

HIDDEN GOD, REVEALED GOD ¹

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The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (Deut. 29:29).

So, there are some things for wise reasons known only to Himself, that God has not told us. They are **secret things**, hidden things, mysteries known only to God. There is no point speculating, philosophising, pontificating on what these hidden mysteries God has not told us about might be. They cannot be known by human investigation. God, unlike some folks, can keep a secret!

Then, there are some things God has openly revealed to us, essential things meant to enlighten us. They are things we are encouraged to delight in and to discuss and to profit from. There is every reason for us to meditate upon, to rejoice in the things God has revealed to us in the holy Scriptures and in His Son Jesus Christ who is the definitive truth.

Yes, there are secret things that belong only to God Himself, and there are revealed things we are all meant to profit from. We may say then, God is the **Hidden God, Revealed God**. And my aim this morning is to see how this doctrine works itself out in our practical day to day life and experiences.

ELISABETH ELLIOT

In 1966, Elisabeth Elliot who had been a missionary to the Aucas (Waorani) of the South American Amazon jungle, wrote a novel entitled *No Graven Image*. It's the story of a young unmarried woman named Margaret Sparhawk who had dedicated her life to translating the Bible for remote tribes whose languages had not yet been written down.

Margaret took up Bible translation work among the Quechua people of the mountains of Ecuador. Key to her work was the discovery of a man Pedro, who knew the unwritten dialect that Margaret needed to learn in order to translate the Bible into that particular language. He began to teach her the language, and her painstaking work of systematically recording and documenting it moved forward.

One day Margaret is feeling grateful as she travels to see Pedro. She remembers the Bible verse, **Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage**. And she prays to God, "I've been waiting, Lord. Waiting and waiting ... You know I waited a long time to be a missionary to mountain Indians ... You seemed to say translation and medical work. So You gave me Pedro... Just being here today is an answer to prayer."

She thinks of all it has taken to bring her to where she is that day --- the support of friends, financial help from many people in the United States, years of training, years of building relationships, and of course, provision of the one man who knew both Spanish and the dialect she needed. God now seemed to be bringing things together. Margaret imagines the possibility of bringing the Bible to a million people in remote regions of the mountains.

Finally, she arrives at Pedro's home and discovers that he has an infected, painful wound in his leg. As part of her duties Margaret provided ordinary medical care and therefore she had with her a syringe and some penicillin. Pedro asks her for an injection and she decides to give it. But within seconds, Pedro begins to experience anaphylactic shock. His whole body was reacting violently to the penicillin.

¹ This is the fourth message delivered at the Mardon Road Church of Christ (Life Only in Christ) during my visit there in February 2019. Once again I ask my readers to make allowances for the note-form and hortatory style. This, like the previous 3 sermons, was delivered to a diverse audience from the very young to the elderly, including many folk who only speak English as a second language. The audience has seasoned Christians as well as unbelievers seeking for the truth of the Gospel.

The entire family is wailing round Pedro, as he lies convulsing. "Can't you see he's dying?" his wife Rosa cries to her. "You killed him."

Margaret is horrified at what is happening and prays, "Lord God, Father of us all, if You've never heard me pray before, hear me now ... Save him, Lord, save him."

But Pedro worsens and begins to retch, bent over in tormented spasms. Rosa puts both of her hands on the top of her head and begins the death wail of women in her community. Margaret continues to pray in her mind, "O Lord, what will become of Rosa? ... What will become of *Your* work? You started all this, Lord. It wasn't I. You led me here. You answered prayers and gave me Pedro --- he is the only one --- O Lord, remember that. There is no one else."

But Pedro dies. And indeed, it means Margaret Sparhawk's Bible translation work is over. All the years of labour are wiped away that day. For she cannot go ahead without an informant. God knew about that when Pedro died. She says, "I do not write prayer letters [to my supporters] anymore, for I have nothing to say about my work. It seemed, on the night of Pedro's death, as though *Finis* were written below all I had done."

The book ends with a profoundly confused young missionary. There is no last-minute reversal, and no "silver lining". She stands at Pedro's grave and thinks, "And God? What of Him? 'I am with you', He had said. With me in *this*? He had allowed Pedro to die, or --- and I could not then nor can I today deny the possibility --- He had perhaps caused me to destroy him. And does He now, I asked myself there at the graveside, ask me to worship Him?"

The answer is yes. For at the very last page of her book, *No Graven Image* Elisabeth Elliot records Margaret's key line --- only arrived at after deep heart-searching: God, if He was merely my accomplice, had betrayed me. If, on the other hand, He was God, He had freed me.

You see, it's very easy for us to erect a graven image, an idol, a little 'g' of a god, who always acts the way we think He should. It's easy to make God after our image, by imagining He must support our plans, even if they are our plans for His work. That is a god of our own creation, a counterfeit god. Such a god is really the projection of our own wisdom, our very own self.

If that is our god, then He is just our "accomplice", somebody we look to and rejoice in only so far as He is doing what we want. If He allows and does something else, then we just "fire" him, or in modern parlance, we "unfriend" Him from our Facebook page.

At the end of her book, Margaret Sparhawk realises that the demise of her plans had shattered her false god, and now she was free for the first time to worship the True One.

If you or I are serving the god-of-my-plans-my work, we will be anxious, never sure that that god is going to come through and get it right! Margaret was shattered to realise she had not been letting God be God --- all-wise, all-good, all-loving, all-powerful. At last she was liberated to put her hope not in her agendas and plans, but in God himself. This place brought her true freedom and her suffering had brought her to see God as God.

Incidentally, Elisabeth Elliot's book *No Graven Image* offended many in the evangelical churches precisely because it proposed that we trust in the God of the Bible Whose ways we cannot always understand. Many Christians protested that God would *never* allow such a tragedy to happen to a woman who had so prayerfully dedicated her life to His cause.

(Don't forget Elisabeth Elliot's own tragic story how her young husband Jim and four other missionaries had been murdered as they brought the gospel to the Waorani people. The night before their murders, those young men had sung a hymn, *We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender*, and the next day they traveled into the forest, met a party of Waoranis, and were all speared to death, leaving behind their widows and fatherless children.)

Elisabeth Elliot warned against trying to “find a silver lining” that would justify what happened. She wrote:

We know that time and again in the history of the Christian church, the blood of martyrs has been its seed. We are tempted to assume a simple equation here. Five men died. This will mean x-number of Waoran Christians. Perhaps so. Perhaps not ... God is God. I dethrone Him in my heart if I demand that he act in ways that satisfy my idea of justice. It is the same spirit that taunted, “**If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.**” There is unbelief, there is even rebellion, in the attitude that says, “God has no right to do this to five men unless ... Let’s illustrate this principle from a story in the Bible ...

“BUT IF NOT”

Remember the story in **Daniel chapter two** where King Nebuchadnezzar set up that gold image and demanded his whole realm fall on their knees before it when the music started up? Three Hebrew lads refused to submit to this man-made idol. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego defied the king. They did not follow the crowd, they did not listen to the music, they did not bow to the idol.

Now, Nebuchadnezzar seems to have admired these lads and he gives them a second chance to comply ...

And Nebuchadnezzar said to them, ‘Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ... If you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?’ (Dan. 3:14-15)

Now, generations of Christians have found inspiration from this story. Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace has become a metaphor for any kind of suffering we are called upon to go through. In the case of those three Hebrew lads, it was State-sponsored totalitarian control. For millions of others the suffering might come in the form of unexpected and shocking tragedy --- sudden accident or death of a loved one, the birth of a deformed or stillborn baby, the collapse of a business, debilitating sickness, unexplained betrayal of a friend, etc.

Whatever the suffering, these Hebrew lads represent any who suddenly find themselves in a painful furnace of suffering through no fault of their own. In response to King Nebuchadnezzar’s ultimatum, the young men gave their famous reply,

“We have no need to answer you in this matter ... our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. *But if not* be it known unto you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

Now, to be honest with you, this answer from these young lads has always intrigued me and at the same time troubled me. On the one hand, they display absolute faith that God is going to rescue them from the flames of death. **“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King.”**

But then, they seem to express doubt, and waver. **“*But if not.*”** Is this doubt not what the book of James warns us of --- **he who wavers is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (James 1: 6-8)?**

On the one hand, these boys are confident God is able and will deliver them. But aren’t they also having a bet each way when they admit the possibility they may not be rescued? Their answer as I say, both intrigued and troubled me. Surely their faith is **unstable?** What’s the solution? **Tim Keller** puts it well;

The answer is that their confidence was actually in God, not in their limited understanding of what they thought he would do. They had inner assurance that God would rescue them. However, they were not so arrogant as to be sure they were “reading God right.” They knew that God was under no obligation to operate according to their limited wisdom. In other words, their confidence was in God Himself, not in some agenda that they wanted God to promote. They trusted in God, and that included trust that He knew better than they what should happen.

So they were essentially saying this: “Even if our God does not rescue us --- and that is right --- we will serve Him and not you. We will serve him whether he conforms to our wisdom or not. We do not defy you because we think we are going to live --- we defy you because our God *is* God.” ²

I often hear good people say, “When you pray for someone to be healed, then you must fervently believe He is going to heal them no matter what. We claim our blessing by faith. God will bless us in the way we have prayed in faith. We name it. We claim it. We believe it. We confess it. That settles it. It’s ours by faith. God will honour and bless our faith.”

You know. I don’t see that in the Bible as I am going to show you. Certainly not here in the example of these boys’ confident faith. And just think of the greatest men of faith in the Bible. Certainly, Abraham, Joseph, David are instances of men of great faith who prayed believing but did not get the answer they craved for. Even the greatest man of faith in the Bible, our Lord Jesus, did not get everything he wished for. Did he not pray, “**Father, if it’s possible take this cup [of suffering] from me, nevertheless not my will but Thine be done**”? As Keller continues,

If we say, “I know You will answer this prayer, God. You *can’t not* answer it” --- then our confidence is not really in God’s wisdom but in our own.

My friends, the Christian prayer-landscape is littered with countless believers who said, “I really trusted God to come through. I prayed so hard for X, but He never came through for me. He let me down!” What’s the problem here? Well, the answer is that their confidence was actually set on their own agenda they had devised for their lives and God was just a means they were employing to arrive at their pre-conceived and wished-for end. *At best, they were trusting in God-plus-my-plan-for-my-life.* ³

In contrast, those three Hebrew lads, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, trusted God whatever His wisdom and love determined. *Full stop!* And that’s the confidence of a God-honouring faith that alone can fireproof you spiritually against the sufferings of this life. They knew that God would deliver them *from* death or *through* death, and their greatest joy and security facing the furnace was in wanting what God wanted for them and His glory.

They weren’t in it just for what they could get out of God for their own lives. The heat of our sufferings, yes, even the darkness of our sufferings, can make us examine our real motives in our walk with the Lord. *If we have created a false God-of-my-program, then when life falls apart we will simply assume he has abandoned us and we won’t seek Him.* ⁴

I suggest that if you go into the furnace of suffering without this attitude, ‘My God whom I serve is able to deliver me, and will deliver me, **but if not** He is still my God and His love and wisdom for me are best’, then when disappointment comes either one of two things will result.

1. Either you will become very disillusioned with God and give up on Him. Countless have. They have come out of their dark hours of suffering saying, “I was serving God. I deserved better. God has not been just towards me. God has wronged me.”

2. Or, others have gone into the furnace of suffering thinking God is bound to fulfill their agenda, and when He does not meet their expectations, then they have said, “The problem is with me. My faith was not strong enough. There must be some hidden sin in my life. I am not worthy and have failed God in some way.” And so they are filled with feelings of failure and unworthiness, and they think God is mad at them.

But if you remember the Gospel truth that God has forgiven you all your sins in Christ, that you stand justified before the God of Heaven in Christ who is your righteousness, then the next time you are tossed into the furnace, you will say, “I am not being punished for my sins (*unless* the Lord has been convicting you of some definite sin in your life and you have not confessed it and repented of it!). Christ died for me. Christ bore every

² Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain & Suffering*, Hodder & Stroughton, 2013, pp230-231

³ *Ibid*, p 231

⁴ *Ibid*, p 234

single last one of my sins, and in him, God the Father has removed them from His sight as far as the east is from the west. Although I am now in this furnace of a fiery trial, I am not being punished for my sins because Jesus bore the wrath of God for me.

Yes, I am going through this furnace, but just like when gold is refined and purified in the fire, so I will trust Him to let this fiery trial make me better for Him. As it turns out, it was God's will the boys be fireproofed. But for everyone miraculously saved, there were many more who perished.

The New Testament agrees with what we are saying;

And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets:

Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection;

And (here comes the **BUT if not!!**) others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:

They ***were*** stoned, they ***were*** sawn asunder, ***were*** tempted, ***were*** slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins: being destitute, afflicted, tormented:

(Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And these **all**, having **obtained a good report through faith**, received not the promise:

God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect (Heb. 11:32-40).

The history of God's faithful people tells us that sometimes God mightily intervenes and delivers in answer to faith; but sometimes God appears silent and He does not deliver, except to tragedy in spite of great faith. But whether their faith worked great miracles and wrought supernatural interventions, or whether God did not miraculously respond to rescue them, they **all obtained a good report through faith!** Either way, God is God.

MY BROTHER JEFF resigned his position as founder and senior pastor at Rivergum Church of Christ for 19 years. He had given his total life in love and sacrificial service to that Sydney community in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His wife Pam, too.

My brother is also a Chaplain in the Army Reserves. He has the rank of Major. Knowing how invested Jeff was in the Rivergum church, His commanding officer came to see how Jeff was doing. He said, "Now that you have resigned from your church, and knowing how much you have loved and lived for those people, I am concerned as to how you might be in yourself. So I have come to do a pastoral visit. Are you OK?"

Jeff replied, "Sir, I cannot tell you how much your concern for me touches me. But I will tell you that, when I woke up this morning nothing fundamental had changed. God was still in His heaven. God was still Sovereign over all my life. I was still a child of His love and grace. My identity, my value had not changed one bit. Sir, with the greatest of respect and appreciation to you for your kind concern, I have to say that today nothing essential has changed from yesterday to today! And it will be the same tomorrow. God is still God, always God, and I am still His beloved son through Christ Jesus my Lord. Nothing has changed." The officer then confided in Jeff that he wished he had that!

Yes, there is much in life we cannot fathom and will never get to the bottom of. There are **the secret things that belong to the Lord**. He has His hidden reasons and ways.

By faith in God as God, let us join with these Hebrew boys and confidently say, **our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. *But if not* be it known unto you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you set up”.**

The god we have set up to bless our plans, even if they are plans for *His* work, sometimes fails to deliver. But faith in the Bible God who is Sovereign and free to be God will ultimately never let us down. Amen.