

Knowing God, Knowing Ourselves: Lesson 2 Knowing God Outside Scripture

Tim Sisemore
Heritage Presbyterian Church
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Brief Review

- Recall Calvin is summarizing the Reformed understanding of the Bible
 - To demonstrate to the Catholic King of France that this is the true Christian faith, dating back to Bible and church fathers
 - And the 1541 French version is largely to persecuted believers
- Last week we briefly looked at the interrelatedness of knowing God and knowing ourselves
- We will build on that today

Today: Book 1, chapters 2-5

- On natural revelation, and natural theology
 - That is: How God has revealed himself in nature and *our* nature, and what we as sinners do with that
- Basically follows the argument of Paul in Romans 1: 18-25
- Contrast the 1647 Westminster Confession: presents this more logically beginning with Scripture, though a brief mention of “natural theology” in first sentence
- Calvin presents more historically, beginning with our fallen state (God created prior to Bible)

Romans 1:18-25

- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 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. 21 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. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.
- 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 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.

Introductory Matter: Piety is a Prerequisite for Knowing God

- For Calvin, “piety” is reverence and love for God joined together
 - Not enough to just love God
 - Must be reverence – a sense of awe
 - Such awe moves us to obey
 - Thus, departs from modern “spirituality” which is about feeling and self-satisfaction only
- Without such piety, a person won't have true knowledge of God
 - Consider us: do we revere God so as to obey him?
 - **Do we dread to offend him more than to die?**

Two Key Quotes to Summarize

Knowledge

- “No drop will be found either of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause.”
- So, all truth is God’s truth

Piety

- “Until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him – they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.”
- God is not a “hobby”!

What is the Purpose of Knowledge of God?

- To teach us to fear and reverence God
- To serve as our guide and teacher so we seek every good from him,
 - And give him the credit for that good
 - E.g., Christian vs. unbeliever watching a sunset

Importance of the Knowledge of God

- Not to dream up any god we please...as in

- Psalm 50

- But to the wicked God says:

- “What right have you to recite my statutes
or take my covenant on your lips?

- 17 For you hate discipline,
and you cast my words behind you.

- 18 If you see a thief, you are pleased with him,
and you keep company with adulterers.

- 19 “You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.

- 20 You sit and speak against your brother;
you slander your own mother's son.

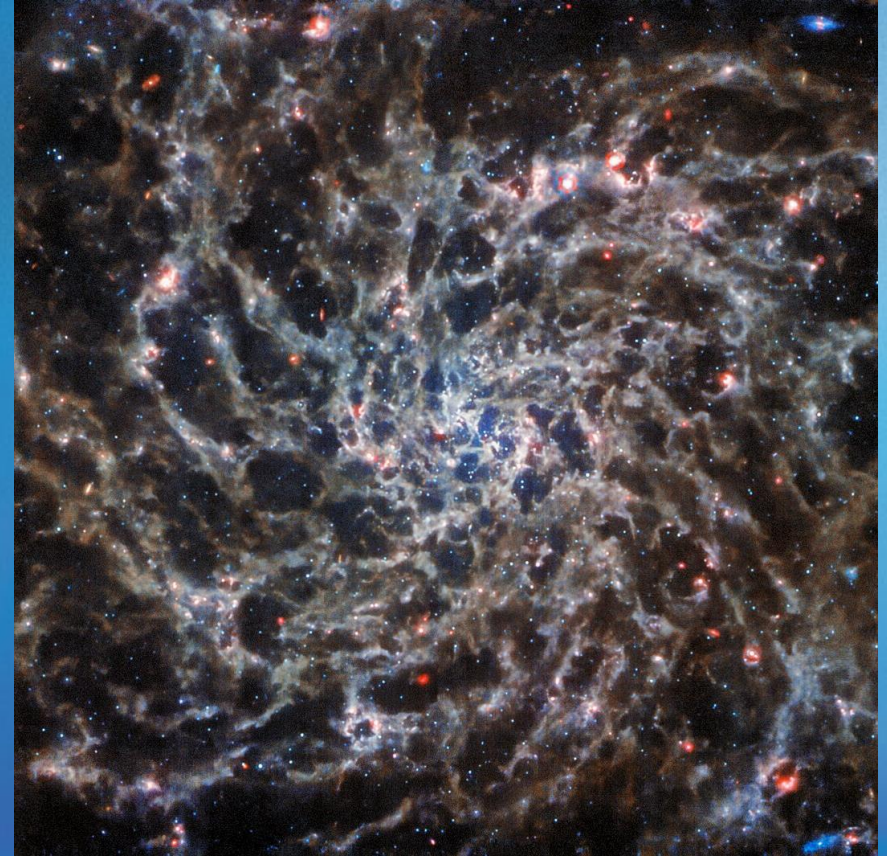
- 21 These things you have done, and I have been silent;
you thought that I was one like yourself.

- But now I rebuke you and play the charge before you.

- And be content with God as he manifests himself

Creator vs. Redeemer

- God shows himself as Creator in his
 - Fashioning the universe
 - General teaching of Scripture
- God shows himself as Redeemer
 - In the face of Christ
- Thus, the twofold knowledge of God
 - And the titles of the first two books of the *Institutes*



Knowing God as Creator vs. Redeemer

- Calvin will cover how we know God as Redeemer later, through Christ as Mediator (book 2)
- Now the focus is on God as Creator
 - Supports us by his power
 - Governs us by his providence
 - Nourishes us by his goodness
 - Attends us with all sorts of blessings



Knowledge of God in Creation

Overview



- Seen in his creation (I.5.1-10)
 - In creation
 - In ourselves
 - In his reign over the world
- Yet still rejected (I.5.11-15)

Natural Revelation of God as Creator

- Important distinction here:

- **Natural revelation**

- What God gives to man
 - Made in his image, though it is distorted now
 - Shown in creation
- Because humans are made in God's image,
 - All know in some sense there is a God
 - And God's wrath is justly revealed
 - This is also why we must know God to know selves

- **Natural theology**

- What sinful man does with natural revelation
 - This is the focus of Romans 1

Natural Revelation

- “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.”
- A *sensus divinitatis* – a sense of the Divine
 - A knowing, not a capacity to learn
- So none are without excuse for not worshipping God...back to Romans 1
 - 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.

Natural Revelation to Natural Theology

- Since God makes this evident by our nature and in nature itself
- People are without excuse who reject it
 - By forming a false god or idol instead
 - Or worst of all, by denying that there is a god altogether
 - To update this to our day
 - With growth of humanism and secularism, we worship ourselves and our abilities (consider internet trends)
 - Deprive nature of its revelatory value by “science”
 - Yet those who are naturalists seem more fearful

Brief Detour

- Yet, science actually supports Calvin in some ways
- Cognitive science of religion
 - Finding that children instinctively seek agents who cause things
 - E.g. Barrett's *Born Believers*
 - More naturally see an agent making nature than natural processes
 - Have to be socialized out of this tendency
 - So, belief in an agent may be more natural than not believing



People Smother or Corrupt Knowledge of God

- While we have a knowledge of God in us due to the image of God
 - Cp. Augustine's "restless heart"
 - We suppress or corrupt it
- Tendency to fashion God as we want him
 - E.g., moralistic therapeutic deism (Christian Smith)
 - Due to not honestly seeking him
- Or deny him altogether
 - Ps 14:1; 53:1
 - Ungodly people say in their hearts there is no god
 - Rebel against the demands this places on them
 - See religion as fear of our mortality
- Or think vague zeal is OK
 - Thus stress on spirituality over religion these days

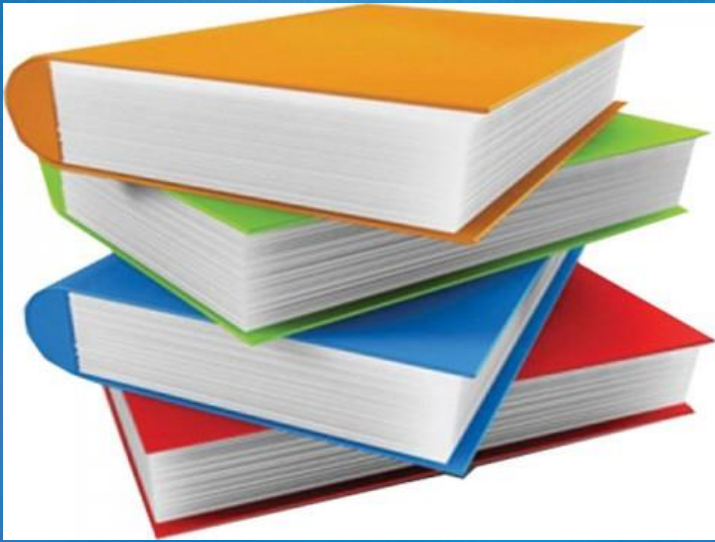
God Manifested in His Created Works

- Importance of the theme
 - “The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God”
 - Cp. John 17:3: And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
 - Cp. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1: “the chief end of man is to know God, and to glorify him forever.”
 - And if we are awake, we can't open our eyes without seeing something of him in our surroundings

In His Commentary on Psalm 19:4

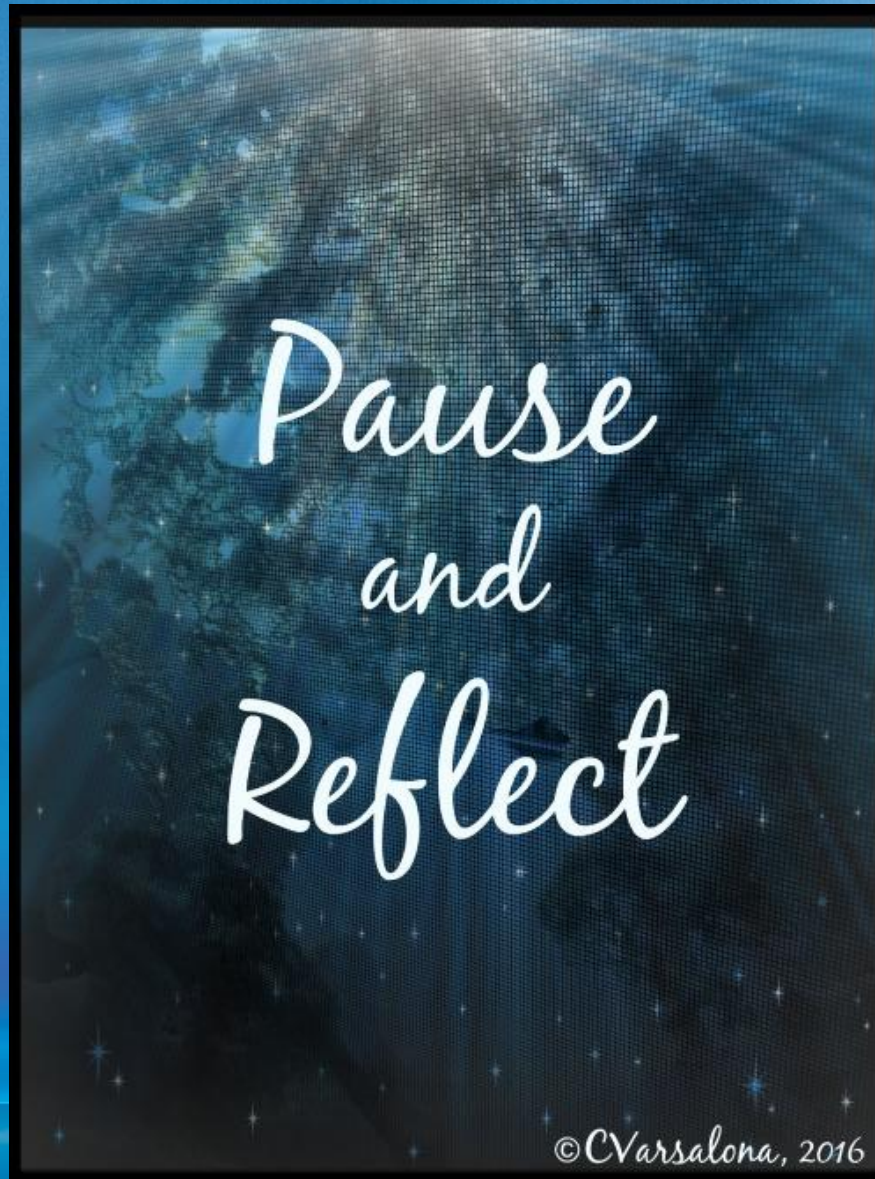
- ...Calvin refers to “the splendor of the heavens preaching the glory of God like a teacher in a seminary of learning”
- How much more should this be true today with all of our knowledge of the universe!!
- We can be “in class” but not listen to the Teacher!

General Revelation Gives Value to Education



- Astronomy, medicine, and natural science intended to lead to praise
- As are the liberal arts which promote our understanding of the Divine wisdom
- All, then, are exposed to the Divine art and wisdom of God

Question or Observations Thus Far?



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Man Himself is the Loftiest Proof

- Psalm 8:4: what is man that you are mindful of him?
- We should be bold to descend within ourselves to see our nature as a revelation of God
 - For in looking at ourselves, we see our sin and God's goodness
 - Compare Augustine's *Confessions*
- Psalm 8:2: God establishes strength from the mouths of babes
 - Few things show God's wonder more than how human infants learn language
- How tragic, then, when we do not see God in our nature
 - A sin of secular psychology

Man Ungratefully Turns Against God

- “How detestable, I ask you, is this madness: That man, finding God in his body and soul a hundred times, on this very pretense of excellence denies that there is a God.”
 - Calvin even addresses those who because they can see a biology of the soul dismiss God’s glory
 - Science is not equipped to see the spiritual, and engages in “nothing buttery”
- Even memory is a sign of the image of God

Not Just Biology and Psychology...

- Cosmology, too, comes under Calvin's view
- "As if the universe, which was founded as a spectacle of God's glory, were its own creator!"
 - Thus, Calvin dismisses human efforts to explain the universe apart from a Creator
- *It is ingratitude to enjoy the gifts of the Creator while denying the Author*
- We have much room to thank God more throughout the day as we notice his gifts

God Seen in His Daily Work

- God is seen in his daily showing grace and judgment in the world
- Even as he shows mercy by delaying his judgment in many cases
- Showing mercy on sinners with “unwearied kindness”



God is Sovereign over People and Nature

- Nothing is outside of God's control
- "What are thought to be chance occurrences are just so many proofs of heavenly providence, especially fatherly kindness."
 - Note that as Calvin introduces providence, it is a form of fatherly kindness, not cruelty
- So despite the dazzling display in the **theater of God's glory**, people are struck blind by their own errors

And for those who do believe...

- We are called to a practical knowledge of God, “not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits about in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart.”
 - Sadly, Calvin’s heirs often like knowledge of God more to “prove” themselves right than to be moved by it. Thus, the “frozen chosen”.

Conclusion on Natural Revelation

- The purpose of such knowledge is to
 - Arouse us in the worship of God
 - Awaken and encourage us to the hope of the future life
 - Where all will be made just and fair
- But we get this
 - “only when we descend into ourselves and contemplate by what means the Lord shows in us his life, wisdom, and power; and exercises in our behalf his righteousness, goodness, and mercy.”

Despite God's Generous Revelation

- Man still fails to know and worship God, falling into superstition (chapter 5. 11-15)
 - Seeing events as fate
 - Explained by natural processes alone
 - Or just luck
 - Even for us as Christians, how often do we lose sight of God's Providence in the events of the world?
- Refusing to concede there is a God
 - Humans blindly create godless philosophies and false religions

Summary

- We have a sense of the divine
 - We have confirmation in nature and the sciences
 - And in our own nature and the wonder of how we are made
 - And in God's providence in the world
- These should move us to worship and hope
- Yet, because of our sinful nature, people find ways to explain these apart from God
 - Superstitions and false religions
 - Erroneous philosophies
 - Outright atheism and naturalism

Consider Together:

- How does this change our understanding of what we see in the news?
- Think through the implications of God's providence.
 - Reconsider how vital this is
 - How does it change us if we truly grasp it?
- Why is it important that piety be related to God's revelation?

The Take Home Points

- Though God is all around us and in us in his revelation
 - How much do we miss?
 - And take for granted?
- Ought we not be more inclined to praise God
 - For his world
 - For our nature
 - For his providence?
- In our day more than Calvin's
 - People take pride in explaining away things
 - Believe philosophies such as evolution
 - A big bang eventually led to life and to our magnificent brains? Really?
 - Culture active in suppressing faith

Take Home Points

- Are we pious in our faith?
 - Does it move us?
 - If not, why not?
 - Pray for change
 - And see ourselves in light of God's holiness
- Let us be more active in thanking God for all we see in the theater of his glory!



Prayer

- Together: let's give thanks to God for
 - Nature and the universe
 - How fearfully and wonderfully we are made
 - God's providence
- And ask for grace to see God more in our lives and in the world around us

In Our Next Episode...

- Calvin on Scripture
- Book I, Chapters 6-10

