



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 2.2 – The Doctrine of God

The Natural Knowledge of God

Every human being has access to a partial knowledge of the true God by observing His creation. **“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork... There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard”** (Psalm 19:1-3). **“Since the creation of the world His (God’s) invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead”** (Romans 1:20). From creation we can learn that God is glorious, powerful, wise, and eternal.

Every human being can gain a partial sense of God’s goodness also from how God takes care of His creatures from day to day. On his mission journeys to cities that did not have a written revelation from God, the apostle Paul referred to this partial knowledge of God. In the city of Lystra Paul declared: **“He (God) did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness”** (Acts 14:17). In the city of Athens Paul addressed the crowd with these words: **“He (God) gives to all life, breath, and all things... He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being”** (Acts 17:25-28).

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul explained that everyone has a partial knowledge of God through God’s law, which He puts into all human hearts, and from the conscience God has given to each person: **“When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them”** (Romans 2:14-15).

The word “law” is used in several different ways in this passage. When Paul says that the Gentiles (the non-Jews) do not have the law, he means that they did not have the written revelation of God’s will that God gave to the Jewish people through Moses. But even though the Gentiles had never heard of the Ten Commandments that God gave to the Jews, their inward nature told them that there were certain things that were right and other things that were wrong. Their conscience would tell them whether what they did was right or wrong, so that these Gentiles at times did by nature what the Ten Commandments demand. They refrained from murdering, committing adultery, and stealing, because their inner nature told them these things were wrong.

God has written His law in man’s hearts from the very beginning, so that every human being has an inward sense of right and wrong. At the same time, God has given every human being a conscience, an inward awareness that there is a God (or some higher being) to whom he must give answer at some time. Because of this law written in his heart and his conscience (his awareness of God), he experiences accusing thoughts when he does something contrary to this law in his heart, and he experiences excusing thoughts when he follows this law in his heart.

This natural knowledge of God, however, is not able at all to make any human beings truly godly in their thinking or behavior. Paul told the Roman Christians that the many Gentiles in the world routinely **“suppress the truth in unrighteousness”** (Romans 1:18). Throughout history **“they did not like to retain God in their knowledge”** (Romans 1:28), and therefore **“God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting, being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual**

immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them” (Romans 1:28-32).

Notice that these Gentiles, as well as all the unbelievers living today, have a certain knowledge of God and His law. They are aware that God will judge them for their actions. Nevertheless, they continually commit sins they know are wrong, and they also give their approval to others who commit these same sins. For this reason, the author of the letter to the Hebrews describes human beings as being **“all their lifetime subject to bondage” “through fear of death”** (Hebrews 2:15). In other words, people do wrong, they know they are doing wrong, they know that they will be punished for their wrongdoing by God, and so they are afraid to die and face their Creator and their God.

It is clear that the natural knowledge of God cannot give anyone eternal life. Why, then, has God given human beings this knowledge? Paul told the crowd at Athens: **“so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him”** (Acts 17:27). The natural knowledge of God leads people to seek for God and His truth. This results in religion being found in every culture. This natural knowledge of God also provides a point of contact for Christian missionaries bringing the Gospel to unbelievers. As missionaries bring God’s law to unbelievers, call attention to their sins and the coming judgment of God, the unbelievers recognize from their own natural knowledge of God that what the missionaries are saying about their sin and God’s judgment is true.

Questions

1. What can everyone learn about God by observing what God has created?
2. How did the apostle Paul show the people of Lystra that God had been good to them?
3. How did the Gentiles show that God’s law was written in their hearts?
4. Why do we say that the law written in man’s hearts does not make them godly?
5. What do unbelievers do with their natural knowledge of God?
6. Why is it that people all over the world are afraid to die?
7. In what way are Christian missionaries helped by the natural knowledge of God?