

THE UNKNOWN GOD MADE KNOWN

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Romans 8:28-30—But we do know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to purpose. Because whom he has foreknown, he has also predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he should be the firstborn from among many brethren. But whom he has predestinated, these also he has called; and whom he has called, these also he has justified; but whom he has justified, these also he has glorified.

John 1:18—No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

Let's have a word of prayer:

Dear Lord, as we continue in Thy presence we want to express our gratitude to Thee. Thou hast been so good to us, allowing us even at this hour to meet together before Thee. Dear Lord, we do realize that we are standing on holy ground. We want to remove our shoes, bow down before Thee, acknowledging Thee as our Lord, our Master. Dear Lord, what hast Thou to say to us this morning? Please speak, Thy servants heareth. May Thy name be hallowed, may Thy kingdom come and Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We ask in Thy precious name. Amen.

We do want to thank our Lord for gathering us together. I always feel that it is very special. We are living in the last days, and yet our Lord is so merciful to us, allowing us once again to gather together before Him. I do pray that we will treasure this time as precious, and we will really open ourselves totally to Him, allowing Him to speak and to work freely among us.

This time as we gather together we have a special theme—*Being Conformed to the Image of God's Son*. In the past few years we have been considering the eternal purpose of God. Our God has a purpose and that purpose He purposed even before the foundation of the world, and He purposed that purpose according to His good pleasure. Everything He does, He does according to that purpose. That purpose is so wonderful and so glorious because it is His good pleasure that all things should be summed up in Christ Jesus. And it is His good pleasure to give His beloved Son a bride. Thank God that we are all being called and involved.

In the past we have already fellowshiped together on the way to this purpose. How can this purpose be fulfilled? We find that God's way of accomplishing His purpose is by the way of the cross. It is by the cross of our Lord Jesus. And on the basis of His cross we who are called should deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. This time we are going to fellowship on one of the consequences, the results of the eternal purpose of God being fulfilled. It is that we who are the Lord's will be conformed to the image of His beloved Son, that His Son may be the firstborn among many brethren.

WHAT IS IMAGE?

In God's sovereign arrangement I was given the responsibility of talking about the image of the invisible God. This is taken from Colossians 1:15: "[The Son of His love] is the image of the invisible God." Now at the very outset I think there is something we

need to understand. What is meant by “image”? I think probably we have a very blurred understanding of what “image” in the Scripture means. Let me put it this way. Image is a derived likeness.

Let me explain. When we think of an image, probably we will think of a statue, and when you look at the statue, you think you see an image of the original. I remember many years ago when I was in London, I went to visit Madame Tussauds Wax Museum. When I went to that museum, I saw there was a man standing by the stairway. I thought he must be an usher, so I began to talk to him. I wanted to ask him where I should go, but to my surprise it was a wax image. And I was told by people who visited that place that you may find someone sitting by your side and when you try to strike up a conversation with him, it is a wax image. There is no life in it. Also, in that museum you can even see a person lying there and you find that his chest goes up and down, like breathing, but it is a wax person. There is no life in it. Is this what we call image? It is very much alike, but there is no life in it. It is not a derived likeness. It is a likeness that is made.

Let me put it another way. When you have a photo taken, if the artist is very skillful, he not only can get your likeness, he can even show your special characteristics in the picture. Now that is a very lively picture; it is picture and image. You see an image there, and it is so lively, but unfortunately, there is no life in it. So you cannot consider this as an image because image is a derived likeness. It is something that comes from within, not something put on from without. So when we talk about image in the word of God, we are talking about something more than just an outward appearance. You may appear almost alike in every way, but if it is not out of His life, if it does not come from within, that is not an image.

REPRESENTATION AND MANIFESTATION

Now brothers and sisters, image includes two basic ideas. On the one hand, image means representation, and on the other hand, it is manifestation. So if it is an image, on the one hand it is a representation of the reality; all that is real within is being represented. On the other hand, all that is real within has been fully manifested. So an image includes these two basic ideas.

When we read Genesis 1, we find that God created man in His image according to His likeness. What does it mean? We say image is a derived likeness. It is born from within, but when God created man, He created man in His image according to His likeness. So when man was created, you find that he was created in such a way that all the potential was there. He was supposed to represent God; he was supposed to manifest God. God had created him in such a way that all the capacities were there. All the possibilities were there, but there was something missing. When God put man before the tree of life, if man does not have the life of God in him, then all the potential will not be developed. Man would not be able to represent God and to manifest God. Unfortunately, our forefather sinned against God and that image in which he was created was marred.

When you come to Genesis 5:1, you find that when Adam was created, he was created in the likeness of God. But when you come to Genesis 5:3, when Adam begot his son Seth, he was born according to the likeness of Adam. It is no longer in the image of God or after the likeness of God. It becomes the likeness of Adam. So all we who came from Adam bear the likeness and the image of Adam. We have inherited, as it were, from Adam his nature, his character. But thank God, when our Lord Jesus came to redeem us,

He has not only forgiven all our sins, He has also given to us His own life. And with that life, gradually we are being conformed to His image. So what we receive in Christ is much more than that with which Adam was first created. Adam was created, but we are born from above. And because we are born from above, we can be conformed to the image of God's beloved Son. Now this is by way of introduction and hopefully we may remember this as we go on in these few days.

So to be conformed to the image of God's beloved Son does not mean something outward. Of course, when there is something real within, it will be expressed even outwardly, but we have to remember it is something of life; it is not something of creation only. God willing, during the three sessions that I am assigned to, first we would like to consider together this matter of how the unknown, invisible God is being made known, second, we will deal with this matter of Christ the exact image of God, and in the last session we will come into this matter of being conformed to the image of God's beloved Son.

THE INVISIBLE GOD

Brothers and sisters, our God is invisible because He is Spirit. In John 4, we find that God is Spirit, and because He is Spirit He is invisible so far as our naked eyes are concerned. We find in I Timothy 6 that He is the only One who has immortality, and He is the One who dwells in inapproachable light. No one has ever seen Him, and no one is able to see Him. And you remember that Moses in Exodus 33 asked God, "Show me Thy glory." And God told Moses, "No one can see me and live. No one has ever seen My face because it is so glorious that if you see it you will die." So God only showed Moses His back and God declared His name to Moses. Our God is invisible, and because of this, people think that God is unknowable.

When the apostle Paul first went to Athens, he found that the Athenians were very pious. They had all kinds of altars for all kinds of gods. And he found an altar there called the altar of the unknown God. So Paul used this opportunity: "You know all kinds of gods, but there is one God unknown to you, and this is the God that I am going to declare to you." In other words, to the human thought, God is unknown. He is the greatest mystery in the universe, and that is very true because God is so far above; He is so transcendent. He is way beyond what our human mind can apprehend. So God is the greatest unknown. Now if our Creator remains unknown, He becomes the greatest mystery in the whole universe. There is no one who can penetrate into that mystery because He is far beyond us.

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

Thank God, even though He is Spirit, even though He is so transcendent, yet it is His heart's desire to reveal Himself to man. Our God is the God who reveals Himself. One thing we have to remember is that unless God reveals Himself, there is absolutely no way for any one to know Him really. You may know about God, but you cannot know Him. It all depends upon His revelation. If He does not want to reveal Himself, then to us He is the unknown God, and there will be no relationship between us and God, no living relationship. But thank God, because He is love, He wants relationship. It is His good pleasure to reveal Himself to us. You remember what Paul says in Galatians 1: "God was pleased to reveal His Son in me." So our God is the God who reveals Himself.

Creation

When you read the Bible, you find that God tries in many, many different ways to make Himself known to man. Number one, God used creation to reveal Himself to man. I think we all know Romans 1:19-20: "Because what is known of God is manifest among them, for God has manifested it to them,—for from the world's creation the invisible things of him are perceived, being apprehended by the mind through the things that are made, both his eternal power and divinity,—so as to render them inexcusable."

In creation God has revealed Himself to a certain extent. He did not fully manifest Himself; He just revealed something to man, especially two things—His eternal power and divinity. In other words, when you see the things He created, you have to acknowledge that this is far beyond human ability. There is a power that is greater than man, and that power is so superior. It is an eternal power. You also see in the creation of God the divinity of God, that He is altogether different. His beauty is far beyond our understanding. These are the things that God tried to reveal to man by creation.

A few of you, if you are old enough, may have known our sister, Ruth Lee. Our dear sister was a co-worker with Watchman Nee. When our brother started His ministry in Shanghai, Sister Lee was there. She was a highly educated woman, and at one time she was an avowed atheist. She was so confident of her atheism that she felt she would never change. She came down from North China to Nanking, and she became like a dean in a high school. There were some students there who believed in the Lord Jesus under the influence of a music teacher named Christiana Tsai. She was called queen of the dark chamber. She influenced a few students who were there. So when Ruth Lee arrived in that school, she confiscated all the Bibles that these students had, and she would not even listen to the gospel. But once there was a play in Nanking, and because of this the school was closed. She was to send some of the students by boat from Nanking to Shanghai, and while she was sailing over the Yangtze River, she looked at the surroundings and saw the things around her. She was so impressed; she realized that there must be a Creator. So by the creation of God she realized the eternal power and divinity of God. When she arrived in Shanghai, she asked her friend to give her a Bible, and she turned to the Lord. She became a sister greatly used by God. When I first began to learn to serve the Lord, she was like a spiritual mother to me.

Now this is just one illustration to show that if you really look at the creation of God, and if you are intelligent enough, your mind will agree that there must be one greater than man. So that is one way God tried to make Himself known to man.

Human History

Human history also is a way that God tried to reveal Himself. When Paul came to Athens and he began to preach to them, in Acts 17:26-27 he said, "And has made of one blood every nation of men to dwell upon the whole face of the earth, having determined ordained times and the boundaries of their dwelling, that they may seek God; if indeed they might feel after him and find him, although he is not far from each one of us."

God created man out of one blood and then He scattered man over the whole earth. He determined their days and He determined their reigns. So God is behind human history. History is not determined by man; history is determined by God. He will rise up one and put down another. He will arrange the whole world according to His plan. So it is not

really wrong to say that history is *His* story. It is very, very true. Now if you are really watchful, why does one nation rise up and another nation go down. Why is it that certain nations occupy certain areas? Who is the one that is behind the whole thing, arranging everything? It is none other than our God. So you remember during the first great empire, the Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was the one who created great Babylon. But God reminded him that it is God, the heavens rule over the earth, until Nebuchadnezzar was humbled and recognized that God is above all. So history will really reveal the greatness of God.

Our Forefathers

Not only in history does God try to reveal Himself, but we find in the Bible that God appeared to our forefathers. He appeared to Adam when Adam was in the Garden of Eden, and God talked to our forefathers. The God of glory appeared to Abraham in Ur of Chaldea. Again and again in the Old Testament, you find God appeared, sometimes in the form of an angel or sometimes in the form of man. Why did God do these things? He tried to make man know Him. So that is also another way that people can really know the invisible God.

The Law

As you go on, you find that God gave the Law to the children of Israel. It is a great revelation of God Himself because when you read the Ten Commandments, you find the Ten Commandments can be broken into four and six. The first tablet, we can call that, is to reveal the holiness of God. Now what is holy? Holy means that He is separated, He is alone, and He is altogether different. In the first four commandments you find that God revealed Himself as holy. Beside Him, there should be no other God because He is altogether alone. That is holy. So in the first four commandments God showed forth something of His nature.

When you come to the last six commandments, even though it seems like they regulate our relationship—man with man,—actually it reveals the righteousness of God. God is righteous; He is right in all relationships. Because He is holy, we must be holy; because He is righteous, therefore we must be righteous. So by the Law God tries to reveal something of Himself to man.

The Prophets

As you go on in the word of God, you find that God rose up prophets. In Hebrews 1:1 it says, “In former days God spoke to man through the prophets in many ways and in many parts.” There are all different kinds of prophets and each prophet seems to reveal something of God’s thought. I think if you read the book of Isaiah, you begin to see how God revealed His thoughts about the Redeemer, of our redemption, about our being the redeemed. Or if you look into Jeremiah God began to reveal to us His new covenant. And if you read Ezekiel you find God revealed to us about inheritance. And if you read Daniel you find God revealed to us His kingdom. So through the prophets God began to reveal something more of Himself.

The Tabernacle

Apart from these revelations, sometimes God used some other ways. He used types; He used symbols to reveal His mind because all these figures are the figures of the real. For instance we read about the tabernacle. I cannot forget that before I was saved, I attended a conference like this. I was seeking to be saved, and I went there with the purpose of getting saved. Unfortunately, in that conference there was a speaker who came from North China, and I could not understand his dialect. Furthermore, he was talking about the tabernacle, so I just could not figure out anything. But thank God, I was saved during that conference. And as days went by, more and more I was attracted to the tabernacle, because I find in the tabernacle such a full representation of the real. God revealed His whole plan, as it were, through the tabernacle, how it is in the innermost of His heart to dwell among men. And the only way He could dwell with man is in Christ Jesus. The tabernacle is something we should meditate upon because it is such a picture of the real, of the true.

Holy Men of God

Further than that, even better than that, God tried to have some representation and manifestation in the holy men of God in the past. He not only tried to reveal His mind but He tried to show us some of His character through these holy men of God. He would work in the lives of these men and these men responded to Him. Somehow you find His inner character was built in them, and when you see these men, it is as if you see God. You know Abraham was a sojourner, a stranger in the land of Canaan, and yet during his sojourning there, God worked so much in his life. So when Sarah died and he tried to get a piece of land for the burial, the sons of Heth said to Abraham, "You are like a prince of God among us, so whatever you want we are willing to give." In other words, there is such a representation and manifestation there.

Moses is another one who responded to God, and he became a friend of God. When the children of Israel looked at him, it seems as if they had seen God. In other words, you find Moses became a representation of God in the eyes of the children of Israel. This is a most glorious thing, and yet this is also a high responsibility.

Do you know why Moses could not enter into the Promised Land? For one reason—because when the children of Israel cried for water, God told Moses to take Aaron's rod, the rod that budded, from the tabernacle: "You go to that rock and speak to that rock and water will flow." But Moses was so agitated, he was so stirred up by the children of Israel, and we would say it was not his fault; it was the fault of the children of Israel. But Moses lost his temper. He struck the rock twice with that rod, and probably the bud was broken. He could not enter into Canaan because he sinned against the representation of God. It is very, very serious. On the other hand, we have to recognize that Moses was so close to God that he could even represent God in the eyes of His people.

In the past God has tried and tried in many different ways to reveal Himself. Because He knew our limitations, He could not reveal Himself fully all at once, and yet through time He tried one way after another to make Himself known to man. It is because God is love. And yet, we have to recognize that even with all the ways that God tried to make Himself known, that the invisible God may be known, we know there is no full

representation and full manifestation until His beloved Son came into this world.

So in John 1:18 it says, “No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” When our Lord Jesus came upon this earth, then the invisible God had His exact image upon this earth.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, we want to thank Thee that Thou hast not only created us, but Thou wantest to make known to us. We do thank Thee for Thy love; we thank Thee for Thy long patience. We thank Thee for trying all different ways to try to make Thyself known to us, and yet, Lord, Thou knowest our foolishness. We thank and praise Thee Thou has sent Thy only beloved Son, that through Thy Son Thou art fully declared, and we see Thee in Thy Son, and we worship Thee. We thank Thee in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

Ponder over these questions.....

- (1) What is your understanding of being conformed to the image of God’s beloved Son?
- (2) What is the meaning of the word “image”? What is the difference between man being created in the image of God and the believers being conformed to the image of Christ?
- (3) Discuss the various ways God tried to make Himself known to men.