

Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

• Lesson One •

Where Do We Find God?

1. God reveals himself to us in his Word
2. Only in the Bible do we find the truth about God

Worship

A meditation based on Psalm 119 (selected verses)

Leader: Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

Group: Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.

Leader: I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

Group: I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word.

Leader: I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.

Group: How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

Leader: Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

Group: The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

Leader: I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.

Group: Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name. Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.

Leader: Redeem me from the oppression of men, that I may obey your precepts.

Group: Make your face shine upon your servant and teach me your decrees.

Leader: Teach us, O LORD, to follow your decrees, and give us understanding to obey you with all our hearts. Direct us in the path of your commands, for there we find delight. Turn our hearts from selfish gain, our eyes from worthless things, and preserve our lives according to your word.

Group: Amen.

Introduction

There are many “religious” people in our world. Some speak often about their spirituality and the joy they’ve experienced in “finding” God. Some meditate on the trees and mountains and claim to discover there the divine all around them. Some perceive a divine spark within and focus their energies on fanning it into flame.

But all that is called spirituality and religion is not necessarily God-pleasing or true. God has not told us to expect to meet him in the mountains and trees. He has not commanded us to find him within ourselves. Instead, he bids us to look outside of ourselves.

The world’s religions all ask the right question: Where do we find God? Only Christianity, however, gives the right answer.

Studying God’s Word

God reveals himself to us in his Word

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.

1. What did the apostle Paul realize about the gospel message that he proclaimed? (verse 6)

He knew that it was not a message the world would consider wise. He knew that only the spiritually mature could understand and accept it. He realized that it violated the world’s sense of logic. He knew that the gospel conflicted with the world’s sense of right and wrong.

2. In what sense is God’s wisdom “hidden”? (verse 7)

No one knows it by nature. No one can see it or understand it until God reveals it. No one can discern it by meditation on nature or meditation on a mantra, no matter how intense that meditation may be. Though creation reveals the existence of God, it does not reveal him to be a loving, saving God, who forgives sins through Christ’s blood.

3. What proof does the apostle offer that God’s wisdom is hidden? (verses 8 and 9)

The rulers of the world (Herod, Pilate, the Sanhedrin) crucified Jesus. If they had known God’s wisdom, that Jesus was the Messiah, God and man in one person, they would not have crucified him. Obviously, God’s wise plan of salvation was hidden from them.

In verse 9 Paul quotes from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Since “no eye has seen, no ear . . . heard, no mind . . . conceived” of God’s saving plan for sinful human beings, it is clear that no one knows it by nature. It is hidden from all, even those with the keenest minds.

4. What’s wrong with this statement: Since God’s plan for the redemption of human beings is hidden, then no one can be saved? (verses 10-12)

It is true that human beings cannot discover the truth on their own. That’s not the same as saying that no one can ever know it. God has graciously revealed his plan of salvation to us in the Bible. The Spirit of God caused the Word to be written. The Spirit of God works through that Word of God to bring about understanding and create faith. Those whose faith rests on Jesus will never die.

How do other religions discover the truth?

Islam: Allah has revealed the truth through his prophets, the greatest of whom was Muhammad. A Muslim man would therefore seek the truth outside of himself and outside of his own meditation. He would find it in the word of Allah.

Judaism: The one true God has revealed the truth. Most Jews seek the truth outside of themselves, in Scriptures that came from God. There are some pockets of Judaism that are mystical and seek the truth by visions.

Hinduism: Hinduism teaches that each person is part of God. Through careful introspection and meditation on that, the individual will come to the truth. There is also an emphasis on meditating on nature to discover meaning in life.

Buddhism: Meditation will lead people to the truth because it frees them from the “things” of life. In some strains of Buddhism, repetition of a mantra is emphasized as a means of finding such freedom because it allows the individual to focus on spiritual things.

His Word in My Life

Hindus say, “He who knows himself will know God.” Through careful meditation, the Hindu hopes to know himself as part of God. Then he will know God.

1. Evaluate the idea that through meditation we can get in touch with God within us.

When we consider the magnificence of our bodies and minds, we recognize that there must be a God who created human beings. In that sense, one who knows himself will know that there must be a god. That's different from knowing exactly who that God is. The Hindu assumes that he is part of God. That's a false assumption, born of an egotistic and self-absorbed sinful nature. Knowing God comes only through careful meditation on his Word, for only there does God reveal himself as he is—the God of grace and mercy, who sent his Son to rescue the world.

2. Even Christians may be affected by this perverse idea. How might such an idea manifest itself in our thinking?

When we neglect the reading and studying of God's Word and yet desire to grow in faith and knowledge, we must be operating under the assumption that we can know God through meditation on something other than his Word. We may also buy into the humanism found in many self-help books. Those books give the impression that the ability to change comes from within us. They claim that if we can only harness the power within us, we can accomplish great things. This is not to say that we cannot find any practical advice from such books. The danger comes when we begin to find a piece of God within ourselves.

3. Formulate a positive Christian response to a person who thinks like this.

We might ask the person whether he or she also sees sin when looking within. Does he or she know the accuracy of King David's words in Psalm 51: “I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (verses 3 and 4)? Through careful meditation, we come to know our unworthiness. We see that we have not been Godlike in our actions or thoughts. We know how desperately we need someone to rescue us from our sins. We can follow up these thoughts with the fact that in the Bible, God reveals Christ, who is the answer to the problem of sin.

In creation God certainly gives testimony to his existence. But from creation we can never learn to know about God's personal love for us. In his Word, God introduces himself to us, so that we might know him and live. We meet him in his sacraments and learn anew of his love for us. Any other method of coming to know God ultimately deceives and leads away from God.

Only in the Bible do we find the truth about God

Read Jeremiah 23:16-32.

1. What message were false prophets proclaiming to the people of Judah? (verses 16 and 17)

They were proclaiming what the people of Judah wanted to hear. It was the false hope that nothing was going to happen to threaten their prosperity. The false prophets said that Judah would dwell in peace and safety regardless of how the people acted toward the Lord and his Word of promise.

2. What fault does the Lord find with these messengers and their message? (verses 18 and 21)

These messengers presumed to be God, thinking they had authority to say whatever they wanted. God accused them of using his name as a cover for their lies and teaching the people their own dreams rather than God's Word.

3. When is a message and messenger trustworthy? (verse 22)

A message is trustworthy when it comes from God. A messenger is trustworthy when he or she speaks a message that is in keeping with the whole of Scripture and aims to turn people away from unbelief and the sins that flow from unbelief.

4. How do false prophets seek to gain a hearing for their message? (verses 25-27)

They claim to have had dreams or visions directly from God. They sound so spiritual and powerful that people are drawn to them, to hear what they have to say.

5. Many in Judah thought the words of the false prophets were on an equal plane with God's Word. What does God himself say about that? (verses 28-31)

God says that there is no comparison between the seemingly pious thoughts of men and the words of God. His words are far more powerful ("like fire . . . and like a hammer"). God is against those who dare to put their opinions and feelings on an equal plane with his Holy Word or who try to validate their message by saying, "This is what the Lord says."

6. Many in Judah felt that they grew in their spirituality by listening to the dreamers. What was God's evaluation? (verse 32)

Though many in Judah may have felt that they were growing, God said that these false teachers "do not benefit these people in the least." Not only were the people of Judah not benefiting from these false prophets; they were being harmed by them.

What sacred writings do other religions use?

Islam: Muslims recognize the Law of Moses, the psalms of David, the **Injil** (*in-JEEL*) (gospel of Jesus Christ), and the **Koran** (*ko-RAHN*). The **Koran** (*ko-RAHN*) supersedes the others, because it is the eternal word given by the angel **Gabriel** (*GAY-bree-uhl*) to **Muhammad** (*moo-HAH-med*). Muslims believe that all other scriptures have been corrupted. Some Muslims also recognize the **hadith** (*hah-DEETH*) and claim that it is on an equal level with the **Koran** (*ko-RAHN*) because it contains the authentic sayings of **Muhammad** (*moo-HAH-med*).

Judaism: The 39 books that Christians call the Old Testament are the sacred scripture of Judaism. Sometimes these books are called the **Torah** (*TORE-uh*) (divine teaching), emphasizing that they are God's guide for the life of his people. The designation **Torah** (*TORE-uh*), though, is usually reserved for the books of Moses. **Tanach** (*tah-NAHK*) is also a name for the 39 books. The **Talmud** (*TAHL-mood*) is comprised of the **Mishnah** (*MISH-nah*) (the interpretations of the Torah made by the scribes and rabbis) and the **Gemara** (*geh-MAH-rah*) (later commentary on the Mishnah). The **Talmud** (*TAHL-mood*) is second in authority only to the **Torah** (*TORE-uh*).

Hinduism: The **Vedas** (*VAY-duhs*) are the earliest Hindu scriptures. These books of wisdom include hymns, prayers, and rituals. The **Upanishads** (*oo-PAH-nih-shahds*) are based on the Vedas and center on the relation of the individual to the Absolute Being. Two great epic poems are also considered useful for stimulating thought: The **Ramayana** (*rah-MY-uh-nuh*) and The **Mahabharata** (*mah-hah-BAH-rah-tuh*). The **Mahabharata** (*mah-hah-BAH-rah-tuh*) includes "**Bhagavad Gita** (*BUH-guh-vud GEE-tuh*)," which has been called the Bible of Hinduism because of its popularity. These sacred writings are not authoritative for the Hindu, nor are they the only way to know God. They are merely the means to the end of finding release from the cycle of reincarnation.

Buddhism: The **Tripitaka** (*trih-PIH-tuh-kuh*) (triple basket) is the primary scripture for the more traditional Buddhists (**Theravada** (*teh-ruh-VAH-duh*) Buddhism). It is 11 times larger than the Bible. The more liberal Buddhists (**Mahayana** (*mah-hah-YAH-nuh*) Buddhism) have many more authoritative texts. Some of the writings are geared toward common piety; others are more philosophical in nature. These books do not have the authority in Buddhism that the Bible does in Christianity.

His Word in My Life

Muslims acknowledge all religious scriptures to be the Word of God but contend that most sacred writings have been corrupted. Though Muslims also turn to the hadith (the sayings of Muhammad), they ultimately rely on the Koran. Only the Koran can be trusted. Only the Koran, a compilation of the visions that Muhammad received and recited to his followers, provides the truth about God.

1. Agree or disagree: We can benefit from reading the Koran or, for that matter, from reading the sacred writings of other religions.

In some ways, we could agree with this statement. If we care for the lost and want to share the truth with people entangled in a false religion, we need to know what their scriptures say. We will benefit from finding out what might be going on in their minds so that we can find a point of contact for sharing the gospel. Generally speaking, though, we would disagree with this statement. God grants spiritual growth only through the gospel. His Word alone has power to create and strengthen faith. Reading the Koran will not draw us closer to God.

2. How would you try to convince a Muslim friend that the Bible alone reveals the true God? Where would you start? Most.

We need to remember that arguing does not bring someone into the kingdom of God. Only the gospel has power to do that. There is a place for apologetics (defending what we believe), but we ought not think that we can convince a Muslim that the Bible alone reveals the true God. That's the gospel's work. The best place to start any discussion with someone who doubts the authenticity of Scripture is with the law and gospel. Share the central message of Scripture, that God in grace sent his Son into the world to live under the law and to accept the punishment that we deserve. Tell the person of God's rich forgiveness and the life that he promises to those who trust in Jesus as their Savior. The gospel alone can lead people to confess that the Bible is God's Word.

3. Most Jewish people accept the Old Testament as the Word of God. They reject the New Testament, however, as the foolish dreams of false prophets. They might even point to the passage in Jeremiah in which the Lord's Word is compared with the false prophets' dreams. How would you respond? Commend them for their concern for the Word of God. Assure them that you also are concerned about letting the words of false prophets have equal status with the Word of God. Point out some of the prophecies in the first 39 books of the Bible that find their fulfillment in Jesus. Demonstrate that the

sacrifices prescribed in the Torah were shadows of the things that were to come. Point them to the book of Hebrews to see how the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament.

Many in our religiously pluralistic society revere the sacred writings of all religions equally. But we cannot, because the dreams of false prophets cannot be placed on a par with God's Word. Only in the Bible does God reveal himself to us. Only there does he tell us of his great love for fallen human beings. There he points us to the sacrifice of his Son on Calvary's cross and gives us forgiveness and life. There he assures us that we are his dear children. There he strengthens faith and excites our hearts for service.

Summary

If you want to grow spiritually, you need to do something more exotic and exciting than turn to the Bible—or so says the world. The idea that God comes to human beings in the Lord's Supper and Baptism is nonsensical, says human reason. Though foolish in the eyes of the world, the message of the cross is God's wisdom and his unfailing means for blessing. Look at the final result. The gospel in Word and sacrament accomplishes far more glorious things than any ritual or practice proposed by the world or the world's non-Christian religions.

Life with God

Day 1: Read Psalm 119:1-32.

Day 2: Read Psalm 119:33-64.

Day 3: Read Psalm 119:65-96.

Day 4: Read Psalm 119:97-128.

Day 5: Read Psalm 119:129-160.

Day 6: Read Psalm 119:161-176.