

Lesson 2

“The Bible: the Book God Wrote—Part 1”

Psalm 19; Rom. 1:18-25

Purpose:

Your students will become familiar with God’s work of revelation, categorizing that work into both special and general revelation. They will appreciate their Bibles as the most valuable form of special revelation, and they will count it an enormous privilege to read their Bible.

In a Nutshell:

The doctrine of the Bible is a good place for the theologian to start because everything he will learn in his theological studies will be based on the Bible. In Lesson One we thought about the theologian’s need for child-like faith in God’s self-attesting revelation as the most credible starting point possible for knowing God (Heb. 11:6). The claims of anyone else can be better attested by some other higher authority. This is not possible with God, so we begin where He tells us to begin, with His Word (Ps. 19:7-14).

God’s Word has much to say about why it can be trusted. The Bible is actually a subset of a larger category of God’s work we call *special revelation*, which is itself only part of the picture when it comes to understanding the entirety of God’s work of revelation. In addition to special revelation, God has used general revelation to reveal himself (Ps. 19:1-6, Rom. 1:18-25).

Special revelation is the direct communication of God to man, whereas general revelation is God communicating to man indirectly through one of His other mighty works: creation, providence, salvation, or judgment. In addition, general revelation is general in the sense that it is available to all, whereas special revelation often is not. In this lesson we will study features of general and special revelation, providing a context for our study of the doctrine of the Bible, the book God wrote.

To the Testimony!

General Revelation

Ps. 19:1-3	1. The psalmist calls the heavens God’s handiwork, and he says that they speak. Paul speaks of how the creation of the world makes certain things visible. What specifically do the heavens say and the creation of the world make visible?
Rom. 1:18-25	

Answer: The heavens declare God’s glory (Ps. 19:1). According to Paul the creation of the world makes visible (1) that which may be known of God (v. 19), (2) invisible things of Him (v. 20), (3) God’s eternal power and Godhead (v. 20), (4) the glory of the incorruptible God (v. 23), and (5) the truth of God (v. 25).

Application: It is a part of the image of God in man that man can appreciate the glory of things. For example, both men and bears go fishing, but only men rejoice in the size of the fish they catch—we can comprehend the glory of fishing in a way a bear cannot. We were designed to appreciate God’s glory in a way that a bear cannot. God’s glory is not revealed by catching a fish, but by making all the creatures of the sea. That glory is declared by the wondrous heavens and visible in all of creation. The universe tells us that God is powerful and blessed, that he is both great and good. *Universe* means *one word*. God spoke all things into existence, and He did so in part to communicate His glory to man.

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Interesting Insight!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon on Psalm 8, after having visited the Alps:

“Yet in all these how great soe’er they be,
We see not Him. The glass is all too dense
And dark, or else our earthborn eyes too dim.
“Yon Alps, that lift their heads above the clouds
And hold familiar converse with the stars,
Are dust, at which the balance trembleth not,
Compared with His divine immensity.
“The snow-crown’d summits fail to set Him forth,
Who dwelleth in Eternity, and bears
Alone, the name of High and Lofty One.
“Depths unfathomed are too shallow to express
The wisdom and the knowledge of the Lord.
“The mirror of the creatures has no space
To bear the image of the Infinite.
“‘Tis true the Lord hath fairly writ His name,
And set His seal upon creation’s brow.
“But as the skillful potter much excels
The vessel which he fashions on the wheel,
E’en so, but in proportion greater far,
Jehovah’s self transcends His noblest works.
“Earth’s ponderous wheels would break, her axles snap,
If freighted with the load of Deity.
“Space is too narrow for the Eternal’s rest,
And time too short a footstool for His throne.
“E’en an avalanche and thunder lack a voice,
To utter the full volume of His praise.

“How then can I declare Him! Where are words
With which my glowing tongue may speak His name!
“Silent I bow, and humbly I adore.”
(*Treasury of David*)

Application: Pastor Spurgeon examples well for us how to hear what the heavens declare and how to see what the creation of the world makes visible.

Ps. 19:2-4 2. From Psalm 19, describe how often God’s general revelation speaks and how many hear that revelation. From Romans 1, describe how those who hear God’s general revelation react to that revelation.
Rom. 1:18-25

Answer: God’s general revelation speaks constantly, “day unto day . . . and night unto night” (Ps. 19:2), and everyone hears this revelation (vv. 3-4). Those who hear react negatively: (1) they “hold [down] the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18); (2) they lacked humble thankfulness favoring foolish pride (vv. 21-22); and (3) they exchange the truth of the Creator’s glory for idolatry fashioned by and after the creature (vv. 23, 25).

Application: God’s general revelation of Himself to man speaks constantly to all. We know from Question One that the content of what is communicated ought to be life-altering truth for those who hear. But instead, those who hear this truth, though they in some sense possess it, nevertheless suppress it in unrighteousness. Their problem is not a lack of truth, but a lack of righteousness to respond correctly to the truth. The correct response to God’s revelation, general or special, is humble thankfulness and submission (v. 21). Pride keeps a man from enjoying this response, and consequently, ignorance is no excuse for any man (v. 20).

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Matt. 5:14-16 3. We have noted that creation is a work of God, which He uses to communicate general revelation. Other works used this way mentioned in these passages include His work of providence, His control of creation through nature’s laws (Ps. 19:4b-6), and His work of judgment, a revelation of His wrath against sin (Rom. 1:18, 24, 26-32). According to Matt. 5:14-16, in what sense does God intend His work of salvation to be a work of general revelation?

Answer: God intends the good works of saved people to be the light of the world. Watching the fruit of the Spirit in our lives should explain something about our God to those who see our lives.

Application: Our Lord’s instruction in this passage indicates something troubling about this

form of general revelation. We have seen that from the works of God's creation, providence, and judgment, a consistent and universal message springs forth full of the revelation of God's truth to man. But when it comes to the general revelation that springs from our good works, this form of communicating the messages of God is less consistent and less universal. We have to agree to let the light shine before men, or else this form of revelation shall fail.

Notes: So we have a role to play when it comes to God's work of general revelation. Ultimately, however, each form of general revelation is subject to some limiting imperfection as it operates in our sinful world. Creation as originally designed is no longer available to us. What we see now is marred by the curse. Man himself, made in God's own image, bears that image as distorted by sin and death. God's providence now includes the troubling mystery of evil, and God's judgment can seem at times distant, late, or even unequal in our sinful estimation. The light that comes from the good works of changed lives in God's work of salvation can suffer from heartbreaking exceptions that communicate confusion rather than truth. In the end what is needed is a perfect direct revelation, and this work of God is called His special revelation.

Special Revelation

Heb. 1:1-3 4. Whereas general revelation is God's revealing Himself to everyone indirectly through His other works, special revelation refers to the direct revelation of God's Word to certain men. The author of Hebrews reminds us that this was done at different times in different ways. From your knowledge of the Bible, try to name five of these ways in which God spoke directly, authoritatively, and infallibly to man.

Answer: These direct communications to certain men include (1) an audible voice (Gen. 2:16-17, 4:6-12, 6:13-21, Acts 9:3-7), (2) as a Christophany, like the angel of the Lord (Gen. 16:7-13), (3) through visions (Gen. 12:7, Acts 10:10-17), (4) through prophets (Num. 12:6-8, Luke 3:2), (5) through dreams (Gen. 15:12, 37:5, Matt. 1:20), (6) through an angel (Dan. 10:5-21, Luke 1:13-20), (7) through layman prophetic utterances (1 Sam. 10:10-12, 1 Cor. 12:1), (8) through miraculous wonders (2 Kings 4:1-7, Acts 3:1-10), (9) through casting lots (Josh. 14:2), (10) through the Urim and Thummim (Exod. 28:30), (11) through the inspiration of Scripture (Josh. 1:8, 2 Pet. 1:20-21), and (12) through the incarnation of the Son of God (Heb. 1:2-3).

Application: It is important to understand that all of these forms of special revelation are direct communications of God's Word to certain men. This alone makes them verbally inerrant and infallible, in addition to authoritative and binding. To deny the inerrancy of Scripture is to leave open the possibility of denying the inerrancy of any other form of special revelation, an approach that got Zacharias in trouble with Gabriel (Luke 1:18-20).

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Ps. 5. What can special revelation do that general revelation is powerless to do?
19:7-14
Rom.
10:13-17

Answer: The psalmist indicates that special revelation, in this case Scripture, can do some things not attributed to general revelation, like convert the soul (v. 7), make the simple wise (v. 7), rejoice the heart (v. 8), enlighten the eyes (v. 8), warn God's servant and deal with his sin (vv. 11-13), reveal God as Yahweh, the psalmist's strength and redeemer (v. 14). Paul is equally clear in Romans that in order to have the faith that calls upon the name of the Lord for salvation, a person must hear the Word of God, special revelation, specifically, the gospel (vv. 15-16).

Application: Sinners cannot be saved without the gospel. How they respond to general revelation leaves them without excuse, because they should not respond that way. But that general revelation can not by itself save them, even if they were able to respond more positively to it. Although the first two chapters of Romans demonstrate that the unsaved religious man exposed to special revelation is just as sinful and guilty as the pagan man who lacks that exposure, the example of Cornelius indicates that it is far better for a culture of lost people to be exposed to the Word of God than it is for it to be pagan (Acts 10:1-6).

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Interesting Insight!

"The rejection of what is revealed in general revelation is sufficient to condemn justly. But this does not imply that the acceptance of general revelation is sufficient to effect eternal salvation. It is not, simply because there is no revelation of the atoning death of God's Son.

"If what I have said appears to erect a double-standard, so be it. There is nothing inherently wrong with two standards as long as both are just. And in this case both are. . . .

"If a concerned student goes to his fellow student who needs one thousand dollars for tuition and offers with genuine loving concern ten dollars (which is all he has), and if his ten dollar bill is thrown scornfully on the floor with a mocking 'What good will that pittance do me?' what further obligation does the student have to provide additional help to his fellow student? If he should suddenly be able to give the entire one thousand dollars, would anyone charge him with injustice if he gave it to another needy student? Accepting a ten dollar gift will not 'save' the person who needs one thousand dollars, but rejecting it will condemn him. We must not forget that the majority of people who have ever lived have rejected the revelation of God through nature, and that rejection has come with scorn and deliberate substitution of their own gods. They have condemned themselves, and when God rejects them, He does so justly" [Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 38].

Heb. 1:3
John 1:1, 18
14:6
Matt. 11:25-30

6. In what sense is Jesus Christ the most important form of special revelation given to us from God?

Answer: Jesus Christ is the most important form of special revelation because He not only reveals God, He is God. In addition, as the only way to the Father, Jesus must be the one who reveals the Father to the sinner if the sinner is going to be saved. A man can be saved apart from any other specific form of special revelation except this one – He must come to terms with Jesus Christ.

Application: Here again, when our Lord says to those who labor and are heavy laden, “Come unto Me,” no substitute will do. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes unto the Father but by Him. We must take His yoke upon us, or we shall not find rest. These things are revealed to those whom Jesus saves. It is not the wise and the prudent who figure these things out, but rather babes who receive this revelation with child-like faith. The incarnate Son of God is the most important form of special revelation because He saves.

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John 14:25-26
16:5-14

7. From the standpoint of special revelation, why was it advantageous for Jesus Christ to leave us and send the Holy Spirit at Pentecost?

Answer: The Holy Spirit’s Pentecostal coming was a divine work of special revelation (Acts 2:16-21) that ultimately provided the church with access to “all the truth” (John 16:13), the completed special revelation of God in the New Testament Scriptures (1 Cor. 13:8-12).

Application: As those who possess the completed revelation of Scripture, we possess a book of great life and power (Heb. 4:12). We of all generations of God’s people bear the responsibility to become men and women of the Word and to put away childish things. We have been given what we have to be witnesses unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Though the resurrected body of Christ has ascended and left this earth, His body the church extends throughout the world giving faith-producing special revelation wherever it goes – Scripture.

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