

Chapter 13

Truth only reveals itself when one gives up all preconceived ideas.

-- *Unknown*

The next morning I found Samuel having his coffee on the deck. We exchanged greetings. He invited me to join him. He expressed his concern that we might be talking about things that didn't interest me. I assured him that everything we had discussed was important. In fact, I was eager to continue. I put a little sugar in my coffee and the discussion picked up where we had left off the night before.

"I would like to continue," I said, "talking about how our perception in regard to the character and nature of God affects contemporary theology. How does our concept of a perfectly loving God impact forgiveness?"

FORGIVENESS

"Once again, if God is perfectly loving then forgiveness is certain."

"You mean it comes more or less automatically?"

"If this incredible Deity is all-knowing then It already knows, in advance, what you and I are going to do and It has already made accommodation for that action. And, if It loves us, then It will always forgive us. Of course, we still suffer the consequences for our actions: emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, or any combination of these, but God, being a loving God, forgives us. This consistency, knowing that God will always forgive, is what brings us hope. We never need to feel that God is against us. My children know that no matter what they do, what trouble they cause or what circumstances plague their life, they can always come home if they need to. We need to know that we can always come to God and find love."

"Some religions teach that wrongdoing, or sinning, creates a wall or barrier between the one who committed the sin and

God. It is further taught that the barrier is not removed until the person asks for forgiveness. What do you think about that?" I asked.

"Here is the basic question," he replied, "was the sin committed against God or someone else? Can we even sin against God?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What sin is there that we can commit against God?"

"Well," I said, "I assume that we could curse God, or reject God's love, or something like that."

"And how do you suppose that would affect God?" he asked.

"I guess it would make God angry or sad or disappointed."

"As we have discussed, if we can make God angry or sad or disappointed by our actions then we have control over God. By anticipating God's response to our actions, we can act in such a way as to control God's responses. Can we have control over God in any way?"

"Probably not," I admitted.

"I think you're right. God is the Creator. God stands alone. God needs no one and no one is over God or has control over God. We cannot affect God in any way. If we did then we would have some control over God. God would need us. But the fact is, God needs no one. You see, God does not need to respond or react to our actions or behavior at all. *We* respond to God but God does not respond to *us*. We can't hurt God. God is beyond our insults. God is above our rejection because God does not need us to accept It. God *is* and God *is* with or without our acceptance. If we do or say something that we suppose is an insult to God we might ask for forgiveness because we feel badly about what we did or said, but it makes no difference to God. God is love and God has forgiven us already, fully knowing that we are imperfect. Therefore, our concern should be to ask for forgiveness from the person whom we have wronged. Not God."

“I never thought of it in that way but it does make sense. I guess we expect God to react as a human would, once again attempting to make God like us.”

“We always do.”

REPENTANCE

“What about repentance?” I asked.

“Repentance and the concept of forgiveness is really for our benefit when you think about it.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s really a natural progression,” he explained. “We understand that what we have done is wrong because it hurt someone else, we feel remorse for our actions or words and we vow not to do it again. This is repentance. It is simply being sorry for something that we have done that hurt someone else and then vowing to not do it again. And, in making that decision, we feel better about ourselves knowing that we have made an improvement. If we are not sincerely repentant then we will more than likely repeat the action again and, once again, suffer the consequences.”

“And the guilt for what we have done?” I asked.

“Experience tells us that most people will still feel the guilt for having done or said something that hurt someone else. After all, the damage we have done cannot be undone. The consequences have been put into motion and they cannot be stopped. However, pledging that we will not do such a thing again will, perhaps, ease some of the guilt. Also, we have the peace and assurance that comes from knowing that God has already forgiven us. There is another action that comes into play here.”

CONFESSION

“Confession?” I asked.

“Yes. In Matthew 2:23-24, Jesus is credited with saying,

‘Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.’

“It seems that the point was not so much to confess to God, but to go to the person that was offended and ask for their forgiveness. By confessing we accept responsibility for our actions and this can bring peace, or eliminate some of the guilt that we might experience as a result of hurting someone else.

“Also, and more importantly, that kind of confession will help heal the wounded relationship that might have been a result of the offending deed or words.”

SALVATION

“What about salvation? Christianity teaches that salvation only comes by believing in Jesus as being the Son of God. Islam teaches that a person must believe in Allah, the Koran and must acknowledge that Muhammad was God’s prophet.”

“And Judaism,” Samuel continued, “while much more vague in their guidelines for salvation, dictates that a person must observe Jewish law, be circumcised and adhere to traditional customs. Each religion teaches that they have the *only* way to salvation, they are the *only* way to God; each claim to be God’s chosen people. Therefore, their particular formula for salvation makes them unique or exclusive. They own God. This feeling of exclusivity can lead to an attitude of arrogance and self-righteousness. Exclusivity is certainly contradictory to what we have discovered about the consistency and perfect love of the Almighty One.

“In addition, as you have already noted, all three religions claim that the God’s love is like a covenant – a one-way agreement. If this is the case then we do not have to do anything to merit God’s love and affection. If we did, it would be a contract, not a covenant. Remember, Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:45b,

‘He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.’

“God is no respecter of persons. In the God’s sight, it seems we are all the same. That’s consistency.

“Also, there is a danger associated with obtaining salvation through a certain act or by performing certain deeds, or observing certain rituals,” he explained. “Once a person feels that they have obtained this salvation, there might be a tendency to think that’s all there is, that they have done all they need to do, that they have accomplished all they need to accomplish. This feeling of complacency can result in a lack of personal involvement in the activities that are really important: helping others and helping to make this world a better place in which to live. Once again, it is important to reiterate that it is this attitude of exclusivity that has caused conflict between religions and led to much of the strife that we are experiencing in the world today.”

PRAYER

“And what about prayer? What does our conclusion about the nature of God tell us about prayer?”

“Prayer is one of the most challenging issues in religious philosophy. Obviously, there is nothing in nature to give us a clue concerning prayer. However, if we examine the concept of prayer, we can draw some conclusions that are rational and logical. So let’s discuss the logic behind prayer.”

“But can there be logic applied to something like communication with a supernatural being?” I asked.

“Bear with me, if you will.”

“Go ahead.” I couldn’t wait to hear how he planned to deal with this topic.

“Why do people pray?” he asked.

“I guess there are a lot of reasons. Sometimes we pray because we need help, sometimes it’s to offer praise and at other

times it might be to ask God to help someone else who is in need.”

He nodded in agreement. “I think you’ve covered some of the reasons. There are several implications that are inherent when we discuss prayer. First, when we ask God for something we are implying that God isn’t aware that we have a certain need or desire so we have to bring it to God’s attention. If God is perfect in knowledge, then God already knows what we need or desire. Remember, what Jesus said concerning prayer:

‘And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.’⁷⁰

“Secondly, prayer implies that we can be persuasive enough to convince God to give us what we need or want. In other words, we think we have the power to influence how God will work in our lives and the lives of others. Once again, that implies that we can have control over God.

“Thirdly, prayer infers that we know better than God what should be done or should not be done in a specific situation. Again, the implication here is that we are more knowledgeable than God. Do we think we know better than God what should be done when it is God who understands and sees everything fully whereas we can only see things from a very limited perspective?”

I had to agree. “I guess, like you said, with our limited knowledge of what is involved in any given situation, we might actually be praying for something that would result in a worse situation if God answered that prayer and gave us what we requested!”

“I think that’s a good point. And, fourth, prayer infers that God will alter everyone else’s schedule or life in some way so that we can get what we want. If I pray that God will give me a

⁷⁰ Bible, Matthew 6:7-8.

specific job, for instance, will God answer that prayer and give me the job when someone else is more qualified and needs the job more than I do? Will God give me the job in spite of the fact that there is a better job for me somewhere else, just waiting for me to find it? Will God alter everyone else's life to give me what I want in spite of the fact that it is not what is best for me or for others? Probably not. Our prayer should be that God will lead us to the best opportunity and allow us to be able to recognize it when we see it."

"So, what is your conclusion?" I wondered.

"We can conclude that prayer is really not logical when approaching prayer in this way because God already knows what we need or desire. God knows better than we do what decision should be made and, since God's decisions are always perfect, we probably will not change God's mind through our argument no matter how persuasive we might be.

"Our prayers should be that God will help us in our decisions, give us guidance and allow us the sensitivity to recognize and discern what is from God and what is from our own desires. We should also praise God at every opportunity. Not for God's sake, but because we should feel humbled that this incomprehensible Being cares for us and has given us all that we have.

"Besides, as we have discussed, God is already actively participating in answering our prayers in another way that does not involve supernatural activity."

"Remind me. How is that?" I questioned.

"Let's take a career choice for example. Let's suppose that a person prays that God will lead him to the best career. God has given that person a talent and an interest, perhaps even a desire in some specific area. So, God has already pointed the way. That individual has already reached the first step if he has considered his talent and what he enjoys doing. Then, if he adds to the formula a list of his responsibilities, that is, his financial requirements, and any other influencing factors and uses these

ingredients to make a decision about a career, he should be well on the way to finding what he is looking for. God has given us all we need to make this and all other decisions in our lives. God participates by giving us the tools and capabilities we need to make logical decisions. And, as we mentioned, God is available to assist us through a variety of resources such as other people and a wealth of information from a myriad of sources.”

“I think when many people pray for something they are hoping to get some supernatural sign.” I said.

“You’re right. One of the greatest dangers regarding prayer is that the person doing the praying won’t do anything but sit around and wait for an answer, a supernatural revelation of some kind, an epiphany.”

“And do you think God gives it?”

“A supernatural revelation?”

“Yeah.”

“Not most of the time,” he replied. “God answers prayers by helping us make right decisions but we have to be actively involved in the decision-making process. God’s sign or revelation comes to us as we get involved in trying to find the answer to our dilemma. For instance, in seeking a career, we learn more about ourselves as we experiment with jobs and then experience the changes in our perception of that job as we participate in or develop that career. Then we can make new decisions based on those changes, all the while, learning more about life and ourselves. Some people want an immediate answer to their prayers, but we must realize, again, as history and experience tell us, that some things take time. As we search for answers to our prayers or become actively involved in the answer to our prayers, we are learning valuable lessons that can result in patience and wisdom. God has already given us what we need to act. I think this is true with all of our decisions. We have the greatest creative, intelligent energy in our lives. All we need to do is learn to tap that amazing power. But as for answering prayer supernaturally, God is God and God will do

whatever It sees fit and necessary to do. So nothing is out of the realm of possibility.”

“So praying for food, shelter and clothing is a waste of time?”

“Certainly not a waste of time. But, if God is truly omnipotent, then God already knows what we need. So, we are merely reiterating what God already knows. Perhaps it makes us feel better to have asked for it, but the Incomprehensible One already knows our needs and our desires. But, once again, remember, we must be actively involved in getting these things for ourselves. If we pray for food and then sit around waiting for a handout or for a steak to fall from the sky we might just starve to death. We always have to be involved in the process. The secret is to offer praise to God for providing these things to us.”

“So, in your evaluation, God is the enabler?” I concluded.

“Yes, but more than that. God also gets involved by putting people and other influences in our lives that can help us. God provides us with a wealth of information if we look for it. And God offers us wisdom, as well. So God is not just an enabler, God is also an active provider as well as the power or energy behind our thoughts. God is always with us assisting us with our decision-making.”

“How about praying for healing?” I asked.

“Let’s face the truth, if God answered the prayer of every person who prayed for healing, no one would be sick and no one would die! Additionally, when a person doesn’t get better and does die, is it God’s fault for not answering the prayer? Or is it life? The consequences of life must be played out if there is going to be a balance in this world. That’s the way the world was designed. Do you see what I mean? The simple fact is that if God answered every prayer by every person according to their desires, there would be no sickness, no death, no sorrow, no pain, no responsibility for our actions because God would always step in and fix the situation. I guess some would call that heaven! Unfortunately, this is not heaven. On this earth, in this

life, there is pain and sorrow and death. That is the order of this world.”

“But at times do you think God will step in and supernaturally alter a situation?”

“Again, nothing is beyond God. Since the Spirit does whatever it chooses to do, supernatural involvement is not beyond reason when it comes to a supernatural being. But I’m not sure that supernatural intervention comes as a result of a prayer request. God knows and God acts. Sometimes when it’s best for someone to be miraculously cured, it happens. When there is a situation that needs an immediate, supernatural remedy, it comes. Some people might call that coincidence but one man’s coincidence is another man’s miracle. There have been too many such occurrences in my own life to be considered coincidence. I’m not sure why or when God does it, but logical or not, God acts when and where God pleases and it is always the correct decision.”

“So you do or don’t believe in prayer?” I was still a little confused in how he stood on this issue.

“I do. But, as I mentioned, prayer, talking to God is very complex. Most religions set certain criteria for prayer: you must face a certain direction, pray at a specific time of day, say certain words over and over, pray in someone’s name, hold hands. All of these things imply that the Almighty One cannot or will not hear the prayer if those conditions are not met. If a loving parent will listen to their children under any circumstance then why would a loving God set such parameters before hearing our prayers? It seems totally out of character.”

“But aren’t these rituals good. Don’t they remind us to communicate with God?”

“Maybe. But the danger in following these rituals, praying a certain number of times a day or before meals or at bedtime, might become so automatic that they are meaningless except to make the person praying feel better about himself because he has

met the requirement of performing that rite. Maybe we should define what prayer is.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“Prayer is communication. If God exists around us and within us, then our very thoughts are prayers. Earlier I said that prayer is not logical. However, if we realize that God is living in us, then communication is not only logical, it is natural. God knows our thoughts therefore every thought is communication. If a person wants to make conversations with God more formal, that’s his option, but we must be aware that God is always participating in our lives, constantly communicating through our thoughts. Besides, it seems that prayer has become more for the individual doing the praying than it is a conversation with God.”

“What do you mean?” I wanted some clarification.

“Prayer offers hope,” he continued. “Hope makes a person more optimistic. People who are optimistic tend to look for positive answers or results. If you pray and have faith that God will answer your prayer then you are more positive about the outcome of whatever it is being prayed about or for. If a group of people is praying for the same thing, then the optimism, or hope, is increased even more. So, these things are good. From another aspect, though, prayer can also have dangers associated with it.”

“You mean the person doing the praying might sit around and wait for an answer rather than to actively participate in the situation being prayed about?” I was remembering our earlier discussion.

“Yes, that’s one danger we’ve discussed. The other danger is that God gets the blame if a prayer is *not* answered in a positive way. As we have discussed, since we are subject to consequences, both our own and those of others, bad things happen. And, when bad things happen there is a tendency to blame God. God becomes the scapegoat. God is the one who we blame instead of accepting the responsibility ourselves or admitting that what happened was a natural consequence of life.

Until we can accept responsibility for our own actions and understand that we are subject to the consequences of the actions of others, we will always be looking to blame someone or something else for our situations or misfortunes. We need to acknowledge that life brings good and bad and we are subject to both. For instance, let's say that I jump in my car and head for work. I'm running late so I pray that God will help me get to work on time."

"I've done that!" I admitted.

"Unfortunately, on the way to work, I encounter a horrific traffic jam. As a result, I'm going to be late for work. So while I sit there in traffic, biting my nails in frustration, I say to myself, "Why me? Why did this have to happen today, God?" Which implies that the traffic jam was God's fault and that God should have altered everyone's decision that led to that situation just so I could get to work on time. Instead, I should have reprimanded myself for leaving for work later than I should have. I should have consulted the local news stations for traffic reports so I could have avoided the problem altogether. You see, we must learn to be responsible for ourselves and learn to take responsibility for our own decisions. When we do, we are able to learn from these experiences and become better and wiser individuals."

"Blaming God might also cause us to resent God. So we might stop communicating with God; and cease our attempts to establish a closer relationship with the Ultimate Power that lives within us," I added.

"And that can have a devastating effect on our life, because, as God's creation, we were made to be one with this awesome Power and if we neglect that relationship we will be incomplete."

"I can see how that might happen."

MEDITATION

"There is another activity that must be considered in regards to prayer," Samuel continued.

“What’s that?”

“Meditation. Meditation makes prayer a two-way communication. Meditation allows us to reflect and focus on the problem or situation at hand. Being quiet enables a person to analyze a problem or situation more clearly. It can help provide solutions by allowing us to see the big picture. Being quiet enables us to hear God reminding us of what we have read, or seen, or heard that impacts our decision. God communicates with us in many ways, through intuition, or wisdom, or even through other people. Meditation helps us consider all aspects of a situation and use our minds and the creative energy that God gives us to find answers. God, the amazing intelligent Energy is within all of us just waiting to be tapped. Remember, our mind is the most powerful tool God has given us. We still do not fully recognize just how powerful it is.”

“So meditation is a form of prayer?” I inquired.

“Absolutely. Basically it is an essential part of two-way communication. There is talking and there is listening. Meditation is the listening part.”

“So what do we do? What do we conclude about prayer?”

“That prayer is natural,” Samuel reiterated. “Prayer helps us and serves as an inspiration to others. Prayer brings optimism and hope. God already knows our concern, but it is good for us to express it. Prayer makes a difference, but only to the one doing the praying and to those, perhaps, privy to the prayers being prayed. But, it is presumptuous to think that prayer will affect the outcome of a particular situation.”

PREDESTINATION VS. FREEDOM OF CHOICE

“So, do you think, based on your observations and conclusions, that the Almighty is involved in day-to-day activities?” I asked.

Samuel stood up and walked over to the edge of the deck. He thought for a moment collecting his thoughts.

“Conceptually,” he began, “if we credit the Almighty One with being omnipresent, that is, in all places at all times, and if we agree that the One is not subject to time or space, then there is no past, present or future with God. God simply is. Therefore, God has participated in all of life already.”

“But we live in this time,” I argued. “We are subject to time and space and that time is now. Do you think the Spirit gets actively involved in day-to-day activities? Does God alter situations and circumstances in order to accomplish some ultimate plan for the world?” I asked.

“This question is complex because it concerns two concepts that are closely related: predestination and freedom of choice. Has God predestined our lives so that our choices are really not choices at all but merely exercises we go through as a part of living? Or do our choices in life really impact our destiny?”

“That’s the question,” I begged. “So, what do you think?”

“For answers to these questions I think we have to rely more heavily on history and experience for answers than nature since most of nature acts almost exclusively out of intuition and instinct. There are several arguments that can be made against the concept of predestination. First, if our destiny is already planned then we, too, should act strictly out of instinct. If that were the case then there is no reason for the whole system of action and consequence. We would simply react to situations automatically or instinctively.

“Secondly, in the case of predestination, there is no reason for us to have been given, or developed, a brain that is capable of analyzing and storing information upon which to make decisions. It would be a cruel joke to give humans this extensive ability and then not allow us to actually use it.”

“But if God knows everything, being omnipotent and having perfect knowledge,” I pointed out, “then God knows our destiny and what decisions we will make. Isn’t that true?” I argued.

“We are not talking about knowledge, we are talking about predetermining our future. There is a difference. If I offer my youngest son, who really likes chocolate, the choice between having a candy bar or an apple, I know in advance which he will choose. Why? Because I know him. I know he will choose the candy bar. Even with this knowledge, he still has the freedom to choose. The decision is his. I have not controlled or manipulated his power to choose in any way. My knowledge does not impact his decision. God not only knows us in an even more intimate way than I know my son, God already knows the future. So, God knows what decisions we will make but that knowledge does not impact *our* decisions.

“The fact that God established the world in such a way as to allow for consequences, both good and bad depending on our choices, and the fact that we have been given the ability to make decisions are evidence that our choices do make a difference. Add to that the lessons that we have learned from history, the catastrophes and atrocities that have occurred at the hands of humans, it is clear that we are making decisions that impact our life and can have a real effect on the world. To believe that God planned the destruction of the Jews in World War II would be inconsistent with the nature of God. To believe that God was responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center in New York would be to say that the Creator advocates the destruction of Its own creation. To believe that God approves of the killing of people in any form is inconsistent with God’s nature. These are a result of man’s decisions, not God’s. This system of consequences tied to decisions is why bad things happen to good people and vice-versa. When a person makes a bad decision a lot of other people suffer from the consequences of that decision.”

“What about supernatural involvement?” I added.

“As we discussed earlier, God’s supernatural involvement is probably limited because life is played out depending on cause and effect, action and consequence. It is the way the Spirit has designed life to function on this earth. It is the order of things. But, God is God and It can do anything It pleases. However, it

would seem that supernatural involvement is very minimal since God participates in a much more natural way.”

“You mean through our thoughts?”

“If God is present in all of us as a creative, intelligent energy, then God assists us in a very real way to make decisions. This ability to make decisions gives us the opportunity and responsibility for our own destiny. We have the freedom to choose, and yet the advantage of having God’s input in the decision-making process.

“Our choices, our decisions are real. They affect us and they affect other people and things around us. We are responsible for our actions. We cannot blame anyone or anything else. And, because our actions and our decisions impact others we must always consider our choices and make our decisions carefully.”

“So, if you don’t think God has a plan, what’s to become of the world?” I was curious to hear his opinion.

“I didn’t say that God doesn’t have a plan. But if God does, who can know what it is? However, judging from nature, our best indication of what God’s plan is for the future is that God is good and therefore wants good things for us. We see this especially in evolution. Remember we pointed out earlier that Darwin makes the observation that variations that did not benefit an organism did not survive as a permanent variation of the organism. In other words, in evolution, only the good things that contributed to the survival of the organism lasted. God wants good for us. If there is a plan for the future, based on the fact that there are consequences for our actions; positive consequences for good actions and negative for bad actions, then we must conclude that God expects us to make good decisions that will result in positive consequences, that will in turn, lead to a healthier environment and a better world in which to live. Perhaps God’s plan is for us to care for each other and be good stewards of the world.”

He paused for a minute and gazed out across the vast landscape. Then he continued.

“If this world is ultimately destroyed, it will probably be as a result of man’s actions, not God’s. And, ironically, based on the world’s situation today, if the world is destroyed it will more than likely occur as the result of man waging war for religious reasons.

“In this century, although it is still early, there have been perhaps more major catastrophes than in any century in recent history. We have had earthquakes, a tsunami, a record number of damaging tornadoes, hurricanes, wild fires of unprecedented numbers, draughts, floods and disease outbreaks that have kept the news media scrambling to keep up. It’s no surprise that some people are wondering if we are experiencing the end of the world. In fact, in 2011, one Baptist minister announced that the world would come to an end on May 5 at 6:00. Is God to blame for these devastating events? Or is the earth simply going through another stage of evolution? After all, our planet has experienced radical changes in the prehistoric past. What makes us think that it will not continue to go through these changes? We are sometimes under the impression that the earth was created for us and that we are God’s greatest creation and therefore the earth and the heavens will remain in their present condition for our benefit forever. This is an inaccurate assumption. The earth and the universe are constantly changing. There is sufficient evidence provided by current events and scientific studies that we are about to experience a major alteration in our planet and we will have to make significant changes in our lifestyle in order to survive in this new world. In addition, politically and socially, we are experiencing unprecedented instability. Populations in countries around the globe are rising up in protest against governments that have fallen short of citizen expectations. Regimes are being toppled. Violent conflicts due to civil unrest, political disgruntlement and religious differences promise to change the face of everyday life as we have known it for hundreds of generations. The face of our world, physically, politically, economically and socially is about

to change more extensively than we have seen in hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years.”

“You don’t think this is God’s doing?” I asked.

“The universe has been created subject to the natural laws of cause and effect. As objects in the universe change position, direction, velocity or undergo any number of other changes, those modifications, regardless of how insignificant they may appear, have an effect on many other entities, including our own planet. Things do not remain in their present state forever. Again, all we need to do is study history to see proof of that. Is God responsible for these changes? Perhaps in a way since God designed the world the way it is, but change is necessary and ultimately good. It might not seem so good for those who are actually caught up in the middle of that change, but in the big picture, these changes are necessary.

“In any case, rest assured the world is changing. Is every tornado or earthquake God’s doing? I really don’t think so. They are part of the law of cause and effect, the result of our ever-evolving universe.”