

The Ways of God

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out!” (Romans 11:33).

It is impossible for man to find or to search out the ways of God. They are above and beyond him as the heavens above the earth. Eliphaz taunts suffering bewildered Job with his incredulous, “Hast thou heard the secret of God?” (Job 15:8). And the Psalmist declares God’s judgments to be a “great deep” (Psalm 36:6). The Law teaches us that there are secrets that belong only to God (Deuteronomy 29:29). Yet in the face of the utter futility of man’s attempt to search out the ways of God, the Lord expresses His grief and wrath with a generation who has not known His ways. “Wherefore was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways” (Hebrews 3:10).

Man’s ways are always wrong and displeasing to God. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). “They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable” (Romans 3:12). God has *a way* for everything, and it is never man’s way. Man can never, in his own wisdom and ability, find or learn God’s ways, yet he is responsible to walk in God’s ways. “And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul . . .” (Deuteronomy 10:12).

A person may go a long way in the things of God, yet stop short of knowing God or His ways. The Hebrews with whom God was grieved were considerably advanced in religion. They saw the *works* of God for forty years (Hebrews 3:9). They walked as holy ground as any man ever trod. They were contemporary with the meekest and yet the mightiest of God’s servants, Moses. They were the first generation to be taught the Sinaitic Law. They heard and knew the *word* of God. Yet they never knew the *ways* of God, never learned to believe Him, so never pleased Him and *could not* enter into His rest.

The Works of God

The works of God are His acts, His deeds, what He has done, and is doing. They are a universal testimony of His existence, power and glory (Psalm 19:1-3). All men are witness of God’s works, whether they acknowledge and glorify Him for them or not. If men have no Bible, church or preacher, if they are illiterate and ignorant, yet they are responsible to worship and glorify God, for they have seen His works and they bear witness of Him.

The wondrous and unsearchable way in which every living creature, from man on down to the lowest cell, is made, speaks of a God of perfect and infinite wisdom. The awesome powers displayed in the elements, wind, rain, seas, fire, unleashed volcanoes, and earthquakes, bear a quiet murmur of the unlimited powers of their Creator. The laws He has ordered in nature and the known sciences point us to an immutable God and speak of His unimpeachable truth and faithfulness. The most tender of affections among creatures, the highest expression of joy and the most agonizing of griefs bear witness of a personal God Who is love that passes knowledge. These, with hundreds of others are the common works of God among all men which cannot help but be known.

The Hebrews were permitted to see some of the special works of God. They saw the plagues executed upon the Egyptians culminating with the death of the firstborn in all of Egypt, the opening of the Red Sea for them and the destruction of the Egyptian army. They gathered fresh food from heaven on the ground every morning, plucked quails from the air, drank water from a rock, walked in sandals that did not wear out for forty years, yet failed to believe Him.

Seeing the works of God, acknowledging that they are God’s works and that we owe Him the glory for them does not bring us into a favorable standing with Him, cause us to know Him or His ways. They serve only to make us responsible. They awaken, alert and warn us to heed His word, His truth, His commandments and instructions.

The works of God declare a God that is, a God that is almighty, a God to be feared, in whose omnipotent hands are our eternal destinies, a God Whose option it is to save or to damn. God’s works deny the foolish and arrogant claims of humanism. Heeded properly, they will expose the vain and illogical speculations of evolution. They cry down the doubts of the skeptic and agnostic; and reveal the obstinate insanity of the atheist. They have answered forever the wails of men over the plight of the heathen who having no Bible or preacher, yet perish in their sins. Men who with such a witness of God before their eyes refuse to seek to know Him and please Him, will have no more inclination to hear His word than they did to heed His works. Those who refuse to walk in the light they have will not be helped by a brighter one. If we are faithless in little, how can we be expected to be entrusted with yet more to trample under unholy feet?

Men who, upon witnessing the works of God, turn aside as Moses at the burning bush in search of the God of wondrous works, will soon find themselves in possession of the direct communications of the Almighty.

The Word of God

The word of God is the communication of a reigning King to His subjects. It reveals the person and character of God, His attributes, His delights and displeasure. The word reveals what He expects of His people, the penalty for disobedience and rewards for obedience. The word also reveals the character and condition of man. It explains traits of the human race that we would otherwise find inexplicable. It has in it all the necessary answers to the problems of good and evil, joy and suffering, justice and inequity. It lays out the way of life and peace and the causes of miseries, failure and death.

God, in His word, lifts up a holy standard for unholy men, and demands that the standard be met in every detail on pain of everlasting punishment. Then He also requires of impotent men other tasks that are impossible for them to perform. He not only forbids murder, but also condemns the common emotion of hate. Men filled with sexual desire are told their lusting in the heart is equivalent with committed adultery. Not only is deserved revenge against a wicked adversary forbidden, but we are enjoined to tear out the grudge and love the enemy. Christ orders an impotent man to walk, a palsied one to stretch out his hand, a dead one to come out of a tomb. A ruddy youth is sent to slay a giant, a lonely prophet to challenge a ruling queen and 800 false prophets. The Lord sends forth a motley crew whose past has nothing higher to commend them than such things as fishing, tax fraud, loafing, harlotry, thieving and lying, and commands them to evangelize the world. He commands them to cast out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead and preach the gospel of God's marvelous grace. Such are the things that the seeker finds in the word of God.

His word tells us truth, objective reality, absolutes, unchanging statutes, perfect law. It tells us what to do, what pleases and displeases God. It does not tell us *how* or *the way to get anything done*. God alone does that. It is God that works. Without Him we can do nothing. His word shuts us up to Him and His ways. We, in ourselves, cannot perform the holy standard and execute the perfect purposes of God. His ways are the way He does things, the way He goes, the manner in which He goes about it, the route He takes. There are four different ways in which men attempt to satisfy the word of God: They way of the apostate, the way of the hypocrite, the legal way, and the way of faith.

The Apostate.

He turns back. Having professed faith in Christ, he now learns that he has taken on more than he bargained for. Accepting the cut-rate, no strings attached salvation that ignorant "soul-winners" had offered him, he is shocked that there is no room in the Kingdom of Christ for unbroken rebels. What true believers have found to be precious blessings, he deems to be unreasonable rigors. The law of God, sweet to the Psalmist, is too bitter to swallow. The flesh pots of Egypt, the lying pleasantries, temporal lusts of the world allure and entice him back to his old way of life. He just quits, renounces all pretences of Christian faith, and, as the proverbial sow, returns to his wallow. He saw and recognized the works of God, looked into the word of God, found God's demands too much for his yet unregenerate heart, and turned back, never knowing the ways of God.

The Hypocrite.

He likewise has found the rigors of God's word too much for him. But unwilling to renounce his profession, admit his failure and honestly, openly turn back, he finds ways to keep up pretenses. Some parts of God's word he thinks he understands and thinks some of the Law within reach of his abilities and not too distasteful for his wicked heart. Thus he "makes broad the borders of his garments," scrupulously pays tithe of "mint, anise and cummin," etc. He compasses land and sea to convert one man to his own hellish hypocrisy. While devouring widows' houses, he makes long prayers and public pious displays to draw attention from his wicked greed. He hopes to outweigh his scantily covered secret sins by loudly paraded pious performances. Those other matters of God's word which he cannot begin to satisfy, he ignores and pretends they do not exist for him at all.

In this he hardly fools himself, very few men, God not at all. His is the way of play acting. He takes up a role and diligently works to fulfil it in a convincing way. Vainly imagining the approval of men to be synonymous with God's approval, he thinks himself to have found a way to meet the requirements of the word. Yet it is all his own way . . . the way of the hypocrite; and he never knows or walks in the ways of God.

The Legalist.

This person is confident that he has satisfied every jot and tittle of God's word. He pours over the letter, painstakingly straining out gnats while camels of spiritual violations thunder by in herds. His delight is in his abilities of personal discipline, in his success in keeping the law in the outward external sense, yet has no idea of his gross spiritual violations. He has, indeed, made clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within is full of extortion and excess" (Matthew 23:25). He camps under the shadow of Mt. Sinai's peaks, mirroring its angry scowl and black threats to all who do not measure up to his own peerless performance. So zealous is he for the outward letter that he even goes beyond the word of God, fabricating more grievous burdens to lay upon men's shoulders. His is the legal way. Keep all the laws of God, he reasons, and you have a right to His favor, He owes you His blessings; for you have bought them and therefore deserve them.

The legalist confidently points to his success as the obvious reward of his lawful performances. He likewise consistently reasons that the failures of others may be laid to their laxity in following the prescribed pattern as well as he. Doubtlessly if they were as holy as he, if they did everything the way he did, they would be as prosperous and successful as he. It is all very simple. The ways of God to him are a clearly spelled out roadmap . . . a meticulously composed set of instructions which anyone may read in the scriptures and do. Once again we must take note of the Hebrews who perished in the wilderness wanderings. They *knew* the word of God, had been taught it first hand by Moses, yet they did not know the ways of God (Hebrews 3:10).

This is the "Israel" that "has a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge," and "being ignorant of God's righteousness, goes about to establish his own righteousness and never submits himself to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:2-3). This poor beggar, clothed in the filthy rags of his external works, considers himself the supreme example of holiness, yet knows nothing of Christ's righteousness. He is simply another, like sheep, gone astray, turned to his own way, and knows not the ways of God. And as long as he imagines God to be pleased with that, he will never know the inadequate wretch he is.

What shall we then say? What are the ways of God? Where is His way to be found? How shall we now when we have found it? Who can have any assurance of knowing and walking in His way?

Of one thing we can be certain. His ways are found in the way of faith. “Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest. Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.” “But with whom was he grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom swore he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?” (Hebrews 3:10-12, 17-18). To not know the ways of God is primarily an error of heart, not of deeds. “They do always err in their heart.” Wrong deeds are then inevitable. Men fail to know the ways of God because of their evil heart of unbelief. They turn back outwardly, they turn back in their hearts (Acts 7:39), or they refuse to believe the impossible spiritual mandates of God’s word. Those who bow to all that God says and bend the mind and will to all of His precepts soon find themselves trapped against the Red Sea with Egypt’s army thundering down upon them. *There is no human way* out of that. God must *make* a way through the waters. That is the essence of the whole matter.

In justification it is the way of faith. Job, under accusation by his friends, cries out the unanswerable question, “How should a man be just with God?” (Job 9:2). What is it that we can do to square accounts with Him? He is too holy and our offences are too great. We can never be ought but His grateful debtor. There are no “plans,” “systems,” techniques, instructions, procedures, that a sinner can be given which he can do that will assure him a right standing with God. He is ever a beggar asking in faith for the free gift of God’s salvation. God’s ways are His Own. The means He uses to convince, to work repentance and faith in the sinner’s heart and impart the grace of salvation are hidden in His wisdom. We seek Him and His favor, and then find that He graciously makes a way for the penitent sinner to stand before Him justified by faith in Christ Jesus.

In sanctification it is still the way of faith. Many, like the foolish Galatians, suppose that having been justified (begun) in the Spirit, they can perfect themselves in the flesh (Galatians 3:3). They think that once they have gotten in, all they need do is perfect themselves by external Law-keeping. But it is yet the inner man that God is transforming into the image of Christ. The outer man will give testimony to the inner work of grace, but it works from the inside out, not outside in. There are no works from the inside out, not outside in. There are no humanly known “ways of God” whereby a man may sanctify himself. It is “God with us” . . . Christ working in us by the Holy Spirit. We walk with Him and “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

There are, of course, commandments to be kept, spiritual laws to be observed, exercises of piety, such as moral purity, scripture reading, prayers, worship attendance and participation, tithes, alms and offerings, fastings and labours; but true sanctification is an inner work of the Spirit that brings fruition in a joy in these outer expressions.

In service it is still the way of faith. Faith in God’s finished work. “See I have given into thine hand Jericho.” God’s command to take the city is accompanied by the statement that He had already given it to them (Joshua 6:2). The “way” or means by which Joshua was to prosecute this battle did not commend itself to him on its merit, but upon the God Who gave it. Nor did the way or means of doing this job become a standard for taking cities. It was never used again. So it is with all of God’s ways of getting things done. There are no “tried and proven methods.” Only a tried and proven God Who has His Own secret ways in which every job is to be done successfully. Such ways can never be found out apart from Him.

Consider Exodus 33:12-16: And Moses said unto the LORD, “See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight. Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation *is* thy people. And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest. And he said unto him, If thy presence go not *with me*, carry us not up hence. For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? *is it* not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that *are* upon the face of the earth.”

Moses has seen the works of God in the burning bush, the judgments of the Egyptians, and the Hebrew’s deliverance. He has turned aside to hear the word of God and has received a mandate impossible for him to perform without divine power and wisdom and guidance. “You have given me a job to do: Show me Your way.” Moses is asking for a road map, an instruction sheet, a set of rules and regulations, a schedule of time and events. God quickly tells him that there will be no such thing. “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” God Himself will be our Guide, our Wisdom, our Strength, our Assurance, our Righteousness. He will make known what is to be done, how it is to be done, when it is to be done. We are kept in clinging dependence upon Him at all times. This is the one thing that marks out and separates God’s redeemed people from all others on the face of the earth. “Is it not that thou goest with us? So shall we be separated.” This is the mark of the grace of God in a person’s life.

The ways of God are found in the way of rest. Those who have found Him are shown His ways and have found rest. “And I will give thee rest” (Exodus 33:14). Unbelief can never rest. It cannot trust and lean. It is always struggling to get the job done itself. “They shall not enter into my rest” (Hebrews 3:11). God has sworn that the unbeliever shall never rest. He cannot rest because of his unbelief (Hebrews 3:18-19). The reason for this is obvious. God’s works were finished from the foundation of the world (Hebrews 4:3). The believer has found this to be true, reckoned it so, trusted in the God Who has completed it, and therefore ceased his struggle to get anything done himself. The unbeliever will not accept that fact. He spends his life laboring and struggling to get something done that God has already finished. How utterly and exhaustively frustrating! He despises the perfection of God’s finished work and goes about devising his own clever ways of doing things himself. He is doomed to perpetual failure, and is a subject of God’s everlasting wrath.

“Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known” (Psalm 77:19). Ships leave not beaten paths through the sea. Though they ply it successfully they leave no certain trail for others to follow. Each captain must find the way for himself. So it is with the ways of God. He is our Navigator, and we shall reach our destination only by continually heeding His wise and unerring counsel. God alone is our chart and compass.

“The way of God is in the sanctuary” (Psalm 77:13). It is in holy communion with Him, abiding in His love and resting in His unerring guidance, His finished work.

- C. M.