

The Phenomenal Nature of Spiritual Experience

AS WE HAVE SAID, our God experience is phenomenal and, like the rest of our experiences, involves both an objective reality and our awareness and interpretation of that reality. Unfortunately, since so many of us are naïve about this phenomenal nature of our experience, we quite naturally equate our awareness of something with the thing itself. Thus, we imagine that when we are aware of God's presence, he is there, and when we are not aware of his presence, he is not there. We perceive our first awareness of God's presence as an objective fact that God has shown up in our lives, rather than our simply having become aware of God's presence for the first time. We further imagine that something must have caused God to have decided to show up, so we consider what we did immediately before we became aware of God's presence, and deem it the cause of God deciding to appear in our lives. The fact is, however, that God is omnipresent, and our first God experience is simply our awareness of that presence. God has always been at work in our lives, but only at certain moments in time do we become aware of that presence.

Following Jesus is largely a matter of entering into a journey whereby we become evermore aware of God's presence in our lives. As we have said, Jesus tells us to "Follow me," and thereby do what he does. Of all the things that Jesus did, and would likewise have us do, the most important is that we would be aware of God's presence, as Jesus was aware. Thus, although God is present in all of our lives, those who are committed to following Jesus and living as he lived, are simply more mindful of that presence. We most emulate Jesus, not by preaching or working miracles, but by practicing this awareness. God loves all of his children, and we all dwell in that love, but some are more mindful of it and thereby reap its fruit.

Sadly, many people go through life unaware of God's presence and therefore never experience the fullness of life that Jesus reveals. Furthermore, those who are aware of God's presence are often not much better off. Their ill-conceived understanding and inappropriate reactions to what God is doing often impair God's intentions. Because we live in a phenomenal reality, what we experience is our interpretation of our God relationship, which might be very different from what God is actually doing. Jesus may have had a perfect comprehension of what God was doing in his life, but we certainly do not. We are not always keenly aware of this. Since we are inclined to believe that our experience is objective rather than phenomenal, we imagine that our interpretation is not an interpretation at all but replicates what God is actually doing. Thus, even when we do become aware of God working in our lives, we do not always live in response to what God is doing but rather in response to what we imagine God to be doing.

Many things contribute to our misinterpretation of what God is doing in our lives, but one of the foremost is the misunderstanding that God loves us because of something we have done. Almost all religions have something of this thinking at their core. It is the belief that God decides who are saved or unsaved—who are godly or ungodly—based on what one does in terms of one's faith, rituals, or behaviors. The truth is that God loves us because we are his creation, and he loves the whole of his creation. We, however, do not; we love the people on this side of the river, but we think it virtuous to kill the people on the other side of the river. We love what we deem the good parts of God's creation but not what we deem the bad parts. We ignore Jesus' teachings, and therefore the perspective through which we interpret our God experiences remains our own.

Our misinterpretation of what God is doing in our lives becomes doubly problematic when we attempt to bless others. We may have good motives, and God is certainly at work in our ministries, but when we minister to others, not only is our misinterpretation involved but also the misinterpretation of those to whom we minister. It certainly would be advantageous in ministering to others, if we, and those to whom we are ministering, both possessed a grasp of the phenomenal nature of our human condition. It would explain why so many of our ministries are not as fruitful in the way we had expected given our good intentions and God's faithfulness.

As much as a phenomenal understanding might aid our ministries, it is perhaps even more helpful in our attempt to understand the Scripture. Although the fundamentalist may be especially prone to equating their understanding or interpretation of the Scripture with the Scripture itself, we nearly all lean in that direction because of our modern cultural prejudice toward objectivity. The truth, however, is that it is always our interpretation of the text and never the text itself that we encounter. We interpret the Scripture through a host of concepts, theories, and even emotive moods that are not God-given but are what we bring to the Scripture. Thus, our interpretation of Scripture is a composite of both what is set forth in the Scripture and all of the prejudices that we bring to the text.

No one objectively reads the Bible just as no one objectively studies the physical universe. One of the reasons for this is that when we perceive anything, we always focus our attention upon what is most important to us, and we marginalize what is not important. In our study of the physical world, individual scholars and scientists focus on those aspects that are most relevant to their interests. The same is true with our reading of the Scripture. We pick out what is dearest to us. The pacifist finds Scripture to support her pacifism and those who think it most important to be chosen focus on Scriptures that speak of the elect. Many people over the course of their lives change their focus, thus causing certain Scriptures to increase or diminish in importance. When one first becomes aware of God's presence, a particular Scripture might loom large. For example, the Scripture "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord"¹ might have special meaning for someone who was interested in salvation and the promise of eternal life. Later, as one becomes more aware of the fact that God's purpose is ultimately to make us more into his divine likeness, other Scriptures may loom larger.

The inescapable truth is that what we bring to our God experience has a great influence in shaping that experience. As we have repeatedly said, our human experience is phenomenal and created by both the data we receive and the understanding we bring to that data. This is as true of our God experiences as it is of the rest of our experiences. When we read the Scripture, God speaks to us, but it is always our understanding that creates our interpretation of what God is saying. The God experiences of Moses and David are no different. God spoke to the authors of Scripture,

1. Luke 2:11 KJV.

but what they recorded reflects the reality of our human condition as we now understand it; that is, although God provides the data, the human author provides the interpretation out of their human understanding. What God reveals to us in Scripture is just such a phenomenal reality. It is God's revelation of who human beings perceive and understand God to be.

THE PHENOMENAL NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

When we were oblivious to how greatly our perspective tainted our experience, it was natural to suppose that the Biblical revelation was a revelation of objective reality. Since we now know that the nature of the reality into which God has placed us is a phenomenal reality and objectivity is beyond our knowing, it should be obvious that the nature of the reality that God reveals to us in Scripture would also be phenomenal.

As such, the Bible is God's revelation of human beings phenomenal understanding of their God relationship. As God's revelation of human beings' relationship with God, it begins by portraying what is typically our initial, misguided notion of God. The notion of God most of us begin with is that of some ultimate authority intent upon law and order, and that is where the Biblical revelation begins as well. It is no wonder that we begin here in our understanding of God, since a god of wrath, intent upon law and order, is what our experience with human authority has brought us to anticipate. Human authority, from our earliest individual experience, as well as our experience as a species across the expanse of history and culture, has wished us to behave in certain ways. When we do not behave as the authority mandates, their response is to punish us in order to make us conform to their mandates. In varying degrees, parents, teachers, police, and judges, all convey and enforce this notion of authority, so it is quite natural that this is what we initially anticipate with God. We imagine that God must have a divine law that he enforces with punishment.

There is, however, another perspective one might take concerning God and the idea of law. It is possible to read something like the Ten Commandments as God's *promises* instead of dictates enforced by punishment for the sake of order. In other words, we could understand God as saying, "If you will dwell in an awareness of my presence, you will not commit adultery, will not murder, will not covet, or bear false witness." Jesus seems to have understood the law as just such a blessing meant to

keep Moses and his people from evil and give them an identity in God. Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of that identity. Jesus is the paradigm for one who has founded his identity solely upon his relationship with God and dwelt continually in God's presence. He is the fullness of the blessing God intended with the law. He says he is the fulfillment of the law.² The Pharisees, on the other hand, saw Jesus as undermining the law. They understood the law as commandments that they had to obey in order to avoid God's punishment, rather than the promise of God's blessing. For the most part, we have the Pharisees' concept of law rather than Jesus' concept because we trust the concepts that arise out of our human experience.

In spite of our ignorance of what God is actually doing, and our defensiveness about our own understanding, God continues to work amid our misunderstanding in the hope of bringing us to a better perspective. This is the progressive, historical revelation that the Bible depicts. As we become aware of God's presence, and earnest about the relationship that results from that awareness, our perspective of God and our relationship to God changes over time.

The idea of the Bible as a phenomenal, progressive revelation does not mean that the Biblical revelation is somehow less than God-breathed. The Scripture is God's revelation, and it reveals exactly what God wishes to reveal. As a phenomenal revelation of who human beings conceive God to be, it reveals how God patiently works amid that misunderstanding to bring them to a better perspective and therein a more intimate union with him.

As such, the Scripture also provides us with a prescription for how we should humbly and meekly interact with others whose notions of God and themselves may be different from our own. Often times, their perspective is very similar to ones we find some place in the Bible or even in our own past. In both cases, God dealt patiently and graciously with such perspectives and we should do the same. God may be the same yesterday, today, and forever, but our understanding of God is not. Our understanding of God and ourselves is something that changes as we stay on the spiritual journey that is our relationship with God. This is what we experience as individuals, as well as what is depicted as the Biblical revelation.

2. Matt 5:17.

This fact that there is a progression to our understanding of God, and our relationship to him, should not be taken to mean that the Jews of the Old Testament had less of a relationship with God than the New Testament Christians. Certainly, there were people in the Old Testament who had a rich understanding of who God was and understood his mercy in a way that many Christians today do not. Christians are not necessarily in a better place since few of us take in the fullness of the Jesus revelation, and thus, we are ill equipped to understand our God experiences. But whether we understand them or not does not alter God's love for us—which is the revelation that the Scripture offers; it is God's revelation of his unrequited love relationship with human beings. Like all great love stories, it works on several levels and is full of irony, ambivalence, and mystery. What else could we expect from a love story between an infinite, eternal God, and beings who interpret everything through a human perspective?

The fact that it is God's revelation and not of human authorship is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that it does not suppress the flaws of the great men and women of whom the Bible speaks. When human beings write sacred texts, their heroes are flawless or at least of superior virtue. When we write the story, George Washington never told a lie. That is how we paint our heroes. The Bible, however, exposes the sin of its heroes and shows how God uses their sin to draw them into humble repentance so they might experience God's forgiveness and mercy. Unlike, other sacred texts that tell us how to do life right, the Bible gives us countless examples of people who did it wrong and in doing it wrong found a God who was gracious and merciful.

Furthermore, the Bible depicts human beings in all sorts of places in this journey toward an ever-greater understanding of, and intimacy with, God. All of those places are parts of a process of coming to know God. The process is not straightforward, however, and many of the happenings depicted in the Scripture result in "two steps backward" rather than "three steps forward." Nevertheless, the Biblical text reveals that God's love doesn't depend on us going forward; in fact, God loves us just as much in our misunderstanding as he does when we come into a fuller understanding. Although God loves us, both as individuals and as a species, in spite of our missteps, we experience the fullness of life only by understanding our ultimate identity as God's beloved daughters and sons. In order that we would come to dwell in that ultimate phenomenal

reality that God has for us, we need to bring to our every circumstance the perspective that God is our father and nothing can separate us from his love. Jesus lived constantly out of that perspective, but most of us who consider ourselves his followers have only a very limited sense that God is as personal as our father, and that we are his beloved daughters and sons.

Throughout the Bible, many people had rich relationship with God, but it was not until Jesus that we encounter the ultimate revelation: that is, the Jesus perspective of God as “our father.” Nothing even close to that revelation appears in the Old Testament. Although there were Scriptures that could have led people to believe that we were God’s beloved sons and daughters, no one really understood or had that as their perspective until Jesus. Indeed, it was so unique that the religious people of Jesus’ day saw it as a scandalous blasphemy for which they put him to death. Sadly, two thousand years later, many who consider themselves his followers have yet to understand it nor seek to make it their own perspective. We are quick to say that God was Jesus’ father, but in spite of how often Jesus reiterates that the God of the universe is equally our father, we have not made that our own viewpoint. Even if we say that we do believe that God is our father, we do not bring that perspective to our every experience the way Jesus did. Consequently, we do not live in the ultimate, phenomenal reality that constitutes the fullness of life God has for us.

CONSEQUENCES OF A PHENOMENAL THEOLOGY

As previously mentioned, a phenomenal theology places the Jesus revelation, rather than a certain theory about how to interpret the Bible, at the center of the Christian faith. By contrast, when we center our faith upon the theory that the Bible is a revelation of God’s objective nature, it has the devastating consequence of neutralizing the words of Jesus. With such a perspective, we perceive God as sometimes wanting us to love our enemies³ and sometimes wanting us to kill our enemies.⁴ We are free therefore to decide if our present situation is a time for loving or killing. If, however, we read the Scripture as a progressive revelation that culminates with the Jesus perspective, then loving our enemies is always a step forward, and killing our enemies is always a step backward.

3. Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:27.

4. Josh 6:21.

Loving our enemies is the result of Jesus' divine perspective, and killing our enemies is the result of the human perspective that runs throughout the Bible.

By understanding the Bible as God's revelation of human beings' phenomenal relationship with God, we better understand why it contains both the killing of enemies and the loving of enemies. As a phenomenal revelation, it depicts a spiritual journey that begins in misunderstanding but progresses over time and culminates in the Jesus revelation that God is our Father and nothing can separate us from his love. With a phenomenal theology, Jesus is the apex of God's revelation and represents the ultimate perspective from which to interpret our God experiences.

When we read the Bible it should not be to attain an understanding of what specific passages of the Bible objectively mean. To take that as our purpose is to be under the sway of a modernist notion of how we should objectively understand truth. In contrast to that modern view, which tells us that we are to find truth in objective facts, Jesus tells us that he is the truth,⁵ and our purpose is to follow him and live as he lived and have the relationship with God that he had. Recall the seventeen times throughout the Gospels that Jesus says, "Follow me,"⁶ and the twenty-seven times he refers to God as "our" or "your" father.⁷ Jesus tells us to follow him in order that we might eventually take on his perspective that God is "our" father.

We may begin the spiritual journey with the idea that God is all about establishing order and wrathfully punishing disobedience, but the end toward which we move is to fall evermore deeply in love with the God that Jesus reveals. In order for that to happen, we must believe that there is nothing to fear in God and we are perfectly safe in his love. A God who is both full of love and wrath is an unapproachable God. Wisdom may begin with a fear of God,⁸ and such an initial fear may be useful. Indeed, it provides a necessary level of obedience that prevents much evil and destruction from entering our lives. If we are truly to fall in love with God, however, we must get beyond that fear. We all know how we respond to human beings that are both loving and wrathful. We

5. John 14:6.

6. Matt 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21; Mark 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Luke 5:27; 9:23; 9:59; 18:22; John 1:43; 10:27; 12:26; 13:36; 21:19.

7. Matt 5:16; 5:45; 5:48; 6:1; 6:4; 6:6; 6:8; 6:9; 6:15; 6:14; 6:18; 6:26; 6:32; 7:11; 10:20; 10:29; 18:14; 18:35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:36; 10:21; 11:13; 12:30; 12:32; 15:21; John 8:41; 20:17.

8. Ps 111:10, and Prov 9:10.

keep our distance. We may obey a god, that is full of wrath as well as love, but a true love relationship with such a god is impossible; and such a love relationship is the culmination of the journey, and thereby that which provides the direction in which Jesus calls us to travel. If we imagine that God is a god of wrath, we can never have the relationship with God that Jesus modeled for us.

Unfortunately, many people imagine that the Father's loving relationship with Jesus was the result of Jesus being sinless, and therefore not an appropriate model for us. Many even believe that the Fathers' relationship with Jesus did involve wrath, and that Jesus' suffering on the cross was at the hand of his Father. What a horrible picture of God. When Jesus suffers on the cross, the Father suffers as well. They are one, and what Jesus so beautifully manifests from the cross is God's divine forgiveness. With forgiveness, the offended one willingly suffers the offense for the sake of restoring connection with the offender. Forgiveness is exactly that; it occurs when the innocent, offended one willingly suffers the offense without retaliation, or a demand for justice, in order to restore relationship with the very one that has destroyed the relationship. Thus, justice is satisfied in that someone has paid for the offense, but in the case of forgiveness the innocent willingly substitutes themselves for the guilty and therefore pays for the offense. With divine forgiveness, the pure innocent lamb that is God suffers in order to restore relationship with the guilty.

Of course, the full truth of what happened on that cross is a mystery to us. We may have reduced its truth to the objective fact that Jesus died for our sins, but its deeper truth lies not in the fact but in its meaning. We have difficulty taking in that meaning, and thus the different theories concerning atonement. What keeps us from seeing atonement as pure forgiveness is our modernist theory of objectivity, which sees the Biblical revelation as the revelation of God's objective nature. Thus, God is both wrathful and punishing, as well as forgiving and merciful, and both must be represented in our interpretation of the atonement. But such a view constantly neutralizes the Jesus revelation. It tell us that the story of the Prodigal is not the entire story and that there is another side to God. It tells us that we must make the Jesus revelation consistent with the idea of justice that is such a prominent perspective throughout the Scripture until Jesus. We do this by aligning ourselves with the familiar, which is far easier than making sense of the strange and alien Jesus revelation.

In fact, the Jesus revelation is so alien that we refuse to take it in, and we search the Scripture for other depictions of God that negate things like the story of the Prodigal. We do this because we know that if we accept the Jesus revelation that God is the Father that always welcomes the return of the prodigal with mercy and forgiveness, we must do the same. We much prefer a perspective that understands God as the punisher of the prodigal, so we too can punish the prodigals in our lives. We seek a much more human understanding of God rather than the divine understanding that Jesus offers, and by seeing the Scripture as an objective revelation we have a god of many different moods from which we can justify our many different moods. It is all right to hate our enemies and feel righteous in our hatred, because even God hates his enemies.

By contrast, if we see the Scripture as God revealing how he patiently works amid our flawed conceptions in order to bring us eventually to the ultimate revelation Jesus offers, we are without excuse. With such a view of Scripture, God is no longer the one who calls us to both love our enemies and kill our enemies.⁹ He is instead the father of the prodigal, and the one who Jesus tells us is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”¹⁰ With a phenomenal view of Scripture, Jesus is the full and ultimate revelation of God’s nature, and we can no longer use the rest of Scripture to suppress the words of Jesus, as we have been prone to do.

We must repeat here, that this is not in any way to claim that the Scripture, in its entirety, is not God-breathed and inerrant. The Scripture is God’s perfect revelation, but, again, what God reveals is who human beings understand God to be. Such a revelation will necessarily contain points of confusion along with the occasional consummate insights into the nature of God. The Scripture is perfect, although perhaps not perfect as our modern minds imagine perfection. We imagine perfection as errorless, on the mathematical model, but God creates his perfection in the midst of error, confusion, and sin. His great design is not simply to make a race of people after his divine likeness, but to create that likeness in sinful flesh. He does not eliminate our sin, but uses it in the divine construction. This is what God does in our individual lives and what he depicts in Scripture. That is very different from what we human beings would do if we were God, and consequently it is very different from the way we generally interpret the Scripture. Our religious idea of perfection

9. Josh 6:21.

10. Luke 6:35.

is the idea of sinlessness. We imagine that what God desires is an angelic race of beings devoid of sin and all of the messiness that complicates human lives. We read the Scripture through such a perspective in order to have clear and distinct ideas about our lives and the Scripture. We want to be the good, sinless people, and so we imagine that evil and sin is “over there” in, say, the abortionist or the homosexual; but sin is not “over there”—it is in us. Our hearts tend to wander from the God we love, but God uses that in order to keep us in an almost constant state of repentance from which to receive an equally constant flow of forgiveness and mercy.

Our lives are much messier than we would like to imagine, and so is the Scripture. We would like it to offer us God’s clear and distinct moral prescription for our lives, but it does not. Instead, it offers the confused picture of how God appears to human beings, and how God patiently works amidst this confusion in order to bring us to a better understanding. This, however, is not what we want God to reveal to us. We would much prefer that God reveal to us the kind of truth that early modern science promised us, but that notion of truth is unrealistic given what we now know to be the limits of our human condition. Our human experience is phenomenal rather than objective, and much muddier than we would like. That is the nature of our human condition, and that is the nature of the Biblical revelation as well.

By realizing the phenomenal and interpretive nature of both our human condition and the Biblical revelation, we should be sufficiently humbled, and our confidence in our very fallible understanding should decrease. The only way to reach a deeper and more intimate relationship with God is to be suspicious of the understanding we bring to our God experiences. The only thing that opens us to increasingly meaningful God experiences is both an awareness and suspicion of the prejudicial understanding with which we so strongly identify. It is only when we realize that our understanding is largely the product of cultural and historical prejudices that we are sufficiently humbled enough to begin to receive the Jesus perspective and a more transparent God experience.

An understanding of this phenomenal nature of both human experience and the Biblical revelation also sets the stage for God’s children to come together in a way that was impossible when truth was objective and our knowledge of it was certain. Our diminished confidence in our own understanding, and the humility that follows from that, should ex-

pand our ability to join in the kind of unity God desires for his children. One of the things that has separated God's children, especially in the modern era, has been the belief that God's word and our understanding of it were one in the same. By recognizing that there is a great difference between the two, we take on a capacity to come together as never before. In the past, the prejudice that our understanding represents objective truth caused Christians with different understandings to kill one another in the name of that truth. By understanding the phenomenal nature of both reality and the Biblical text, we should finally be able to see that so much of the violence that human beings have done in the name of defending God's truth was in fact a defense of individual and collective egos. What is exposed is the fact that what we human beings have most often held to be sacred has not been God but rather our own understanding. Thankfully, we have finally come to understand the evil that results from disguising, through the illusion of objectivity, our own understanding as God's truth.

God's eternal perspective is beyond us, and even the perspective that Jesus offers as the best understanding available to human beings seemingly hasn't been approached by many. This fact, however, puts us in a very good and humble place, which has the potential to unite us as never before. In the past, what united people was a sameness of understanding that was mistaken for objective truth. We now know that objective truth is beyond us, and the truth that should unite us is the truth of the Jesus perspective; further uniting us are both our endeavors to grasp it, and our failures to do so completely.

As we will see in the next chapter, however, most people's idea of the truth of the Gospel is one very different from that of a phenomenal journey into the truth of the Jesus perspective. Most think of truth as something fixed and static. Likewise, they imagine that our understanding of the truth should also be fixed and static. Of course, the truth may well be fixed and certain when seen by God from his eternal and infinite perspective, but our understanding of it is never from that privileged place. We come to know the truth with an understanding that is changing and dynamic. For that reason, we best understand our pursuit of the truth of the Gospel as a journey. Indeed, we come to pursue the truth of the Gospel when we heed Jesus command and begin to follow him. As we do, the Gospel begins to open before us, and as it does, that revelation begins to transform us.