

Review of “Experiencing the Spirit”, by Henry Blackaby

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Revealing the Unknowable

Many statements hint that man cannot know God without the Holy Spirit as given after the death of Jesus on the cross. Some examples:

“The person who does not know the Holy Spirit of God does not know God”

“But apart from the Holy Spirit, God's great salvation is of no relevance to us. Apart from the active work of the Spirit in our lives, we would neither know God nor have the ability to respond to Him.”

“... unless the Holy Spirit turns the light on, your life will be kept in complete darkness, disoriented to the things of God. There's absolutely nothing you can do to find the light; you're at the complete mercy of God to reveal it.”

“Theologians use the term *prevenient grace* to describe God's work of drawing us to Himself. Before we in our fallen state can seek God, He must first create the desire within us for spiritual realities... That's why we believe no one can go to church or open God's Word “by accident.” God is drawing them, whether or not they realize it.”

And also:

Because we're spiritual creatures created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), we have spiritual faculties that allow us to truly know Him... In non-Christians, this faculty lies dormant. It's asleep in their nature. For all practical purposes it is dead because of sin. But this faculty is quickened to life by the work of the Holy Spirit when we're born again. The sending of the Spirit was part of God's plan from the beginning, and that plan was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost”

It is true that we cannot know the mind of God unless he reveals it to us (1 Cor 2:11), and that according to the scriptures God has revealed himself through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:5, 2 Pet. 1:21). However, it is evident that God has revealed himself from the beginning of time, and also through the Law of Moses, through the prophets (2 Pet. 1:21) and through the creation itself (Rom. 1:19-20)

The statement that “apart from the active work of the Spirit in our lives” when combined with the concept of “spiritual faculties” (which are dead in us until awakened by the work of the Spirit as promised and worked on Pentecost), seems to say that mankind could not come to God until after the death of Christ! (when the Spirit was given to awaken our “spiritual faculties”)

These statements of Blackaby are in concert with the doctrine of Total Hereditary Depravity which says, (wikipedia.org) “... as a consequence of the Fall of Man, every person born into the world is enslaved to the service of sin and, apart from the efficacious or prevenient grace of God, is utterly unable to choose to follow God.” The doctrine of total hereditary depravity (i.e. that we inherit our depraved nature from Adam) contradicts what God said in Ezekiel 18:20 which says,

“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.” Thus, we are not separated from God by the sin of Adam or anyone else.

Blackaby seems to refer to the “fallen state” (i.e. inherited depravity) when he says - “Before we in our fallen state can seek God, He must first create the desire within us...”

Blackaby seems to use Romans 3 as evidence for the understanding of man being totally depraved and unable to even choose to follow God when he says,

“Apart from His active work in your life, you would never have the desire to seek Him. For as we've seen, because of sin, “There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God” (Romans 3:11)

Paul argued that God was just in his judgment of Gentiles who rejected God:

(Romans 1:19-20) “because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. (20) For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse”

Now, if it is true that man could neither know God nor respond to him (Blackaby's statement above, “Apart from His active work in your life...”) without “the active work of the Spirit” (as given after the death of Jesus), then either God is unjust toward those who lived prior to the death of Christ (by judging them for not doing what they could not do), or else the active work of the Spirit was effectual prior to the death of Jesus. Therefore if the awakening of man to his “spiritual faculties” is a work of the Spirit as Blackaby proposes, then it must not be a matter reserved until the pouring out of the spirit after the death of Christ since we know that God is just in his judgment.

Paul's statement in Romans 1:20, that the evidence of creation testified about God such that man is without excuse for failing to seek God, made it plain that man could learn about God by observing the creation. God provided a witness such that man could know how to follow him, and it is likely (from our knowledge that God has worked through the Spirit to reveal himself to man, e.g. 2 Peter 1:21), that the Spirit of God also revealed God to man during this time. It was possible for the Gentile who lived before Christ to seek God as Paul says,

(Rom. 2:14-16) “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, ... show the work of the law written in their hearts”

Since God has revealed himself such that Gentiles can seek him, and the Jews have the Law which reveals God to mankind, man can seek and discover God. However, Blackaby says (ch 1), “Divine truth is not something we 'discover;' it is revealed by the Holy Spirit of God.” The Bible says that what may be known about God, man can observe (discover), since God has revealed it in His creation (Rom. 1:19-20) such that man is without excuse. Blackaby has the order inverted. God has already revealed himself and thus man can “discover” God.

Total Depravity

The concept of “Total Depravity” seems to be argued by Blackaby when he quotes Paul (Romans 3:11), for Blackaby wrote,

“Apart from His active work in your life, you would never have the desire to seek Him. For as we've seen, because of sin, “There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God” (Romans 3:11)

It must be understood from reading Romans 3 that the text is not saying that no person had ever sought

God or lived righteously – for in the scriptures, we read of men like:

Enoch (Gen. 5:24) who “walked with God”

Abraham (Rom. 4:3) 'For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”’

David (Acts 13:22) “He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.’”

This statement by Paul (Romans 3:11) is not directed toward mankind in general, and the application by Blackaby to all men in general is a mistake.

What did Paul Really Say?

The conclusion that Paul declares in Romans 3 must be understood in light of the arguments that he made preceding the conclusion and the evidence (quotations) that he used to justify the conclusion. First, consider the arguments used as the basis for the conclusion:

- (1) the Gentiles as a group had rebelled against God thus were under the power of sin (Rom. 1:18-32),
- (2) the Jews who were in a covenant relationship with God, as a group were not following God, and thus were under the power of sin (Rom. 2:1-29), and
- (3) those who were in a covenant relationship with God (Law of Moses) were not justified (Rom. 3:20).

Thus the conclusion is supported that all were under the power of sin (Rom. 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”).

Gentiles who rebelled

The conclusion that the Gentiles were under the power of sin begins with the Judgment of God: “Rom. 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...” The statement is that the judgment of God is against the Gentiles who rejected him and it is a righteous judgment.

This is not a condemnation of all who were Gentiles, for he says that some obeyed (Romans 2:14-16), but rather a condemnation of those who rejected God.

Jews who rebelled

The conclusion that the Jews were under the power of sin begins with those who were hypocritical and thought that because they had the Law, that they would escape judgment. This hypocrisy is stated plainly:

(Rom. 2:5) But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who “will render to each one according to his deeds”;

Thus, both the Jew and Gentile alike who rejected God faced “just” judgment. This is the basis for the

conclusion that all are under the power of sin. Romans 2 is not a blanket condemnation of all Jews, for he says immediately following vs. 5 (“will render to each one according to his deeds”)

“eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath”

Law of Moses could not take away Sin

Thus, in summary, God consigns all men who rebel against him, Jew and Gentile alike as “under sin”, and then in preparation for the conclusion, states that “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

This inability of the Law of Moses to take away sin is stated in Hebrews 10:4

“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin.”

All Mankind Under Sin

Thus, the general condition of mankind is that of being “under the power of sin”, for those who rebelled were clearly “under sin”, and those who had a covenant relationship with God (the Law of Moses) were “not justified”, and thus all were under the power of sin (law of sin and death, Romans 8:2), and therefore in need of salvation.

Evidence from the O.T. Scriptures

Paul quotes from several Old Testament passages to show that this condition of those who reject God was known and spoken of in God's word. Each quote is about those who rebel, and none are spoken of about mankind in general.

O.T. Quote #1

First (Rom. 3:11-2) Paul quotes Psalm 14. The psalm begins with:

“The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, They have done abominable works, There is none who does good.

Who is being spoken about in the statement “none who does good”? The opening statement is speaking of those who reject God, the one who says “there is no God”. These are described (as a class) as being foolish. These are those who are corrupt and have done abominable works. It is among this class that it is said, “there is none who does good”.

O.T. Quote #2

Next (Rom. 3:13) Paul references Psalm 5:9 which says:

(Psalm 5:9) For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; Their inward part is destruction; Their throat is an open tomb; They flatter with their tongue.

In the context, who is David speaking of? In the previous verse (v. 8) David says, “Lead me, O Lord, in Your righteousness because of my enemies:” Thus, in the context, David is speaking of his enemies

and verse 9 (quoted by Paul) is a statement directed at the enemies of David, and by extension the enemies of God, since they rejected the anointed of God (David) and his rule over them.

O.T. Quote #3

Next (Rom. 3:13b) Paul references Psalm 140:3, which says:

“They sharpen their tongues like a serpent; The poison of asps is under their lips.”

In the context of Psalm 140, David begins with (v. 1-2), “Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; Preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their hearts; They continually gather together for war.”

Thus, in the context, this is not speaking of the general condition of mankind, but rather is speaking specifically about the condition of those who rejected David as God's anointed (David) and by extension the reign of God as well.

O.T. Quote #4

Next (Rom. 3:14), Paul references Psalm 10:7, which says:

“His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and oppression; Under his tongue is trouble and iniquity.”

In the context, the Psalmist speaks of the wicked and his oppression of the poor and thus the need for God's judgment against the wicked. In the verses immediately preceding, he writes:

(Psalm 10:3-6) “For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire; He blesses the greedy and renounces the Lord. The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts. His ways are always prospering; Your judgments are far above, out of his sight; As for all his enemies, he sneers at them. He has said in his heart, 'I shall not be moved; I shall never be in adversity.'”

O.T. Quote #5

Next (Rom. 3:15-17), Paul references Is 59:7-8, which says:

Their feet run to evil, And they make haste to shed innocent blood; Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; Wasting and destruction are in their paths. (8) The way of peace they have not known, And there is no justice in their ways; They have made themselves crooked paths; Whoever takes that way shall not know peace.

In the context, Isaiah is speaking of the wicked who have separated themselves from God such that God would not hear their prayers:

Isaiah 59:2-3 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear. 3 For your hands are defiled with blood, And your fingers with iniquity; Your lips have spoken lies, Your tongue has muttered perversity.

It is evident that this statement of Isaiah is not directed against all men, for we know that God hears the prayers of the righteous - (Proverbs 15:29) “The Lord is far from the wicked, But He hears the prayer of the righteous.”

O.T. Quote #6

Next (Rom. 3:18), Paul references Psalm 36:1, which says:

“An oracle within my heart concerning the transgression of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes.”

In the context it plainly states that this is an oracle concerning the wicked.

Paul's Point

If it were Paul's object to state that all mankind was “Totally Depraved” (as Calvinism teaches), then he failed to argue the case successfully, for he used as evidence the condition of Gentiles who rejected God, Jews who rejected God, and the nature of the wicked who reject God. All of the passages quoted by Paul are applied to the wicked, those who rejected God – not a single one are used in a universal sense about all mankind.

Thus, since the arguments and the evidence used are speaking universally against those who reject God, what is Paul's conclusion? It is a plain statement that all are under sin (Rom. 3:23), and the first part of it being that the “common” condition of the Gentiles was that of disobedience, and that the “common” condition of the Jews was that of rebellion to God, and that neither group could be justified by their works. Then he concludes (v. 20) with the simple statement that even those in a covenant relationship (the Law of Moses) were not justified, (Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin) because of the limitations of the Law, and thus concludes that all mankind was under the power of sin prior to the death of Christ. This is the same condition described in Hebrews 2:14-15 which declares that Christ has liberated mankind from the bondage they were under while the devil had the power of death.

Thus the conclusion is that man needs salvation, and thus he introduced that concept in the next verse, “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed... even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Does Paul's argument mean that all mankind who lived before Jesus were condemned. Paul has made it clear that God's judgment against unrighteousness was evident (Rom. 1:18) and that it was just. But it was not universal – it was reserved for those who rejected God. Gentiles who accepted and obeyed God were accepted by God (Romans 2:14-16). Jews who lived obediently under the Law of Moses were saved (Romans 2:7 “... eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality”) – but not by the Law. They were saved just as we are, by the blood of Jesus, Heb. 9:15, “... for this reason He [Jesus] is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Those who were obedient under the Law of Moses were saved by Grace through faith (Eph. 2:8) – which included obedience to the faith just as those who lived after the Law of Moses was taken away (Rom 1:5; 16:15).

Salvation is not earned through works which merit salvation, but rather salvation is the free gift of God (Eph 2:9 “not of works, lest anyone should boast”). However, the free gift is not applied to all, for then all would be saved, since this is what God desires (1 Tim. 2:4). Access to that Grace, is through faith – reserved for those who believe and obey. Paul said, (Romans 5:2), “through whom [i.e. Christ] also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand”. The access to the grace is through Christ and faith in him. That faith includes obedience as even the context of Ephesians 2 indicates, (v. 10) “For

we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”

Jesus also said “I am the true vine.. abide in Me, and I in you... if anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch...if you keep my commandments, you will abide in My love”. God has always commanded obedience, and Jesus likewise said, (John 15:14) “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.” By obedience we do not earn salvation, but can we say that we love God, and that we are a friend of God, and then refuse to obey him?

Conclusion:

Paul does not teach a doctrine of Total Depravity in Romans 1-3, but teaches that man apart from God (those who reject him) are by nature corrupt, and that all (Jew and Gentile alike) are in need of salvation from sin. What the Law of Moses could not accomplish (Hebrew 10:1-4) is now available in Christ Jesus, the grace of salvation by faith.