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## **Question 38 - Can General Revelation in and by itself bring someone to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ?**

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## 101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

### 38. **Can General Revelation in and by itself bring someone to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ?**

Theologian Millard Erickson responds as follows:

“But what of the judgment of man, spoken of by Paul in Romans 1 and 2? If it is just for God to condemn man, and if man can become guilty without having known God’s special revelation, does that mean that man without special revelation can do what will enable him to avoid the condemnation of God? In Rom. 2:14 Paul says: *‘When Gentiles who have not the law, do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.’* Is Paul suggesting that they could have fulfilled the requirements of the law?

“What if someone then were to throw himself upon the mercy of God, not knowing upon what basis that mercy was provided? Would he not in a sense be in the same situation as the Old Testament believers? The doctrine of Christ and his atoning work had not been fully revealed to these people. Yet they knew that there was provision for the forgiveness of sins, and that they could not be accepted on the merits of any works of their own. They had the form of the gospel without its full content. And they were saved. Now if the God known in nature is the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as Paul seems to assert in Acts 17:23), then it would seem that a person who comes to a belief in a single powerful God, who despairs of any works-righteousness to please this holy God, and who throws himself upon the mercy of this good God, would be accepted as were the Old Testament believers. The basis of acceptance would be the work of Jesus Christ, even though the person involved is not conscious that this is how provision has been made for his salvation. We should note that the basis of salvation was apparently the same in the Old Testament as in the New. Salvation has always been appropriated by faith (Gal. 3:6-9); this salvation rests upon Christ’s deliverance of us from the law (vv. 10-14, 19-29). Nothing has been changed in that respect.

“What inference are we to draw, then, from Paul’s statement in Rom. 2:1-16? Is it conceivable that one can be saved by faith without having the special revelation? Paul seems to be laying open this theoretical possibility. Yet it is merely a theoretical possibility. It is highly questionable how many, if any, actually experience salvation without having special revelation. Paul suggests in Romans 3 that no one does. And in chapter 10 he urges the necessity of preaching the

gospel (the special revelation) so that men may believe. Thus it is apparent that in failing to respond to the light of general revelation which they have, men are fully responsible, for they have truly known God, but have willfully suppressed that truth. Thus in effect the general revelation serves, as does the law, merely to make guilty, not to make righteous.

“On the one hand, sin has marred the witness of the general revelation. The created order is now under a curse (Gen. 3:17-19). The ground brings forth thorns and thistles for the man who would till it (v. 18); women must suffer the multiplied anguish of childbearing (v. 16). Paul speaks in Rom. 8:18-25 about the creation’s having been subjected to futility (v. 20); it waits for its liberation (vv. 19, 21, 23). As a result, its witness is somewhat refracted. While it is still God’s creation and thus continues to witness to him, it is not quite what it was when it came from the hand of the Maker. It is a spoiled creation. The testimony to the Maker is blurred.

“The more serious effect of sin and the fall is upon man himself. Scripture speaks in several places of the blindness and darkness of man’s understanding. Rom. 1:21 has already been noted, where Paul says that men knew God but rejected this knowledge, and blindness followed. In 2 Cor. 4:4, Paul attributes this blindness to the work of Satan: *‘In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.’* Although Paul is here referring to ability to see the light of the gospel, this blindness would doubtless affect the ability to see God in the creation as well.

“General revelation evidently does not enable the unbeliever to come to the knowledge of God. Paul’s statements about general revelation (Rom. 1-2) must be viewed in the light of what he says about sinful man (Rom. 3 – all men are under sin’s power; none is righteous) and the urgency of telling people about Christ (10:14): *‘But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?’* Thus in Paul’s mind the possibility of constructing a full-scale natural theology seems seriously in question.

(*Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985, pp. 170-173)