

REACHING OUT TO KNOW THE MIND OF GOD

Personal Testimony

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Artificial intelligence, the ability of a machine to think like a human being, has become a reality in the twenty-first century, but its origin dates all the way back to the 1930's and 40's. Scientists discovered that they could create a mechanical device that mimicked the electrical impulses that take place in the human brain. In other words they were copying the very way in which human beings are able to think. The development of computers has provided the means by which this technology can be implanted into machines with fully developed cognitive powers, including the ability to carry on a conversation and to achieve intellectual reasoning and problem solving far beyond human capabilities. Even the spell check function on your computer is a low level form of artificial intelligence. Of course, with these technological advances comes the potential for what is good and maybe not so good. Could the creation of artificial intelligence turn against its creator? Remember the movie, 2001 Space Odyssey? A crew of astronauts is sent on a secret mission to the planet Jupiter. Life on board their spacecraft is controlled by a super computer named "Hal." Because "Hal" has been programmed incorrectly, he experiences a mental breakdown, becoming schizophrenic. He turns on the crew and kills everyone, except for one remaining astronaut.

Who knows whether artificial intelligence will be a blessing or a curse for humanity? However, it does raise another question which for us as Christians may be even more interesting. What if we were able to tap into "Divine Intelligence?" What if we were able to reach out and come to a better understanding of the mind of God? Now that would be a real achievement. Gaining access to the thoughts and purposes of the Lord God Almighty would open up whole new vistas of understanding and advancement for mankind. But is that possible? The Old Testament prophet Isaiah threw a great big wet blanket on that idea when he said, speaking on the Lord's behalf, "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Nevertheless, through prayer can we reach out and at least know something of the mind of God? Let's examine two possibilities and see if that might prove to be true. The first is the life and ministry of Jesus. After He was baptized by John the Baptist, what did He do? Matthew, Mark and Luke all say the same thing. He went into the Jordanian wilderness where He spent 40 days fasting. Besides going without food, what else did He do? Being led by the Spirit of God to that desolate location, the answer is obvious. It was a time of prayer, a time to commune with His heavenly Father as He mapped out the future course of His ministry. The gospel of Mark hints at what was taking place during that time by mentioning that Jesus was attended by angels (Mark 1:10). We also know from the Scriptures that it was a time to hear and be tempted by God's adversary, the devil. Rejecting all that Satan had to offer, Jesus was now ready to begin preaching and teaching and healing the sick. Later, near the end of His ministry there was that encounter with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. Once again, whether you call it a time of prayer or a divine meeting, Jesus was receiving instruction and encouragement for the conclusion of His ministry here on earth. Finally, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the last night of His life, what was Jesus doing? He was praying and what was the prayer that He was praying, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). He was reaching out to know the mind and heart of God and to accept what that entailed, even if it meant death on a cross.

Of course, it's easy to say that Jesus was the Son of God and we are not. But don't forget that when Jesus wanted to know what God was thinking and desiring for Him to accomplish, He had to do the same thing that we as God's children have to do. He prayed. The same is true of another servant of God. He was not divine by a long shot. In fact, at first he wanted to destroy this heretical movement which eventually became known as Christianity. On the road to Damascus, of course, all of that changed and he too became a Christian. So how did Paul prepare himself for an evangelical ministry that would stretch all the way across the Roman Empire? Let me share with you a passage of Scripture that is often overlooked. After his conversion and before he started preaching, this is what Paul did. In his letter to the Galatians he wrote, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12). Then after explaining how he became a believer, he adds, "I did not consult with any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was. I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus" (Galatians 1:16-17).

The gospel message of God's salvation was not something that Paul discovered after consulting with the leaders of the early church. He didn't pursue that approach at all. Instead, like Jesus, he spent time alone with God to insure that he had a proper understanding of the mind of the Almighty. In other words he spent a considerable amount of time in prayer. That's why Paul could say to the Christians in Corinth, "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rules of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began" (1 Corinthians 2:6-7). Out there in the desert of Arabia, Paul was able to plug into the mind of God and to discern the wonderful revelation of His plan for mankind's salvation in Christ Jesus.

With all of this in mind, let's return to that question that I raised at the beginning of this sermon. Through prayer can we reach out to know the mind of God? To be perfectly honest, our prayer capabilities in no way measure up to those of Christ and for most, if not all of us they are also inferior to those of Paul. So what are we to do? Has the bar been set so high that knowing anything of the mind and heart of God through prayer is simply beyond us? Perhaps not. Let me share a memory with you from years ago. I was serving as a chaplain intern at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem. Under my supervision was a Mennonite lay pastor from Canada. He was there for a 15 week course in pastoral care. One of the things that I quickly realized was that he was a man of prayer. He knew the Lord and communed with Him on a daily basis. The way in which he dealt with people reminded me of the New Testament description of Jesus' life and ministry. His insightful comments and compassionate demeanor drew people like a magnet. In just a few days, not only patients, but nurses and even doctors were seeking his counsel. I was supposed to be his supervisor, but in reality I was his student. Very quickly I began to realize that this rather quiet and unassuming man had access to the mind and heart of God. He knew how to pray.

So what about you and me? As we bring this six week emphasis on prayer to a conclusion, what can we take away from it that will be genuinely beneficial? Here it is. You and I can walk hand in hand with God through prayer. It's simply a matter of whether we want to or not. God will not force us to walk with Him. It's our choice and to be perfectly honest it's not easy. Having gone on a number of back packing trips with my son and others, I can tell you that walking down a trail, sometimes over difficult terrain, requires both discipline and determination. It's not a stroll in the park. You've got to know what to take, be willing to carry a cumbersome backpack and deal with some harsh realities like sleeping on the ground. It

also requires being alert, being aware of what's going on around you, so that you are not surprised by something that could be dangerous. But when you come to the end of the trail and look back over the entire experience you know that every step of the journey was worth it. You have gotten to know those with whom you have been hiking in a far deeper way and in a more meaningful way than what would have ever been possible otherwise.

The same is true when you go for a prayerful walk with God. It will require time, getting to know Him and learning how to follow His leadership. It will take some training, studying His guidebook, the Bible, because God will never tell you or show you anything that violates His Word. It will take some stamina and discipline, developing a regular prayer routine and keeping it, even when you don't want to. Finally and most importantly, it will require being conscious of the one who walks beside you, the Holy Spirit, being alert to what He wants to tell you and show you on your journey through life.

In the fifth chapter of the book of Genesis, we are introduced to a man by the name of Enoch. You know what's so special about him? Only one thing. He walked with God, another way of saying that he and the Lord had an abiding relationship with one another through prayer. That relationship was so strong that Enoch received a special invitation from God. The Bible says, "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more because God took him away" (Genesis 5:24). In other words, he received an invitation to spend all of eternity in the presence of His heavenly Father. May it be said of each of us that like Enoch, we too knew how to walk with God.