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Lenten Testimonies.*

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1. Who Is God?

There are two sources of information concerning God, nature and the Bible.

From nature we learn the *fact that there is a God*. "The invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." Rom. 1, 20.

When Napoleon's generals down in Egypt one night were repeating the popular atheistic ideas of French revolutionary times, the great emperor said, waving his hands towards the starry heaven: "Who made that sky?"

Nature also reveals attributes of God. When we look out upon the wild mountains and the boundless ocean, we are impressed with the power of God. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork." The storm that sweeps over woodland and villages reveals the wrath of God. In the spring-time, when the flowers bloom and the birds sing, we say: "How gentle and good God is!"

But we do not know from nature who the true God is, neither how He is disposed toward us. For that knowledge we turn to the Bible.

The Bible does not prove that there is a God, it takes that for granted. The very first verse of the Bible says: "In the beginning, God," etc. And the last verse in the Bible says: "If any man shall

* Continuing a custom of former years, a series of Lenten talks is herewith presented that were delivered during the noon-hour of one week in Lent at the American Theater in St. Louis, Mo.

take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, *God* shall take away his part out of the book of life." The Bible waves aside the argument as such by simply stating: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." Ps. 14, 1. What's the use of arguing with a fool?

The Bible tells us that "God is a spirit." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, is one Lord." Deut. 6, 4. "I am the First and the Last, and beside Me there is no God." Is. 44, 6.

However, while there is but one God, there are three persons in the Godhead. We believe in the *Triune God*, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three distinct persons in one divine essence. All attributes are shared alike by all three persons of the Trinity. At the baptism of Jesus the three persons of the Trinity are present; the Father saying by a voice from heaven: "Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"; the Son standing in the water, and the Holy Ghost like a dove descending and resting upon the Son. According to the command of Jesus the three persons of the one Godhead are acknowledged in the command to baptize: "Go ye and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." And all three persons are alike God. The Son stands in no inferior position to the Father: "All should honor the Son even as they honor the Father." Peter insists that Ananias had not lied to man, but to *God*, when he lied to the Holy Ghost. Acts 5, 3, 4.

The three persons are inseparable. If we have the Father, we have the Son; and if we have the Son, we have the Father. Jesus says: "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." "I and the Father are one."

We are well aware that this is a mystery, and we do not endeavor to prove this revelation to our reason. It is not against reason, this doctrine of the Trinity in unity; it is *above* our reason. Faith begins where reason ends.

Jesus revealed God to us as the *Father*. That was the common name which Jesus applied to God. Jesus knew as no other could know. For Jesus was in the beginning with God. "Verily, verily," says Jesus to Nicodemus, "We speak that We do know and testify that We have seen." "And no man hath ascended up to heaven but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven." And Jesus maintained: "No man knoweth the Father save the Son and he to whomsoever the Son shall reveal Him." In Bethlehem, in Nazareth, in Galilee, in Gethsemane,

Jesus is slowly, clearly, spelling out that name to men. Jesus pronounced that name when He said: "When ye pray, pray thus: Our Father." On the cross He proved the name.

But whose Father is God? Is he everybody's Father? Yes, everybody's. The Fatherhood of God is universal and independent of men and their characters. God is the Creator of us all alike. He is the Father of the humblest and the noblest; of the best and of the worst and most degraded. Absalom turned out to be a wayward son and brought sorrow and shame upon his father. But Absalom's disobedience and wickedness could not destroy the father's love. When word came that Absalom was dead, the old king wept: "O Absalom, my son, my son! Would God I had died for thee!" No waywardness and wickedness can ever change the heart of the heavenly Father. That is what Jesus would teach us in the parable of the *Prodigal Son*. God is the Father not only of the obedient son, but also of the prodigal son who went into the far country and wasted his substance in riotous living. The father's heart yearned for that wandering boy, and when he returned in his rags and fell down before him and cried, "Father," he folded him in his arms and took him to his heart and said, "My son, my son"; he that was lost is found, he that was dead is alive.

Yes, God is the Father of *all*. But, strange as it may seem, the Bible tells us as clearly that *not all men are sons*. This Book which talks about the Fatherhood of God speaks about men's "becoming the sons of God," of "receiving the Spirit of adoption." Our parents were created in God's image, but that image was lost, and with the loss of that image, that likeness of the character of God, they forfeited their place in the family of God and became prodigals. And we are all born of prodigals, born in the far country. We must come back to the Father, and the first step in the return is the knowledge of our sin and lost condition. Only after the Prodigal realized his pitiful condition away from His Father, did he determine to go back.

The way back to the Father's house is *Jesus*. "I am the Way." "No man cometh to the Father but by Me," says Jesus. "As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God." We must accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and put our trust in Him, who, fulfilling the Law and suffering the punishment for our sins, has redeemed us. Setting aside all our own righteousness and merit, we must trust for God's favor and forgiveness to what Jesus has done and suffered for us. So Christ has become the

great highway for the prodigals to return to their loving Father. In Venice there is a red line inlaid in the pavement or on the walls, which, if you will trace it through the tortuous, twisting, narrow streets, will gradually bring you to the great cathedral in the center of the plaza. And so through all the tortuous ways of life there is a red line made by the blood of Jesus Christ, which, if you will follow it, will bring you at last to the Father's house.

Ah, friends, if any perish in the far country, it is not the Father's fault. He loves us unceasingly. No sin can change His love. He yearns for us all. His heart is breaking for us. As often as one perishes in the far country of unbelief, the great All-Father cries pitifully like David: "My son, my son!" And the Father has opened a great highway on which we may return to him. No man cometh to the Father but through Jesus. He that cometh any other way is a thief and a robber and will be disowned and cast out. There is no other way. There is no sonship without faith in Christ. "As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God."

Our Father in heaven is perfect in this most tender and sacred human relation. He is perfect in *love*. He bears with us in patience which never wearies. The Bible contemplates all but an unthinkable contingency: "If my father . . . forsake me." "If" — it is not likely. It is not until every one else has first forsaken him and not then, generally. Yet if it should be so, yet God will take me up. "His mercy endureth forever." He loves us with an everlasting love. If only we will not go away into the far country, despise Jesus and His blood and atonement, and so put ourselves out of the reach of His saving hand. If in daily penitence we confess our sins and plead for mercy in the name of Jesus, we shall hear our Father in heaven whisper softly that sweet word: "My son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee."

Our Father is perfect in *wisdom*. Earthly parents are not always wise. Sometimes they are unwise in severity; more often they are unwise in the expressions of their affection. Many a child is spoiled, if not ruined, by foolish and misguided love. But God is wise. Whom He loveth He chasteneth. He knows when to chasten and how severely, and when and how to comfort and how to direct His children. If we will but be guided by His counsel, He will receive us to glory. Step by step He reveals the way to us, that we should walk in it. We cannot lose the way.

Our Father is perfect in *helpfulness*. Have you ever seen a

father stand by the bed of his sick child? The eyes of the sick look with mute appeal to the father. He stands in his torment and agony, watching the death struggle, but powerless to help, the picture of defeated love. But with God nothing shall be impossible. He can save to the uttermost all that come to Him in Christ Jesus.

If you come to the Father through Jesus Christ, then you need not go through life friendless and alone. "As a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him." Ps. 103, 13. You need not trouble yourself with cares, for "He careth for you." You need not worry about to-morrow's food and raiment, for "your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things." He will make your bed in sickness; He will be your Refuge in trouble; He will guide you with His counsel and at last receive you to glory; through Him you will be more than a conqueror.

Now I would invite you all who have come to the Father through Jesus Christ to gather all your cares and anxieties together and repeat with me the prayer which the Master taught us: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

2. How God Speaks to Men.

God speaks to all men through conscience, that remnant of the original Law which God implanted into the heart of man at creation. "For when the Gentiles, which have not the Law, do by nature the things contained in the Law, these, having not the Law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another." Rom. 2, 14. 15.

But conscience is uncertain and unreliable and, sometimes, entirely perverted. Notwithstanding, God does in some measure speak to men through their conscience.

God has spoken to men in dreams and visions. This was a common method of communication in Old Testament times. But even in the New Testament God sometimes revealed His will to men in dreams and visions. For instance, God sent Peter to Cornelius and Paul to Macedonia by means of visions.

Now, however, God speaks plainly and authoritatively to men through the Bible. In comparison with visions St. Peter maintains: "We have a more sure Word of prophecy." All other methods by which God speaks to men, by the voice of conscience, by dreams, by visions, may be and must be tested by the plain Word of the Bible to determine their reliability. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." 2 Tim. 3, 16. "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." 2 Pet. 1, 21.

The Lutheran Church accepts the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible to be the Word of God to men and therefore the highest authority for all teaching and discipline in the Church. We require that all accept what is revealed in the Bible. We reject whatever is contrary to the Bible. In all matters in which the Bible does not make a definite statement we allow the individual liberty to accept or reject according to his own taste and judgment.

In the Bible God speaks to men concerning their souls and their eternal salvation. The purpose of the Bible is not to reveal scientific or historical information. Such matters are touched upon in Scripture only incidentally and in so far as they are necessary for God's chief purpose, namely, to teach men how to be saved. St. Paul says: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction *in righteousness*," not in science or history, but instruction in righteousness. John tells us that what is written in the gospels is written, "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that, believing, ye might have life through His name." John 20, 31.

That being the purpose of Scripture, what does God say to men in the Bible regarding the way of salvation? What must a man do to be saved?

The Bible insists, from cover to cover, with painful repetition that *all men are sinners*. Paul says: "There is no difference; for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Rom. 3, 22, 23. "There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not." Eccl. 7, 20. God tells us in the Bible that we are sinners by *nature*. St. Paul says Eph. 2, 3: "We were by nature the children of wrath even as others." David confesses Ps. 51, 5: "I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." We were born corrupt with evil tendencies and wills opposed to God. It is not true that men become wicked through environment, temptation, or poverty. Men sin because the inclinations and desires and appetites

are in their very nature. You need not paint the spots on a leopard, and you need not tempt a man to make him sin. It is as natural for men to sin as it is for a leopard to have spots. And so it follows logically, as the Bible confirms persistently, that we are sinners *by practise*, sinning in thought, in word, and in deed. Actual sin is simply original sin in action. "There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." Eccl. 7, 20. "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." Ps. 14, 3.

God very plainly states in the Bible that He will punish sin. There will be no weak administration of justice. Sin will by no means be condoned. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Ezek. 18, 20. "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this Law to do them, and all the people shall say, Amen." Deut. 27, 26. No man shall say: "It is unjust; it is cruel." All the people shall say: "Amen," that is right; we deserved it.

Then if we all sinned and if God will punish sin, how can a man save himself? What can he do? God states with equal plainness and insistency that man cannot do anything to save himself. No man can fulfil the Law, being born in sin. No man can atone for his sin. A man cannot pay his debts by borrowing more money from his creditor. You cannot atone for yesterday's sin by any service to-morrow. You cannot pay a debt to God incurred yesterday by borrowing from His time and service to-morrow.

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus with the question of what he must do to be saved, and Jesus told him that, though he was rich and though he was a ruler in the synagog and had outwardly observed all the requirements of the Mosaic Law, still he lacked one thing, and when He then said to His disciples, as the young man walked away sadly: "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" the disciples said in astonishment: "Who, then, can be saved?" meaning that if a rich man could not be saved by his wealth and a good man could not be saved by his righteousness, how can any one else hope to be saved. Jesus answered: "With man it is impossible," Matt. 19, 26, but He continued: "With God all things are possible." Yes, God did what we were unable to do, He saved us. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, *made under the Law*, to redeem them that were under the Law." Gal. 4, 4, 5. Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law for us, vicariously. Moreover, "the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all." "He was made sin for us." Jesus suffered all the consequences of sin for the whole

human race, even the death of the cross, and thus atoned for the sin of the world. "With His stripes we are healed."

Now God in His Gospel offers to all men forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. To as many as accept Jesus as their Savior God ascribes all that Jesus did and suffered and will give them a new spirit and a new heart. But this is the condition, that men accept the grace of God for Jesus' sake; that they lay no claim to God's mercy on the ground of their own righteousness or merit, but, acknowledging that they are lost and unable to save themselves, accept salvation in Jesus Christ.

The best men need Christ's merit and suffering as much as the worst. Certainly there is a difference between men in the extent to which they fall into sin. But all are lost and dead in trespasses and sins, and whether a man is shot through the heart ten times or a thousand times makes no difference. In either case he is dead. And whether a man is a moral outcast or an outwardly respectable man, in either case he is dead in trespasses and sins and must be quickened again. No man can be saved without Christ. Without shedding of blood there is no remission. "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin," and nothing else will. "He that believeth not shall be damned." "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house."

And God is able to "save to the uttermost all that come to Him through Jesus Christ." There are no hopeless sinners; harlots, murderers, malefactors, — all may be saved. In Christ there is "plenteous redemption." The only sin that damns a man now is the sin of unbelief, of rejecting the one means of salvation which God at the sacrifice of His own Son has wrought out for man.

By the death of Christ *atonement* was made for sin, and sin was practically forgiven. The forgiveness of sin, effected for all by the death of Christ, is offered to all in the Gospel. Each person who hears the Gospel should by faith lay hold of the absolution which God there has pronounced upon him. Lay your hand on Jesus by faith, and believe that your sins which Christ has already atoned have been carried away, forgiven. "As far as the east is from the west," God has put out of His sight your sins.