

# DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE

## General and Special Revelation

### Lesson #7

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Revelation is a term used to describe how God has chosen to reveal Himself to man. Christians usually use the term in relation to the Bible being the revelation of God. We call the last book of the Bible the book of Revelation and sometimes refer to ideas we have as revelations. How does revelation relate to the Bible? What are the differences between what theologians call general and special revelation? In this study we will examine the two broad categories of revelation general and special revelation and seek to discover how these apply to the Bible and our lives.

#### I. DEFINITION OF GENERAL REVELATION

- A. That divine disclosure to all persons at all times and places by which one comes to know that God is, and what He is like. While not imparting saving truths such as the Trinity, incarnation, or atonement, general revelation mediates the conviction that God exists and that He is self-sufficient, transcendent, immanent, eternal, powerful, wise, good, and righteous. General or natural revelation may be divided into two categories: (1) internal, the innate sense of deity and conscience, and (2) external, nature and providential history.<sup>1</sup>
- B. General revelation is God's communications of Himself to all persons at all times and in all places. . . A closer examination of the definition of general revelation discloses that it refers to God's self-manifestation through nature, history, and the inner being of the human person. It is general in two senses: its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times) and the content of the message (it is less particularized and detailed than special revelation).<sup>2</sup>
- C. It is important to remember that general revelation is what can be known **about God** from creation. General revelation does not tell us how to live to the glory of God. In order to know how to live for God's glory, we need special revelation.

#### II. DEFINITION OF SPECIAL REVELATION

- A. Special revelation is objective verbal revelation from God.<sup>3</sup> Special revelation can be spoken, as when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, or written, as is the case with the Scriptures. The primary source of special revelation is the Word of God. The Bible reveals that special revelation has been given to a few select individuals, such as the prophets, certain kings, apostles, and a handful of others whom God spoke to directly, verbally, and objectively. Apart from the writings of Scriptures there have been rare instances of special revelation such

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Elwell, Gen. Ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, pg. 944.

<sup>2</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 153-154.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Geisler & William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pg. 322.

as theophanies, visions, dreams, and, in one case, God even spoke through a donkey. Other than very rare and isolated encounters with God, i.e., theophanies and Christophanies,<sup>4</sup> special revelation is always the product of inspiration.<sup>5</sup>

- B. Special revelation, . . . involves God's particular communications and manifestations of Himself to particular persons at particular times, communications and manifestations which are available now only by consultation of certain sacred writings.<sup>6</sup>

### III. **CURRENT TRENDS TO CONSIDER IN RELATION TO GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION**

- A. Today there are many people claiming that they have had a word from God or that God spoke to them. We hear people saying things like, "God was telling me. . . ." or "I sensed the Lord was speaking to me and saying. . . ." These people believe that God is communicating to them apart from His Word. They believe God is directing them through some other means than the Scriptures. This raises some questions:

1. Is God giving these people general or special revelation?
2. Does the Bible direct us to live by what we feel or sense or by our personal interpretations of circumstances or something else?
3. General revelation, as noted above, only relates to what can be learned about God from creation.<sup>7</sup> Do these private revelations from God qualify as general revelation?
4. Special revelation is perfect, direct verbal communication from God in an understandable language. Do the private revelations people claim to have today qualify as special revelation?
5. If the private revelations people claim to have today are special revelation, what implications does that have concerning the Bible?

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<sup>4</sup> Theophanies and Christophanies were direct appearances or manifestations of God where God verbally spoke e.g., burning bush, the Angel of the Lord, Shekinah glory.

<sup>5</sup> Inspiration is the process whereby the Holy Spirit used men to write down the Word of God (II Tim. 3:16; II Pet. 1:20-21). See lesson six for a detailed study on inspiration.

<sup>6</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 154.

<sup>7</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, pg. 87.

- B. When it comes to sin cursed men in their fallen state, we must remember that they naturally suppress, distort, twist and corrupt general revelation (John 3:19-20; Rom. 1:18-25).<sup>8</sup> Because general revelation is interpreted subjectively (coming from within us), the wicked hearts of men frequently do not see what general revelation is teaching them about God. Because of this, we must always verify the accuracy of what we think we are learning about God apart from the Bible, by comparing general revelation with special revelation (the Scriptures). Special revelation is objective (interpreted from observing what is outside of us in the text of Scripture). In the Old Testament when a person claimed to receive special revelation, they needed to be able to prove it by predicting the future. If they did attempt to predict the future and were unable to do so, they were labeled a false prophet and put to death.
1. Deut. 13:1-5 1 If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them, 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.
  2. Deut. 18:18-22 I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19 It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. 20 But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. 21 You may say in your heart, How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? 22 When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.
    - a. Why do you think the punishment was so severe for falsely claiming to speak from the Lord?
    - b. If someone says they are speaking from God, but aren't, then who are they speaking on behalf of?
    - c. What are the consequences of following the false revelations of a false prophet?
    - d. What is the difference between listening to a sincere false prophet and an insincere false prophet?

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<sup>8</sup> Norman Geisler & William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pg. 322.

## IV. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

### A. General (or Natural) Revelation

1. Psa. 19:1-2 The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. 2Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.
2. Rom. 1:18-20 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.
3. Rom. 2:14-15 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, 15in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.
4. Does the Bible tell us that people can be saved by looking at creation?

### B. Special (or Particular) Revelation

#### 1. Primarily Through Israel

- a. Psa. 147:19-20 He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. 20He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His ordinances, they have not known them. Praise the Lord!
- b. Jn. 4:22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.
- c. Eph. 2:11-12 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by the so-called Circumcision, which is performed in the flesh by human hands 12remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.
- d. What do the verses above tell us about the instrument God used to reveal His Word and the consequences of not having the Word of God?

#### 2. Inspired Writings

- a. Deut. 29:29 The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

- b. Neh. 8:1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel.
- c. II Pet. 1:20-21 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.
- d. Why has God chosen to speak to His people through the Bible more than any other means?

### 3. Direct Verbal Communication

- a. Gen. 6:13 Then God said to Noah, The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.
- b. Gen. 12:1 Now the Lord said to Abram, Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you;
- c. Ex. 20:1-2, 18-19 Then God spoke all these words, saying, 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.  
  
18 All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. 19 Then they said to Moses, Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.
- d. Numb. 12:7-8 Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household; 8 With him I speak mouth to mouth, Even openly, and not in dark sayings, And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant, against Moses?
- e. In any of the examples above, did those who received special revelation have any doubt about what God was saying? Why?

### 4. Inspired Proclamations

- a. Deut. 18:18 I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.
- b. Amos 3:7 Surely the Lord God does nothing Unless He reveals His secret counsel To His servants the prophets.
- c. Matt. 16:16-17 Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

- d. Mk. 13:11 When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.
- e. When God decides to speak to someone, does that person have a choice in the matter?
- f. What do the Scriptures above teach you about how God chooses to speak to people through inspired proclamations? Are these to be normal for all people at all times?

## 5. Visions/Dreams

- a. Gen. 41:1 Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile.
- b. Numb. 12:6 He said, Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream.
- c. Dan. 2:19, 28 Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven;  
  
28 However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days. This was your dream and the visions in your mind while on your bed.
- d. Dan. 7:1 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel saw a dream and visions in his mind as he lay on his bed; then he wrote the dream down and related the following summary of it.
- e. Joel 2:28 It will come about after this That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions.
- f. What do the verses above tell you about visions and dreams?

## 6. Theophanies/Christophanies

- a. Gen. 18:1-2, 13, 17, 20, 22 1Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. 2When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from them to the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, . . . 13And the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old? . . . 17The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, . . . 20And the Lord said, The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. . . 22Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord.

- b. Ex. 3:1-4 Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. 3So Moses said, I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up. 4When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, Moses, Moses! And he said, Here I am.
- c. Judges 13:9-22 God listened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again to the woman as she was sitting in the field, but Manoah her husband was not with her. 10So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, Behold, the man who came the other day has appeared to me. 11Then Manoah arose and followed his wife, and when he came to the man he said to him, Are you the man who spoke to the woman? And he said, I am. 12Manoah said, Now when your words come to pass, what shall be the boys mode of life and his vocation? 13So the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, Let the woman pay attention to all that I said. 14 She should not eat anything that comes from the vine nor drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; let her observe all that I commanded. 15Then Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, Please let us detain you so that we may prepare a young goat for you. 16The angel of the Lord said to Manoah, Though you detain me, I will not eat your food, but if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord. For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord. 17Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, What is your name, so that when your words come to pass, we may honor you? 18But the angel of the Lord said to him, Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful? 19So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering and offered it on the rock to the Lord, and He performed wonders while Manoah and his wife looked on. 20For it came about when the flame went up from the altar toward heaven, that the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar. When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. 21Now the angel of the Lord did not appear to Manoah or his wife again. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. 22 So Manoah said to his wife, We will surely die, for we have seen God.
- d. When God sends men His Word, He also confronts them with Himself. The Bible does not think of revelation as a mere broadcasting of information, divinely guaranteed, but as God personally coming to individuals to make Himself known to them (Gen. 35:7; Ex. 6:3; Nu. 12:6-8; Gal. 1:15). This is the lesson to be learned from the theophanies of the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 3:2; 19:11-20; Ezek. 1; *etc.*), and from the part played by the enigmatic angel (messenger) of Yahweh, who is so evidently a manifestation of Yahweh Himself (cf. Gn. 16:10; Ex. 3:2ff.; Jdg. 13:9-23): the lesson, namely, that God is not only the author and subject of His messages to men, but He is also His own messenger. When a man meets God's Word, however casual and accidental the meeting may seem to be, God meets that man, addressing the word to him personally and calling for a personal response to Himself as its Author.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Wood, D. R. W., and I. Howard Marshall. *New Bible Dictionary*. 3rd ed. /, Page 1014. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996, Logos Bible Software.

## 7. The Incarnate Word

- a. Jn. 1:1-2, 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God.  
  
14And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- b. Heb. 1:2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.
- c. Rev. 19:13 He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.
- d. Because the Bible is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) and written by men carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21), the Bible is entirely reliable and accurate in its portrayal of Jesus Christ. There is, in fact, a correlation between the two aspects of special revelation: the Scripture may be termed the living, written Word (Heb. 4:12), while Jesus Christ may be designated the living, incarnate Word (John 1:1, 14). In the case of Christ, there was *human* parentage but the Holy Spirit overshadowed the event (Luke 1:35), ensuring a sinless Christ; in the case of the Scriptures there was *human* authorship but the Holy Spirit superintended the writers (2 Pet. 1:21), ensuring an inerrant Word. The Bible accurately presents the special revelation of God in Christ.<sup>10</sup>

## 8. Unique Examples of Special Revelation

- a. Numb. 22:28 And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?
- b. I Sam. 28:6 (see also Ex. 28:30; Numb. 27:21) When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets.
- c. I Sam. 28:11-19 Then the woman said, Whom shall I bring up for you? And he said, Bring up Samuel for me. 12When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul. 13The king said to her, Do not be afraid; but what do you see? And the woman said to Saul, I see a divine being coming up out of the earth. 14He said to her, What is his form? And she said, An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe. And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and did homage. 15Then Samuel said to Saul, Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up? And Saul answered, I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has departed from me and no longer answers me, either through prophets or by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I

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<sup>10</sup>Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, Chicago Ill., Moody Press, 1997, pg. 159, Logos Bible Software.



should do. 16 Samuel said, Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has departed from you and has become your adversary? 17 The Lord has done accordingly as He spoke through me; for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, to David. 18 As you did not obey the Lord and did not execute His fierce wrath on Amalek, so the Lord has done this thing to you this day. 19 Moreover the Lord will also give over Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines, therefore tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. Indeed the Lord will give over the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines!

- d. What do the instances mentioned above teach us about God and His revelation to man?
  
- e. If God has given special revelation to someone in a particular way once, should we expect Him to do it again or make it the norm for all Christians? Why or why not?

**V. ERRORS CONCERNING GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION**

- A. False God speaks to us through our feelings.
- B. False God speaks to us through circumstances.
- C. False The Holy Spirit speaks to us apart from the Scriptures.
- D. False God speaks to us when we pray.
- E. False We should build our doctrine and theology from what we see in creation.
- F. False People can get saved apart from the special revelation of the Bible.
- G. False We should make decisions based on our interpretation of what we think God is telling us in our circumstances and experiences.
- H. False Because God has used special means to communicate to people in the past, those special means should be the norm for every Christian.
- I. False Because I can't find a particular verse in the Bible that addresses my need and circumstance, I should try to listen to what the Lord is telling me to do in my heart.
- J. False If I have prayed about something and have a peace about it in my heart, then it must be the Lord telling me it is okay.

- K. False The Lord sometimes tells us through our feelings, senses, circumstances, or through other people, to do things that are contrary to His Word.

If we live by feelings, brethren, we shall live a very wretched life; we shall not dwell in the Father's house, but we shall be a kind of gypsies, whose tents are too frail to shut out the weather. God save us from being like the barometer, which at one time is set fair; but set fair with the barometer does not last long, it is back again to rain, and it drops down to much rain, before we know where we are. Strong faith knows where its true standing is, and, perceiving this to be unchanging, it concludes that its foundation is as good one day as another day; for its standing is in Christ. As the promise upon which strong faith leans is not a variable quantity, but is always the same, so its rest is the same.<sup>11</sup>

## VI. APPLICATION OF GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

- A. God speaks to us through His Word.
- B. Only believers can understand God's revelation in an experiential, life changing way.
- C. Unbelievers can only be condemned by general revelation, not saved.
- D. All we need for life and godliness is given to us in the Scriptures, which equip us for every good work.
- E. We must learn to seek what God has said to us in His Word first before seeking the wisdom of men and must judge the wisdom of men by the Word of God.
- F. If we want God to speak to us, then we must read the Bible.
- G. Special and general revelation reveal to us that God loves us and wants to reveal Himself to us.

The motions of the Spirit are always consonant with the Word. The Word is the chariot in which the Spirit of God rides; whichever way the tide of the Word runs, that way the wind of the Spirit blows.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. Vol. 36, Spurgeon's Sermons: Logos Library System; Spurgeon's Sermons. Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture*, pg. 68.