

Why Does God Keep Secrets?

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In Proverbs 25:2, we read the enigmatic passage, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter." Countless individuals throughout history have expressed frustration and bewilderment at God's proclivity to conceal things or keep secrets.

When Job was trying to make sense of his devastating trial, he lamented, "And these things You have hidden in Your heart; I know that this was with You" (Job 10:13), and, "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat!" (Job 23:3). He wanted to pry out a few secrets.

Most people at one time or another have identified with the ceramic clay in Isaiah 45:9 and Romans 9:20, who asks, "What are you making?" and "Why have you made me like this?" Has God a pragmatic reason for keeping mankind perpetually in the dark, ignorant of His intentions?

Scripture reveals that there are certain things God has kept back from His creation, purposing instead to reveal things incrementally to His obedient offspring: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

General Revelation

Theologians have long discussed a general or public revelation that anyone with eyes and a brain could figure out for himself. Zophar, one of Job's counselors, alludes to this empirical revelation: "Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7).

The American pamphleteer and propagandist, Thomas Paine, wrote a book entitled *The Age of Reason*, in which for his thesis he attempted to answer Zophar's double-pronged question. To the first part, he answered unequivocally in the affirmative, citing the order and design of the cosmos. Paine, a practicing Deist, points to Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork" as affirmation of the general or public revelation.

Romans 1:20 more definitively substantiates the idea of a public or general revelation: "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." Even with such an overwhelming testimony some hapless fools, having immersed themselves in evil behavior, have deluded themselves into rejecting this general revelation, refusing to see God (Psalm 14:1). Even the public or general revelation cannot penetrate the darkened minds of those whom, because of their addiction to sin, God has given over to a reprobate mind (Romans 1:21).

Thomas Paine responded to Zophar's second question, "Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?" with a resounding, "No." Largely, Paine is right on target. The carnal mind, because of its propensity to sin and lawlessness, is enmity against God (Romans 8:7). Knowledge of God's intent or purpose has always been conditional, linked to obedience to His holy law. He promises to those He has scattered for disobedience:

But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the Lord your God and obey His voice. . . . (Deuteronomy 4:29-30)

Consequently, the answer to Zophar's second question has strings attached. We may see God's intent and purpose for our lives more clearly if 1) we yield to His will, and 2) we actively and tirelessly seek for Him as we would for buried precious minerals.

Axiomatically, God will only reveal Himself (making known His purposes and intentions) to people who yield themselves to Him and actively and aggressively seek Him. Paul, addressing the philosophers of Athens, suggests that finding God requires some expended effort and energy:

And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26-27)

God Almighty has placed a high priority on the "seeking out" and the "exploring" aspect of our character. Even the use of the Helper, God's Holy Spirit, requires explorative, investigative application. Consider: "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (I Corinthians 2:10). The receipt of this power to search and investigate also comes with strings attached. As the apostle Peter says, the Holy Spirit is "given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:32).

Even after God draws an individual into His Family (John 6:44), He does not instantaneously put all the pieces together. Herbert Armstrong often referred to the Bible as a coded book or a jigsaw puzzle, with God revealing the schematic diagram incrementally through His Holy Spirit. The main guiding interpreting principle in the greater church of God has been that the Bible interprets the Bible, but the clues are not all found in one place. As one begins the process of putting the pieces together, he practices the principle introduced in Isaiah 28:10, "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little."

Without the connecting links supplied by God's Holy Spirit, the disjointed segments remain unrelated and incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Our Savior Jesus Christ incorporated the same coded feature into the parables. When the disciples asked Him why He used these coded figures of speech, He told them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matthew 13:11).

Jesus gave the crowds a clear figure of speech, but he withheld both the referent and the grounds of comparison, sharing it with the disciples in private (Matthew 13:11-13). He refers to a scripture in Isaiah 6:9 as His reason for not sharing the connection with the uninitiated: "And He said, 'Go, and tell this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'""

As a coded book, the Bible demands readers to look for parallels, recurring patterns, and symbol clusters. Otherwise, it is just as inscrutable as the score of a symphony to one who cannot read music.

Digging Deep

A principle pertaining to discovering biblical knowledge appears repeatedly in Proverbs. Regarding wisdom, Solomon suggests: "If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:4-5). Likewise, Proverbs 8 suggests that those who diligently search for wisdom will find it. A former Ambassador College administrator used to refer to the institution as a gold mine, adding with caution that gold or silver ore does not lie neatly above the ground, but must be sought for amidst waste tailings and slag.

Whether we apply the principle to mining procedures or pedagogy, what we acquire too easily, we do not esteem very highly. In my experience, the lessons I have learned from glib instructors equipped with the latest technological bells and whistles seem to stick to the memory like Teflon®. On the other hand, some of the one-on-one independent study courses in which I metaphorically had to assemble each piece or dig out each nugget of ore chunk by chunk, have remained a permanent part of my learning repertoire.

In 1910, American educator John Dewey wrote a book entitled *How We Think*, in which he demonstrated how people develop the mature process of reflective thinking and problem solving. He suggested that to foster mature reflective thinking, a state of perplexity or a "forked-road" situation offering ambiguous alternatives must be placed in the learner's way. As long as no obstructions are placed in the path, reflective or problem-solving skills will not be called for, but when an obstruction of some kind emerges, calling for some kind of decision, the intense need to resolve an ambiguity initiates the process of reflective thinking.

Job had to undergo multiple revisions of thought brought about by "forked-roads" in his thinking. As he methodically resolved each fork, he grew in reflective thought processes until he finally saw God (Job 42:5). The Almighty had to lead Abraham through many forked roads until he became the friend of God, intimate with the His intents and purposes.

We could refer to the Creator's pedagogical techniques as inductive—starting with the experiences and working to the generalization or consequences. Inductive or inquiry approaches are generally more time-consuming and seemingly indirect, but their results are far more permanent.

Studying Fish

Nathaniel Schaler, a student of the famous professor of Zoology at Harvard, Louis Agassiz, provides a classic example of the inductive-inquiry approach to learning:

When I sat me down before my tin pan, Agassiz brought me a small fish, placing it before me with a rather stern requirement that I should study it but should on no account talk to anyone concerning it nor read anything relating to fishes until I had his permission to do so. To my inquiry, "What shall I do?" he said in effect, "Find out what you can without damaging the specimen. When I think you have done the work, I will question you." In the course of an hour I thought I had compassed the fish. It was rather an unsavory object, giving forth the stench of old alcohol, then loathsome to me, though in time I came to like. Many of the scales were loosened so that they fell off.

It appeared to me to be a case of a summary report which I was anxious to make and get on to the next stage of the business. But Agassiz, though always within call, concerned himself no further with me that day nor the next, nor for a week. At first, this neglect was distressing, but I saw that it was a game. For he was, as I discerned rather than saw,

covertly watching me. So, I set my wits to work upon the thing and in the course of a hundred hours or so thought I had done much—a hundred times as much as seemed possible at the start. I got interested in finding out how the scales went in series, their shape, the form and placement of the teeth, etc. Finally, I felt full of the subject and probably expressed it in my bearing. As for words about it then, there were none from my master except from his cheery, "Good morning!"

At length on the seventh day came the question, "Well?" and the discourse of my learning to him as he sat on the edge of my table puffing his cigar. At the end of the hour's telling, he swung off and away saying, "That is not right." Here I began to think that after all, perhaps the rules for scanning Latin verse were not the worst infliction in the world; moreover, it was clear that he was playing a game with me to find if I were capable of doing hard, continuous work without the support of a teacher, and this stimulated me to labor. I went at the task anew, discarded my first notes and in another week of ten hours a day labor, I had results which astonished myself and satisfied him. Still there was no trace of praise and words or manner. He signified that it would do by placing before me about half a peck of bones, telling me to see what I could make of them with no further directions to guide me.

As a young graduate student, I complained to my English professor that no one had assembled a systematic phonemic inventory comparing the sounds of English to other languages. Dr. Hackenburg challenged me, "Why don't you construct one yourself?" With this challenge, I assembled such a reference book over a period of years and then shared the work with my linguistics students. Today, collectively, my students and I have compared and contrasted more than 56 languages. When my students complain about the tedium of this work, I metaphorically compare it to blueberry or blackberry picking—it takes a long time to fill the pail and enjoy the results.

Incremental Learning

Our father Abraham stepped out in faith incrementally until he became a friend of God and the father of the faithful. These titles did not accrue to him all at once, but came about as a result of a lifetime of learning experiences in which he diligently searched for God's purpose for him. Abraham learned through raw experience that "without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

By demanding exploratory behavior, God Almighty has modeled the most effective instructive techniques known to education, the emphasis on inductive or inquiry approaches to learning, which take perhaps a little longer than traditional, straight lecture, deductive methods. In it, God deliberately withholds many of the answers He could have given all at once.

Herbert Armstrong related many times how he and Loma had kept the Feast of Tabernacles several years at Siegler Springs without having a clue as to what they meant. Today, because of his persistence at seeking God's intent, the greater church of God has a better picture of how the pieces fit together. Over more than seventy years, God has annually rehearsed with us the incremental pieces of the Divine Master plan. Some of the misguided members of our previous fellowship have scorned the practice of removing leaven from their homes in the spring and living in temporary dwellings in the fall, relegating it to foolish, childish ritual. Evidently, they found putting up Christmas trees and hunting for Easter eggs as more adult behavior.

However, like the students of Louis Agassiz, we should look upon these annual learning activities as a means of getting to know our Creator more intimately and of understanding His plan. Each time we rehearse them, we should get a clearer picture of God's ultimate purposes and intent. To those who stay with these learning activities outlined by the plan of God, He promises understanding, communion, and family membership.

As Proverbs 15:29 warns us, "The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous." If we want to become privy to more of our Father's secrets, we need to seek Him actively and tirelessly and draw close to Him. James 4:7 assures us that if we, with all deliberation, resist the Devil and draw close to God, He will come near to us.

Ultimately, all of the riddles, figures of speech, and esoteric prophecies will be cleared up for us. Our Elder Brother Jesus assures us, "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father" (John 16:25).