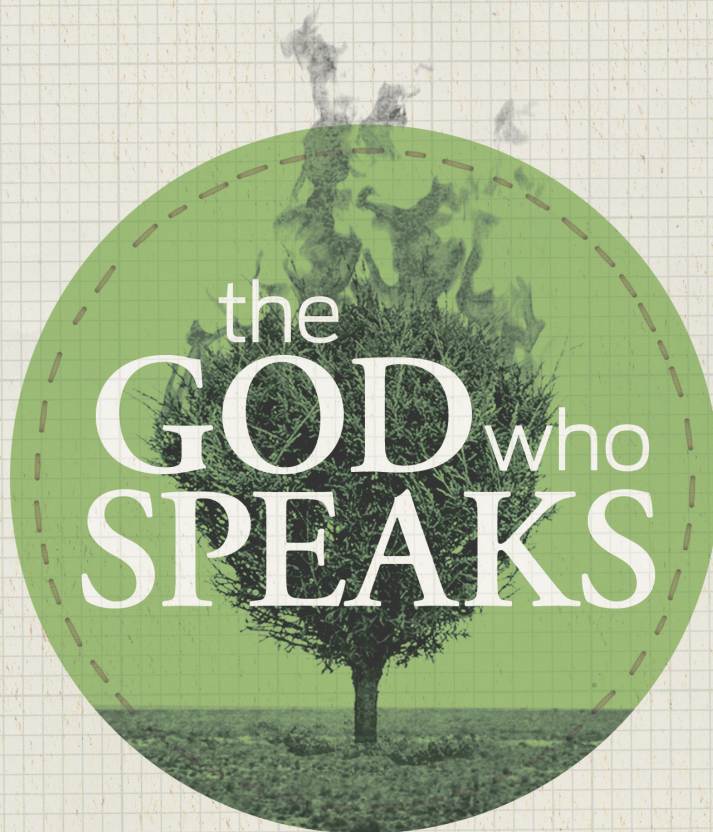


THE GOSPEL PROJECT FOR ADULTS



FALL 2012: *Personal Study Guide*

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LifeWay | Adults

God Is Not Hiding

Seeing

2



Romans 1:20: *“For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made...”*

An interesting paradox. God’s *invisible* attributes have been clearly *seen*? How so? One way we “see” things that we actually can’t see is by noticing their effects. What does wind look like, for instance? We don’t know. We can’t see the wind itself, but we can certainly see its effects. We can see it in the trees, the dust, and the empty swings on a playground.

The Bible teaches that God has made His presence known through the created order of the world. We call this “general revelation.” We can’t see God in the general revelation of creation, but we can certainly see His effects.

We might see His “eternal power” in the majesty of the mountains or the roaring of the sea or the expanse of space photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope. We might see His “divine nature” in the pull our hearts feel toward something beyond ourselves upon witnessing a glorious sunset or paying special attention to the way winter gives way to spring. None of these natural “witnesses” are divine, and we ought never trade the Giver for one of His gifts, but these effects are meant to draw us to the cause—God Himself, to whom is due all glory and honor and worship and praise.

This week, we will explore the Bible’s special revelation of God’s general revelation. Prepare your heart now to receive God’s Word with gladness. Pray that He would help you love Him more deeply as you wonder at His wonders in creation.



Pause and Reflect

- What does creation say about our Creator?
- What are some dangers in the idea that God reveals Himself through His creation?
- When do you most lose sight of God’s presence?

Session 2: Ready Your Heart

God Is Not Hiding

God Wants Glory

Why did God create the world, knowing ahead of time that Adam and Eve would sin? The answer to this difficult question goes back to God's ultimate aim: to glorify Himself. In *The Explicit Gospel*, Matt Chandler shows how central God's glory is to the story line of the Bible:

"For the sake of his name, God did not destroy Israel in the desert (Ezek. 20:5-9). God saves men for his name's sake (Ps. 106:8). Pharaoh's heart was hardened for the glory of God (Ex. 14:4,18)...Israel became great and powerful among the nations because God was 'making himself a name' (2 Sam. 7:23). God did not destroy Israel when it deserved to be destroyed, because he did not want his name blasphemed among the nations (Isa. 48:9-11)...Jesus's life and ministry was about the glory of God (John 7:18; 17:4). You and I are saved to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:3-6)."¹

As it pertains to general revelation, Psalm 19:1 tells us "The heavens declare the glory of God." So what we learn from the special revelation of the Bible is that God created the world to provide the general revelation of His glory.

Although we may never understand the mind of God in allowing Adam and Eve to disobey Him, we know through the lens of the Bible's story of redemption that God decided that His glory would be best demonstrated through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel gives God the glory He wants in a way that man never sinning doesn't.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- How does it affect your faith, your perspective, and your sense of security to believe that God's ultimate goal is His own glory?
- In what ways do the heavens proclaim the glory of God?

God Is Not Hiding

The God Who Reveals Himself Through Creation



In the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey plays Truman Burbank, a generally cheerful insurance adjuster in a cozy island town whose days run like clockwork—until the day a stage light falls out of the heavens and crashes near his car. As Truman begins paying attention to the world around him, he discovers little by little that he is the unwitting star of a reality television show. Looking back through his life and at the world around him, he sees the clues to reality were there all along.

The Truman Show is just a movie, of course, but it is still a good metaphor for how billions of people live their lives in this world every day. They go about their routines, sometimes suspecting the world around them is trying to tell them something about itself and what's outside of it but failing over and over again to put those clues together. Meanwhile, billions of other people see the signs in daily life (the sun's rising, the sea's swelling, the changing of the seasons, the clockwork of the solar system, the intricacies of DNA) as if they are peeks behind the stage. The world is telling us something; we just know it! It's telling us something about itself, about us, and about what's behind it all.

But what? What is it saying?



What are some of the hints and clues we see in creation that point us to the existence of a Creator? Conversely, what are some of the aspects of creation that cause some people to believe that no Creator exists?

According to the Bible, the world around us is testifying to all within it that there is a Creator. Furthermore, the world around us is telling us what the Creator is like, and it is telling us something of His plans. We call this reality **general revelation** because it refers to the general way God reveals Himself to people everywhere.

In this lesson, we will see that God has created the world for our good and His glory. By observing God's handiwork in creation, we gain awareness of His existence, His attributes, and His benevolent intentions. Our response to God's general revelation should be celebration of His kindness in giving us creation as a signpost that points us back to Him, the source of lasting joy.

1. God reveals His existence through creation (Ps. 19:1-6).

One of the most direct references to general revelation in Scripture is Psalm 19:1-6.

- ¹ *The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky proclaims the work of His hands.*
² *Day after day they pour out speech;
night after night they communicate knowledge.*
³ *There is no speech; there are no words;
their voice is not heard.*
⁴ *Their message has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.*
In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun.
⁵ *It is like a groom coming from the bridal chamber;
it rejoices like an athlete running a course.*
⁶ *It rises from one end of the heavens
and circles to their other end;
nothing is hidden from its heat.*

According to this passage, the created world is constantly saying something about its Creator—or more accurately, the Creator is constantly saying something about Himself through His created world. The picture we receive from the psalmist is of a world that acts as a loudspeaker, a stage, and an art gallery—all pointing to God's glory. The sky proclaims that all this work has a Designer's hands behind it.

The sense we receive in verses 1-2 is of continual revelation. Creation never presses "pause" on its proclaiming that it is an effect, not a cause, and that it has an Originator.

Verse 3 can be difficult to sort out, but the context of the passage gives us two most likely interpretations. The first is that despite the nonstop speech and communication, some people simply ignore it as if it doesn't exist; the voice is not heard. Nevertheless,



Voices from Church History

"The voices of visible creation...are equally clear to everyone...giving everyone the one message, that they were made by someone and do not exist of themselves."²

—Diodore of Tarsus
(ca. A.D. 380)

they cannot say they were not told, only that they did not listen.

? Think about the ways people attempt to guard themselves from God's revelation. What are some of the most common ways we try to hide from God's voice? What are some of the common ways we try to drown it out?

The second possible interpretation of Psalm 19:3 is simply that David is noting the nature of general revelation, which is to say, it is not a speech that comes in audible voice or literal words. The communication and knowledge is proclaimed, but not in the way direct, special revelation is. A watch tells us it has a watchmaker, but not in the same way as does shaking the watchmaker's hand and hearing his voice say, "I made that."

Verse 4 tells us that the "message has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." In other words, no place is absent general revelation. Nature's "music" points us to look for the Conductor. Nature's beauty points us to look for the Artist. The vastness of the Sahara Desert and the Arctic tundra and the mighty oceans, in making us feel small and vulnerable, point us to God, the strong Tower.



Voices from Church History

"The heavens show forth the glory of God' not by speaking in a voice audible to sensible ears but by manifesting to us through their own greatness the power of the Creator, and when we make comments about their beauty, we give glory to their Maker."³

—John of Damascus
(ca. 650-750)



Voices from Church History

"God's speech in nature is not to be confused with the notion of a talking cosmos, as by those who insist that nature speaks, and that we must therefore hear what nature says as if nature were the voice of God. 'Hear God!' is the biblical message, not 'Listen to nature!' Nature is God's created order, and in nature God presents himself."⁴

—Carl F. H. Henry
(1913-2003)

2. God reveals His attributes through creation (Rom. 1:20).

Suppose you came home to find a package with this note attached: "These are the personal effects of your twin brother Joe, recently deceased." Once you got over the shock of discovering you had a twin brother you never knew about, you'd open the package and look at the contents, hoping they might tell you something about this brother.

If the package contained a leather jacket, a set of brass knuckles, and some cigarettes, that wouldn't tell you everything about your brother, but it would certainly give you a general impression, wouldn't it? And if the package contained instead a set of watercolor paints, a beret, and a tin of organic breath mints, that might give you an entirely different impression, wouldn't it? The package's existence would tell you that you had a brother, but the package's *contents* would tell you a bit about him.

In the same way, the created world tells us there is a God, and it tells us some general things about Him. By seeing the general revelation of "the heavens" and the rest of the world, we can get a sense of God's glory, the sum of His attributes.



What knowledge of God's character do we gain by looking at creation?

In Romans 1:20, Paul writes:

²⁰ For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made. As a result, people are without excuse.

In this passage, Paul teaches that general revelation does not tell us everything there is to know about God, nor can we hear the specific gospel message of salvation in the declarations of the heavens. Still, enough is communicated that "people are without excuse." Paul says the visible world reveals God's invisible attributes, namely, His "eternal power and divine nature."

We see God's eternal power revealed through the vastness of the cosmos and through the mighty forces at work in nature. The expanse of space or the unfathomable depths of the ocean ought to humble mankind. The same is true of an eruption of a volcano or the strength of a tsunami. These shows of power give us an otherworldly and overwhelming sense of being in the presence of the divine Being. As Matt Chandler has said, "Nobody stands at the base of the Rocky Mountains and says, 'Remember that time I benched 300 pounds in high school?'"



Voices from Church History

"In all things visible, clear reminders of the Benefactor grip us."⁵

—Basil of Caesarea
(ca. 330–379)



What does the complexity and variety of nature tell us about God?

How is God's "divine nature" revealed through what we see? Because we are creatures made in God's image, we have innate senses and compulsions that point to the reality of God's divine nature. Of course, we are not divine ourselves, and after the fall of mankind, the image of God in us is obscured and broken. Still, we can see that mankind's generally innate sense of justice and fairness, compulsion to create, ability to express and experience love, and frequent appeals to conscience all point away from our being the evolved result of a random electric current in a primordial goop.

? If God is revealing Himself through creation and created things, what might the implications of this be on our own creativity?

? Name some of God's attributes revealed in the Bible. How might some of these be communicated in the visible world? Where and how do we see them proclaimed in nature, including in general human experience?

3. God reveals His intentions through creation (Acts 14:15-17).

In Acts 14, Barnabas and Paul are in Lystra when a priest of Zeus begins to lead a crowd in making sacrifices to them. Barnabas and Paul interrupt the proceedings:

¹⁵ "Men! Why are you doing these things? We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them. ¹⁶ In past generations He allowed all the nations to go their own way, ¹⁷ although He did not leave Himself without a witness, since He did what is good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and satisfying your hearts with food and happiness."

What did Barnabas and Paul want the people of Lystra to know? As the pagan demand for more sacrifices to a dead god continued, Barnabas and Paul desperately wanted these people to know the good news that Jesus has made the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, and He did so to honor the will of a Heavenly Father who had been far better to the unsaved people of Lystra than Zeus had been. The missionaries pointed to the evidence: "You have a witness that this is true!" they cried. "He has given you rain and harvest and good food and happiness."

? What does the description of Paul and Barnabas' actions in Acts 14:11-18 tell us about evangelistic motives, demeanor, strategy, and message?

When we look at the world around us, we recognize that this place is broken but there is pleasure to be had. This is the concept of “common grace,” which we also see in Matthew 5:45: “For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

God intends for the happiness we experience in marriage, parenting, and His other good gifts to point us back to Him. The gifts everyone enjoys in this life lead to the Giver. Yet not everyone has eyes to see. I think of this truth every time Thanksgiving rolls around and families who do not acknowledge God sit around the holiday table and share something they are thankful for. I always want to know: To whom are you thankful? To whom are you giving thanks for a healthy family? Yourselves? The very impulse to “be thankful” points to a Giver who is due our thanksgiving.

The general revelation we receive in the created world evinces the Giver’s fingerprints everywhere. And these tell us something of His intentions. We cannot receive the gospel message in general revelation, but we can certainly see its echoes. Things like the metamorphosis of the butterfly can help us illustrate Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection—and ours in response. Even the cycle of the seasons—from the death of winter to the newness of spring—helps us see the imprint of the gospel.

Conclusion

The Reformers thought of the world as a grand theater in which God showcases His glory. One thing we must say about this theater, of course, is that it is not itself the story but the stage. Like a good stage set, it tells us something of the story before the players even enter and begin their lines. But it is the script that really reveals.

Thankfully, while God does communicate His presence, His attributes, and His intentions through the gift of general revelation, He wants to be even clearer than that.

What are some other general revelation “signposts” we find in creation that illustrate the gospel of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection?

What is so wrong with just “experiencing God” out in nature? How will the truth of general revelation help or otherwise affect your mission to be a witness to the gospel of Jesus?



Voices from the Church

“The created realm (creation) is a spectacular theater that serves as the cosmic matrix in which God’s saving and judging glory can be revealed. God’s glory is so grand that no less a stage than the universe—all that is or was and will be, across space and through time—is necessary for the unfolding of this all-encompassing drama.”⁶

—James M. Hamilton Jr.

Session 2: Respond in Your Life

God Is Not Hiding

God's Goodness

In the previous lesson, we learned about how Barnabas and Paul were so disturbed by the “ministry” of the priest of Zeus in Lystra that they couldn’t help but interrupt (Acts 14:11-18). *“Men! Why are you doing these things? We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.”*

We learn three things from this incident about God’s mission through Paul and Barnabas:

1. Paul and Barnabas were grieved by the idolatry of the lost. They were so moved and disturbed that they tore their robes and shouted. This helps us see the passion of the missionaries for the gospel and for the lost, and it helps us see what they thought the stakes were.
2. Paul and Barnabas were confident in the gospel. They did not preach their own goodness, and in fact, they made it a point to deny the projections of divinity cast upon them. Instead, the missionaries proclaimed the good news.
3. Paul and Barnabas made it a point to point to God’s goodness and love. The gospel message is also about God’s holiness, His justice, and His wrath, but the context for Christ’s substituting Himself in our place to measure up to holiness, satisfy justice, and absorb the wrath is that “God loved the world” (John 3:16).

P&R Pause and Reflect

- Do you have a heart for those lost in idolatry and sinful behaviors like Barnabas and Paul did? If not, pray that God will give you one.
- How can you show someone this week the goodness of God in a way that “advertises” the gospel?