacher, he had been so scrupulous about his doctrinal purity that he never once questioned his relationship to God. Consequently, he had developed judgmental attitudes toward other preachers and other churches.

When he reflected upon someone whom the Lord would delight to honor, he naturally concluded that it would be him. Other "Christians" like Mordecai he assumed would be condemned.

Legally speaking Hamaan had a good case!

Hamaan had been promoted above all the princes that were with him (Esther 3:1).

The King had commanded all his servants to bow down to Hamaan (Esther 3:2).

Mordecai had transgressed the King's command (Esther 3:3).

Mordecai was warned daily but still refused to obey (Esther 3:4).

It was written and sealed by the King that the Jews should be destroyed (Esther 3:9-12).

The law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed (Esther 1:19; 8:8; Dan. 6:8, 12, 15).

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In addition to this Hamaan was rich and had many children (Esther 5:11).

Hamaan was also the only special guest at a banquet with the King and Queen (Esther 5:12).

When the King asked, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor?" it was logical for Hamaan to conclude, "To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?" (Esther 6:6).

Hamaan was wrong!

As smart as he was . . . as rich as he was . . . as successful as he was . . . there were still some things that Hamaan didn't know. The King had other considerations of which Hamaan was not aware.

The King's love for Esther took precedence over even the law of the Medes and the Persians which could not be changed.

Esther and her people were saved, and Hamaan was hanged on his own gallows.

Surely the Scriptures are trying to tell us something about the nature of God.

Certainly the law was a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. How do words communicate?
2. What failures and limitations in communication can result from words?
3. Since Jesus was the Author of the Bible why didn't the students of the Bible recognize Him?
4. Is there any association between the mentality of Cain who killed his brother and the mentality of the Jews who crucified Jesus?
5. Put yourself in the place of Ishmael and tell why God's dealing with you did not seem fair.
6. Did the selection of Abraham have anything to do with the Law?
7. Which is more important, law or faith?
8. Did the thief on the cross accurately discern the nature of Christ's Kingdom? If so, why didn't the disciples?
9. Is it fair to say that God operates without control by law?
10. Does God desire us to operate without control by law?

