

WHAT IS GOD REALLY UP TO?

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 2:1-16
Third Message
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1 Corinthians 2:1-16

At the end of C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior demon writes letters to a junior demon, the senior demon laments "the failure of our Intelligence Department" to understand the mind of God. Screwtape, the senior demon, wonders about God: "If only we could find out what He is really up to."¹

Well, what about God? Can we find out what he is really up to?

To answer the question, we turn not to the letter of a demon but to letter of an apostle. In 1 Corinthians 2, the apostle Paul tells us not only how we got the Scriptures but also how we can understand the Scriptures.

Changed lives

1 Corinthians 2:1-5:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

When Paul came to Corinth, he avoided "lofty speech" and "plausible words" that conveyed "wisdom"—that is, human wisdom. Such speech and words would have distracted from his gospel message: "Jesus Christ and him crucified." He wanted the Corinthians to focus not on the words or on the one speaking the words but on what the words mean.

If Paul's speech didn't come off as superior, neither did he himself: he was with them "in weakness and in fear and much trembling." His weakness may have been some physical ailment. For sure, when he came to

Corinth, the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:9-11).

Strip away superior words and a self-assured speaker, and all you're left with is the message: Jesus Christ and him crucified. But what happened? They believed! Paul got out of the way so that the gospel message could come "in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

The result? Changed lives. That's power. Therefore, the faith of the Corinthians rests on the power of God, who worked—and continues to work—in their lives through his Holy Spirit.

Powerful message

Years ago, I preached for the second time at an evangelistic campaign in Pakistan, in a terribly polluted city. The air pollution was so thick that it blocked out not only the moon and stars by night but also the sun by day. I became terribly sick. I was with the Pakistanis in much weakness.

Each time when I got up to preach the gospel, however, I forgot I was sick. Each time after the sermon, people stood up to indicate that they wanted to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. Each time I sat down after preaching, I felt terribly sick. I came to them in weakness, but the Spirit came to them in power.

If you have not yet given your life to Christ, listen to what Paul told the Corinthians: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures," he "was buried," and he "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

This simple message comes with the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said of the Spirit: "And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment . . ." (John 16:8).

I don't need to add to the message or subtract from it. In fact, if I add to it or subtract from it, I risk distracting

from it. If you believe this message, then your faith will rest not on the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Christ died for our sins. Christ was buried. Christ was raised from the dead.

Once we believe in Christ and receive the Holy Spirit, then what?

The wisdom of this age

1 Corinthians 2:6-13:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

Paul is not opposed to wisdom per se; he’s opposed to a particular kind of wisdom. The wisdom that Paul imparts is “of God” and appropriate for “the mature.” Paul will go on to suggest in a challenging way that perhaps the Corinthians aren’t ready for this wisdom (1 Corinthians 3:1-4).

The wisdom that Paul imparts contrasts with the wisdom of “this age” that is imparted by the earthly “rulers of this age,” who are “doomed to pass away”—and their wisdom with them.

The wisdom of God is now an open secret; it had been hidden, but now God has uncovered it. This wisdom isn’t confined to this age and even predates this age, having been decreed by God “before the ages for our glory” so that believers in Christ are restored as God’s image bearers, ultimately in the new creation (Romans 3:23). Indeed, followers of Jesus will inherit “the kingdom prepared” for them “from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

The rulers of this age, ignorant of the wisdom of God, crucified Jesus, “the Lord of glory,” who embodied the God of glory. In their wisdom, the wisdom of this age, they were fools.

Flawed understanding

Paul then recites something that has been written, though where it was written, from our vantage point today, is uncertain (Isaiah 64:4 and 65:16 are contenders). Our eyes can see, our ears can hear, and our hearts can draw some conclusions based on, or not based on, what we take in with our eyes and ears, but all three have their limitations. On their own or even together, they can’t see, hear, or imagine “what God has prepared for those who love him.”

The wisdom of Paul’s age is the same as the wisdom of this age in this sense: people come to conclusions either without God’s thoughts or with a flawed understanding of God’s thoughts. They cannot understand what God is really up to, if they even happen to believe in God. Because of such thinking, we’re always vulnerable to making cosmic blunders, such as crucifying the Lord of glory.

Woody Guthrie, in his song “Jesus Christ,” speculates what would happen to Jesus if he came to New York City: “If Jesus was to preach what he preached in Galilee, / They would lay poor Jesus in His grave.”

If our eyes and ears and hearts can’t imagine what God has prepared for those who love him, how then can we understand it?

The thoughts of God

Paul says God has revealed “these things,” what God has prepared for those who love him, “to us”—that is, to him and the other New Testament writers—through the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit has inspired the New Testament writers. Jesus told his apostles that the Holy Spirit would do this for them:

— “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

— “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13).

Just as the spirit of a person knows that person’s thoughts, so the Spirit of God knows God’s thoughts. Paul likens the Spirit of God to the divine self-consciousness and self-understanding. Only God knows God.

Therefore, if people are to know God’s thoughts, the Spirit of God must reveal those thoughts to those people. Paul and the other New Testament writers are such people. Indeed, Paul says that “we”—he and the other New Testament writers—have received the Spirit of God.

Therefore, Paul knows the depths of God and the thoughts of God: what God has decreed for our glory, what God has prepared for those who love him, the things freely given us by God. This wisdom, which builds on the gospel message of Christ crucified, features the implications of the gospel message.

All right, Paul and the other New Testament writers know such things, but how can the Corinthians know such things? The Corinthians know such things because Paul imparted them to them, “interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual”—taking what the Holy Spirit has revealed to them and conveying them to those who possess the Spirit based on their faith in Christ.

Preserved for us

How can we know such things? Paul and the other New Testament writers wrote down the thoughts of God. We have the New Testament, not to mention the Hebrew Scriptures, much of which the New Testament writers interpret for us. First Corinthians, for example, not only features the gospel message but also the implications of the gospel message. And it has been preserved for us.

Here is our doctrinal statement concerning the Scriptures:

We believe that the original writings of both Old and New Testaments were breathed out by God to prophets, apostles, and apostolic associates by means of the Spirit, who chose the

words employed according to the personality and background of the human author, and that these writings were without error and are of supreme and final authority in the lives of believers in any age.

Theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. tells the story of when he visited prisoners on death row. He came upon one prisoner and asked him how he spent his days. The man picked up his Bible and said, “I spend a lot of time reading our book. I’m glad it’s so big. I’ll never get to the bottom of it. You know, there are 2 billion of us Christians in the world, and everything today that any of us does that’s any good has something to do with our book. And I have a copy of it right here in my cell!”²

We have God’s revelation to us: the Scriptures. Is it enough? Lots of people read the Scriptures and don’t benefit from them. How do we benefit?

The mind of Christ

1 Corinthians 2:14-16:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ **The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.** ¹⁶ **“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.**

The “natural” person does not possess the Spirit of God and therefore cannot “accept the things of the Spirit of God.” In fact, such things appear to her or him as foolish, not wise. The things of the Spirit are “spiritually discerned”: they are discerned with the help of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, the natural person cannot understand what God is really up to.

On the one hand, the “spiritual” person, who possesses the Spirit, “judges all things”: such a person can understand all the things that the Spirit of God reveals. On the other hand, the spiritual person is “to be judged by no one”: those who don’t possess the Spirit cannot understand the spiritual person because they cannot understand what he or she understands.

Paul then asks a rhetorical question based on Isaiah 40:13. Who could possibly understand the mind of the Lord? No one—unless, of course, the Lord has communicated his mind. And he has done so: Paul and

the other New Testament writers have received the Spirit of God to understand the things of God.

Therefore, “we”—that is, Paul and the other New Testament writers—“have the mind of Christ.” The Holy Spirit has revealed the thoughts of God, now understood in the person of Jesus Christ, to Paul and the other New Testament writers.

The Spirit helps us

We who believe in Christ not only have the Scriptures, we also have the Holy Spirit, who helps us understand and, especially, apply the Scriptures. The Scriptures, breathed out by the Spirit, are authoritative, speaking God’s word to us, and they are also effective, as the Spirit relates us to God.

Put all of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 together, and you have revelation, inspiration, and illumination. First, God reveals his thoughts to the biblical writers: that’s revelation. Second, the biblical writers express those thoughts in the Scriptures: that’s inspiration. Third, the Holy Spirit helps us understand and apply the Scriptures: that’s illumination.

This does not mean that studying the Scriptures requires no effort. Grammatical, historical, and theological analysis and synthesis require a great deal of effort. The Spirit doesn’t make work unnecessary; he makes it effective.

As we apply our minds to the text, the Holy Spirit gives rise to thoughts and insights. From first to last, the process involves both intellectual effort and divine illumination. That’s why Paul could say to Timothy: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Timothy 2:7). Our part is considering the word. As we consider the word, the Lord works through our effort.

It is quite possible to accurately interpret Scripture apart from the indwelling activity of the Holy Spirit. In many cases, the Pharisees perfectly understood what Jesus said, but they hated him for it (Mark 12:12). They couldn’t apply it.

David Roper, a former pastor of this church, writes: “Frankly some of my non-Christian professors at the University of California had a better grasp of the meaning of the Bible than some of my evangelical colleagues who, interpretively speaking, tend to shoot from the hip. It was the implications of Scripture for life

and its ability to transform character that my profs were inclined to miss.”

Only the Holy Spirit can open our hearts to receive the truth we understand, assuming we understand it, and apply it to life. Therefore, though it is possible to accurately interpret Scripture apart from divine illumination, it is impossible to apply it in a God-oriented way. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to subjectively appropriate, and be shaped by, objective truth.

The Spirit’s most important work in helping us understand the word is in helping us apply it to life. And the result of application is the purpose of Bible study and contemplation: that God may be revealed so that he may be known and worshiped.

Burning hearts

Look at it this way. A patron commissions an artist to paint his portrait (like the Holy Spirit inspires the biblical writers). Then the artist paints the portrait (like the biblical authors express God’s thoughts in the Scriptures). Then a docent explains the finer points of the artwork to the observer (like the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures for us).

When Karen and I were first married, we visited Madrid, and one of the top attractions in Madrid is the Museo del Prado art museum, which includes works by Goya, Rubens, El Greco, and Velazquez. Upon entering, we were greeted by a docent who offered us his services.

He took us to these masterpieces and gave us all sorts of ways to appreciate them that we wouldn’t have known if we had toured the museum by ourselves. The docent illuminated the masterpieces for us, sort of like the Holy Spirit illuminates the biblical masterpieces.

After he was raised from the dead, Jesus joined two disciples who were walking to Emmaus, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Along the way, Jesus “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Later, when their eyes were opened, they said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:13-35).

Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit. At least occasionally, as the Spirit opens to us the Scriptures, our hearts will burn within us. The two disciples were in need, being disoriented after the loss of Jesus. Sometimes, when we

find ourselves in need, the Spirit will open us to a text that ministers to our hearts.

Recently, as I found myself in need, I came upon Psalm 46, which begins, “God is our refuge and strength, / a very present help in trouble.” I’ve been reading it through and praying it through ever since.

Then again, when am ever I *not* in need? I’m always in need. It’s just that sometimes, I’m *aware* of my need.

Of course, our hearts aren’t always—or even usually—going to burn within us when we engage with the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the memory of such an encounter can stay with us and serve as a stabilizing force in our lives.

What is waiting for us in the Scriptures? The depths of God and the thoughts of God: what God has decreed for our glory, what God has prepared for those who love him, the things freely given us by God. God is waiting for us in the Scriptures. The word of God is a feast!

Dig in! Dig in to know God.

There are multiple ways to engage with God by engaging with the Scriptures, from casual reading to meditation to intense study.

Since 1990, I’ve been following a daily Bible-reading plan that takes me through the Scriptures in three years, alternating between Old Testament and New Testament readings. That way I get breadth. I’m also always intensely studying a particular text. That way I get depth.

Whatever method you employ consider praying Psalm 119:18 before you begin: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (the basic meaning of the Hebrew word translated “law” is “instruction”).

The frustrations of Screwtape

What is God really up to? C.S. Lewis gives the answer away earlier in *The Screwtape Letters*. Listen again to the frustrations of Screwtape, the senior demon, as he ponders the relationship between God and humans:

*All His talk about Love must be a disguise for something else—He must have some **real** motive for creating them and taking so much trouble about them. The reason one comes to talk as if He really had this impossible Love is our utter failure to find out that real motive. What does He stand to make out of them? That is the insoluble question . . . We know that He cannot really love: nobody can: it doesn’t make sense. If we could only find out what He is **really** up to! Hypothesis after hypothesis has been tried, and still we can’t find out.³*

Ah, yes! What is God really up to? Love! The love of God is waiting for us in the word of God.

And I have a copy right here!

Endnotes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Urichsville, OH: Barbour and Co., MCMXC), 160.
2. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Reading for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 8-9.
3. Lewis, 97-98.