

GOD'S CALL

Major themes in the Scriptures

The wisdom of God (11)

Wisdom in allowing evil (2)

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, “The wisdom of God” the eleventh message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures.

A short summary of today’s message:

God is perfectly good and infinitely wise, but when we see so much moral evil in this world, we may find it difficult to understand how a morally good God can create moral beings who are so evil. However, when we draw near to God and behold the blazing glory of His holiness, we will marvel at the wisdom of God in allowing moral evil in this universe.

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

As we come into this world, what is it that is important to us? This is a question that all human beings would sooner or later think about. Why are we in this world? What should we seek for? How should we occupy our time? What do we want to accomplish during our time on earth?

For those who have become children of God, it is very important for us to ponder further: Now that we are children of God, what is most important for us? Why did God create us this way; what is His purpose?

If we do not appreciate that, then we may not be able to rise to the highest plane that God intends for us. Knowing that God is good, wise and perfect, surely we would want to understand what He wants to accomplish and cooperate with Him.

So, what I am going to talk about today is something not so easy to appreciate: our concept of God. The things that we pursue may not very often correspond with this aspect of what God wants to reveal to us and what He wants to develop in us.

We look around and we see so much moral evil in this world, and some question: "How can God who is a perfectly good God create moral beings who are so evil?"

The underlying issue basically is: God has never created any evil moral being.

The most evil moral being, Satan, was an angel; he became evil because he chose it. Adam and Eve were not created evil; they became evil because they chose to disobey God, go their own way. So too for each one of us: all of us have sinned not because Adam sinned but because we chose to sin, that is why each one of us is responsible for our own sins.

Is it possible for God not to allow evil in the universe that He has created? Is it possible for God to create a universe where He does not allow evil, moral evil, to continue or to exist?

We know that that is possible. One possibility is: He creates non-moral beings and non-moral things. If they are non-moral, they cannot become morally evil. So, God can create animals and plants and rocks and trees and skies; they can be very beautiful, never rebelling against God. But then how would these non-moral beings and non-moral things relate with God in a deep, personal and meaningful way? That would not be possible.

The other way is that God creates moral beings but He does not permit moral evil to exist. The moment we choose a morally evil course of action, God destroys us completely; He exterminates us. Anyone who makes a choice that is morally evil is completely removed from this universe. So then, many people may not dare to choose any evil and you can have many people who do not sin. And therefore, there may be a situation where there are moral beings but no moral evil.

Is that possible? Yes. When God created the angels, Satan sinned and so too many followed him. God did not destroy them, that is why they continue, but if God had destroyed them, then what we would have left would be the angels who did not sin.

So then, for us moral human beings, why are we living in a world where there is so much of evil and suffering and pain; what does all this mean?

In the last message, we considered how wonderful it is that God, in His great almighty power and majesty, has chosen to give us the opportunity to really know Him personally, deeply, and to know Him in all His glory, in all His fullness.

He wants us to develop such that we will know Him who has been from the beginning. God in the totality of His goodness and greatness, He wants us to know Him because in so knowing Him, we can be transformed to become like Him and our fellowship with Him can rise to a plane that can never ever be otherwise.

So if we think of that, would we not think that all of us, especially believers, would eagerly look forward to that: to know God in all His fullness? Should not that be our primary objective? We would be so eager to do that.

But in the realities of life, we know that is not true.

Many people are prepared to come to God up to a point, but no further. If they are in deep trouble, they are burdened with sin, they need forgiveness; yes, they will come to God: "God be merciful to me, the sinner!" But after they have been forgiven, after they have become children of God, they may not be prepared to go further because going further can become very costly and very difficult.

Let us turn to **Exodus 20: 18-19**.

Exodus 20: 18-19

18 All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance.

19 Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."

These were the people of Israel whom God rescued from slavery out of the land of Egypt. God spoke. God spoke in the context of a blazing mountain and they were fearful, they were trembling. They did not want to come near to God and they asked Moses to go near instead, to listen to what God had to say and to tell them on God's behalf: "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."

This tells us they recognized: We cannot approach God as we wish. God is a God of holiness. They knew that if they were to come too close in the context of their sinfulness, yes, they might die; God may just destroy them.

But they also recognized that Moses could go near. Why? Because they knew that God appreciated Moses, that Moses lived a life that was pleasing to God. And so when Moses approached God, God welcomed him; God was prepared to speak to him, and in that context, Moses would then transmit the message to the people.

This may be an incident in the Old Testament but the underlying principles are true for all time. There are many people who are afraid to come near to God because they recognize their lives are not good. But the problem is although they know their lives are not good and although they know that this can be corrected, they are not prepared to correct that so that they can draw near to God.

The cost of becoming holy is very great, but if we do not appreciate the cost of holiness, if we do not appreciate the greatness of the glory of God in His holiness, we will not be able to know Him as He truly is: Our concept of God, our understanding of God, our relationship with God will be very much diluted or even distorted because of what we prefer to think of Him as, so that we can get the things that we want.

So if we are hungry, we think of God as the Provider of our needs; the Lord Jesus fed the five thousand. If we are sick, we think of the Lord Jesus as the One who heals so many people. These are the things that interest us because of these kinds of needs that we may have.

But our greatest need is to develop a life that is truly good and pure and meaningful before God, and yet, we are not pursuing that.

We would rather choose and pursue other aspects because either they are not so costly or very commonly, they are pleasant. Sometimes a course of action that we take may be costly but pleasant, and for that we are prepared.

Hebrews 12: 14

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

Pursue peace with all men: this does not mean that we must be at peace with all men at all cost. The Lord Jesus is the Prince of Peace but He came, He said, “not to bring peace, but a sword”. So, both are true. The Lord Jesus came to bring peace to us: where our responses are positive, we will find true peace. If our responses are negative, there will be a sword: we will be in conflict with God and with all those who love Him. So whether it is peace or a sword will depend on the way we respond.

When we pursue peace with all men, it can help us to remember our approach to life. Our approach to life is not to have conflict with people; to prove that we are greater, better; to conquer people and subdue them; to take advantage; to become famous; that should not be our approach. Our approach should be to pursue what is good for all men, seek their well-being, care for them, do the utmost we can to bring about what is good for their lives.

Pursue peace (have the right spirit) and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. Sanctification is essential if we want to see the Lord. Sanctification means being set apart for God, being holy, being righteous, being good. Here again, the phrase “see the Lord” is not a physical viewing of the Lord but “see the Lord” here has to do with a deep fellowship with Him. If we want to have a deep fellowship with the Lord, be acceptable in His sight then there must be sanctification.

The meaning is the same as **Matthew 5: 8: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.** If we are not **pure in heart**, we will not see God in a deep, personal sense.

So this is an area that is very difficult for us to properly appreciate: Who is God? How do we respond to Him in a manner that will be most meaningful to Him?

Generally, people would prefer to think of God as the God of tender love and we can remember: “...**God so loved the world...**” God suffered so much because He loved the world.

So, it is true: God is a God of tender love. The Lord Jesus showed much compassion for those who were ill-treated by others, for those who were weak, those who were suffering, those who faltered and failed. The Lord Jesus was very compassionate; we can see the tender love in Him.

So generally, our image of God and our thoughts of Him tend to centre on the love of God to such an extent that people may think the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New Testament. The God of the New Testament is a God of love; the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath. But that is not true: He is the same God; we see different aspects of His character manifested in different situations of life.

When we think of God as being full of tender love and we do not sufficiently appreciate that He is also the blazing light then our concept of God becomes distorted. We approach God too freely without sufficient reverence; we take many things for granted.

When we come together to worship God, where is our heart?

Are we really worshiping God or are our hearts occupied with the things of the world: what we want to get after the meeting, what we have been planning to do, or the problems that we have been facing that we want to resolve quickly.

To what extent do we really appreciate the great privilege that God has given to us to worship Him, to come before Him and to come with the right spirit?

It is difficult for people to appreciate that. We are so used to it: that God cares, God loves us, God will forgive us.

So I want to bring across today this aspect for us to carefully consider: Unless we develop a deeper appreciation of the blazing light of glory of God, our relationship with God will tend to be superficial, and the things that we do for Him cannot be of really satisfying quality to Him.

At the same time, let us remember that God does want to give us the very best, the things that we long for.

Revelation 21: 3-8

- 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them,
- 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."
- 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He *said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."
- 6 Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.
- 7 "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.
- 8 "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

God said that there will be such a wonderful thing that we will be able to experience in eternity. God will make provision for us that we long for: there will not be any more mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. He will give to us from the spring of the water of life without cost. These are things that speak of the abundance of meaningful aspects of life that God will grant to us.

But then He makes this qualification: "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son."

So all these that God has promised are intended only for a category of people: He who overcomes; those who are prepared to identify with Him, follow Him, choose the path of righteousness. Of course this does not mean absolute in our victory in every situation, but it means a life that is committed to God, a life that is given to move in the direction of holiness.

Then having said that, we come to **verse 8**: "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." So, we see God is not only the God of tender love, seeking to provide for us the very best; He is also the One who will destroy evil. While God allows evil for a period of time, He will not continue to allow it long term. He says, "... for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Fire and brimstone: do we think of God in that way?

I find it very hard to imagine such a situation. All these years, I have often trembled when I think of what will happen in eternity for those who disobey God, who go their own way; how terrible it would be! To me, it is unimaginable.

But God is like that: God hates evil and He will take steps to help us recognize that - He is a God of absolute holiness.

Fire and brimstone is a description of a place of great suffering. So who are the people who will go through such suffering? It is people who are not prepared to go through fire and brimstone for God. If we are not prepared to live for God in the context of difficulties and pain, suffering fire and brimstone if necessary then that may be the outcome because we are not prepared to be loyal to Him.

So, it is a choice that we make: Do we want to live for God and go through whatever suffering may be necessary in His view, in His love, in His wisdom; or we want to go our own way: follow the world, follow the evil one and incur the wrath of God?

This aspect may not be very popular but it is there in the Scriptures. It is true that there are some people who may specialize in this area - "fire and brimstone preachers" - there are people like that who frighten people into the kingdom of God. They think that by preaching fire and brimstone, they will be so fearful they will believe. But that is not the right way either.

Maybe to some extent - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom - so sometimes, people may need to be frightened in order to recognize the consequences of their actions.

That is why we have pictures of people with lung disease for people who smoke; we have pictures of people suffering greatly in accidents for people who drive recklessly; and so too other warnings. But this is very limited and can lead to a wrong approach to God: we approach God purely out of fear.

God wants us to approach Him in the right spirit where we appreciate, understand what He is seeking to do.

Daniel 12: 2

"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt..."

Two groups of people, when they awake from the ground (that refers to the resurrection), there will be a resurrection of the righteous; there will also be a resurrection of the unrighteous, but they will go separate ways. The resurrection of the righteous will have a spiritual body like that of the Lord Jesus; the resurrection of the unrighteous will be to be sentenced to the lake of fire.

Revelation 20: 10

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

This is something very difficult for me to understand. Why would they need to suffer forever and ever? Why can't God just destroy them? But as it is recorded in this way, we need to try to understand what God is seeking to do.

There is a consequence for all our choices. We cannot run away from it. We may hide for a while, we may pretend, we may seek substitutes, but we will have to face it on the Judgment Day: What have we lived for? What have we pursued? What have we given our lives for? And God will deal with us accordingly.

The Lord Jesus said that those who know the master's will and do deeds worthy of a flogging will be beaten many times, but those who do not know the master's will but do deeds that are worthy of a flogging will be beaten with fewer stripes. So, there are differences in the manner of punishment, but all punishment will be inflicted on those who deserve it. So in that context, the slave may not know the master's specific will but he knew that he was doing something wrong, so he will still be punished.

I want to read a few passages, which help to bring across this aspect of the holiness of God.

Hebrews 12: 25-29

- 25 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned *them* on earth, much less *will* we *escape* who turn away from Him who *warns* from heaven.
- 26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN."
- 27 This *expression*, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.
- 28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;
- 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

Our God is a consuming fire – Can we face this humbly, worshipfully, prayerfully, and respond well?

God in the Old Testament manifested Himself in physical ways and the people were frightened. The earth trembled, there were earthquakes; the mountains shook, there was smoke: they were affected by these things.

But one day, it will not be just these things; it will be far more serious things in the moral, eternal realm: we will be banished from the presence of God forever; we will not be able to know Him, have fellowship with Him, if we do not choose to follow Him now.

It is very serious.

...since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.

Reverence and awe should come forth from our heart, not because we are afraid of the consuming fire itself, but that should come forth from our heart because we recognize the glory of God, how wonderful it is.

Hebrews 10: 30-31

- 30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."
31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

It is a terrifying thing – many people do not appreciate that nor do they want to think about it.

I am very fearful when I think of what will happen to all those who disobey God, who want to go their own way. They may not realize it now but when the time comes, they will be terrified.

Some people think: "I am quite prepared to stand before God; I am prepared to be judged by Him. I have lived my life in a way which I believe is proper, pleasing to God." But in reality, it is not.

We need to carefully come before God and seek to understand what is truly acceptable to Him.

Revelation 6: 15-17

- 15 Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains;
16 and they *said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb;
17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

The great people of the world will be terrified on the day when the judgment of God falls and notice they said: "...hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb..."

Him who sits on the throne we can understand is God Almighty.

...the wrath of the Lamb – we do not think of a lamb as being full of wrath.

He was the Lamb of God sacrificed for us but now, He is the Lamb of God who will judge the world and they will be terrified: "...the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

Hebrews 12: 18-21

- 18 For you have not come to *a mountain that* can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind,
19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which *sound was such that* those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them.
20 For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED."
21 And so terrible was the sight, *that* Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."

This was a physical manifestation of the power of God and the people were very frightened. Even Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling" in relation to the physical appearance. Such situations can be quite frightening. But although Moses said that he was FULL OF FEAR and trembling, the people recognized that Moses could approach God, that Moses could find favour with God.

So then, let us consider: Having understood these things, what should be our response? How can we respond in such a way that we will know God in the way that we should: to know Him in all His glory, in all His fullness?

1 John 4: 16-19

- 16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.
17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.
18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.
19 We love, because He first loved us.

Is it possible for us to approach God without fear; approach God from the angle of what we have considered – to appreciate Him in all His glory; His tender love and His blazing light: we do not shrink back from that?

Yes, physical things may frighten us but when it comes to our relationship with God, can we develop our heart so that we can have confidence to come before God and not to be afraid of Him?

The apostle John says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment..."

We are afraid of God because of the difference between Him and us. He is holy; we are not, so therefore there can be punishment from God. So, we can be very fearful.

So he says, "...the one who fears is not perfected in love". If we are perfected in love, we have developed the quality of the love of God in us, then there will be no fear as we approach God; we delight in the presence of God; but how to develop this kind of love?

Many people may quite easily think that they love God. This is something that can happen very easily because there is genuine love for Him. When we are forgiven our sins, we are grateful; we love God. So too when God answers our prayers in our times of need, we are grateful; we love Him. So we think we love God and we are prepared to do many things for Him.

But if we want to develop love that is truly the love of God of that kind of quality as it ought to be, then we need to appreciate how to identify with God in His holiness.

That includes, for example, being prepared to take our stand against evil, being prepared for conflicts, problems and difficulties because of our loyalty to God.

Most of the time, we are not prepared for that and we may say we seek peace with all men. Sure, we do not want to have conflicts unnecessarily but there is a time and place where we may have to take our stand.

You look at the three friends of Daniel. They were peace loving people; they just wanted to worship God, they wanted to be faithful to God. They were not causing any trouble; they were good people.

So then, why did they cause so much antagonism from Nebuchadnezzar and the people?

That was basically because they were not prepared to compromise their faith in God; they were not prepared to bow down to worship an image of gold. They would be loyal to God even if it meant being cast into the furnace of fire. So for that, they were thrown into the furnace of fire but God protected them.

So too in life, we will go through many situations where there will be not just differences of opinion but different approach in life and the directions can be opposite to what God requires of us.

Will we be faithful to Him?

If we love Him as we should, then yes, we will because we understand the meaning of the holiness of God.

But if we do not appreciate that, then our approach can be all the time seeking to be loving, to be kind, to be helpful, to be taken advantage of, without any stand for what is good and right. How then can we be a proper witness for the Lord?

We look at the life of the Lord Jesus. He denounced the Pharisees; He made sure that the message came through clearly: whatever is negative and evil will not be tolerated in the kingdom of God. Yet at the same time, He was so loving, so kind to people who were willing to listen, who were willing to change for the better, who were willing to respond to God.

So then, he says, “the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him”. If we want God to abide in us, we must choose to abide in God; and if we want to abide in God, we must learn to abide in His love. Again here, we need to appreciate what that means: abiding in the love of God is not always a very pleasant thing.

We may think of it as very pleasant – love is always pleasant – but that is not true. Because God loves us, He will discipline us; He will bring us through difficulties to purify us, to help us develop, to grow well, and that can be very unpleasant.

Will we abide in His love, or will we try to get out of it – “I do not want this; I want the other kind. I want the chocolate and the ice cream, but I do not want this kind of life of suffering.”

So if we want to specify the things that we like as the grounds and means by which God must help us, then God may leave us to the world. In the world, we can have all these things; the evil one is always eager to offer us, to give to us these things.

But if we abide in the love of God, being prepared to continue in Him wherever He leads us, whatever may take place, then God will abide in us.

By this, love is perfected with us – so, as God abides in us, then the love of God will be perfected in us, with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.

When the love of God is developed within us, we will have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.

This statement is a very beautiful statement. We want to be a witness for the Lord; this is the kind of witness that God is looking for: as He is, so also are we in this world.

The Lord Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father".

Can this be true of our lives?

Yes, up to a point – not in the same sense as the Lord Jesus in His perfection, but to a very meaningful degree, where people look at our lives, they can behold the glory of God, the love of God, the holiness of God, and this can draw them to the true God.

But if our lives do not have such kind of love, yes we may tell them "Believe in the Lord Jesus", but what kind of belief would that be; what kind of the Lord Jesus would they be following?

So in order to be a good witness, we must develop this kind of quality in our hearts and then the message that we bring will help them to respond likewise.

We love, because He first loved us – In ourselves, we were not loving people; we were self-centred, we went our own way.

So if we develop that kind of quality, we should always be grateful, eternally grateful, that God has brought this about in our hearts.

There will be no ground for us to boast, "I have become such because of my great determination." Yes, it requires determination but only in the context of the grace of God.

So, the one who fears is not perfected in love – we want to develop a life where we can meaningfully know Him who has been from the beginning.

More and more with the passing of days, we will come to see how wonderful God really is: the glory of His being.

So if we want to live our lives well and fulfil God's call in our lives, we must learn to appreciate the wisdom of God in allowing moral evil in this world, so that we can understand the fullness of the meaning of deep fellowship with God and wholeheartedly work together with Him to bring about His perfect will for His creation.

Let us, as we behold the world in all its evil, recognize that beyond that is the absolute holiness of God.

God allows evil but He wants us to see how evil really is evil and to see His wrath against evil that we may appreciate what is truly good and righteous and that we may develop the right kind of righteousness, to be like God.

We should learn to be like God but not in the way that the evil one sought to be like God: he wanted to be like God in terms of power. We must learn to be like God primarily in terms of His moral perfection: "...be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect".

Let us come before the Lord and ask Him to help us to appreciate Him in the totality of His being.

Let us not be afraid of His holiness but neither should we trifle with it. We must come before Him with reverence and awe and yet, with deep gratitude and the desire to be close to Him, to do what we ought to do, to be what we ought to be.

Let us thank the Lord for all that He has done for us so that we can become what we ought to be.