

Bro. Tom Gilbert

Hymns: 283

365 (How Great Thou Art)

292 (Alt.)

Given at:

"WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT AN INVISIBLE GOD?"

I. Does God Exist or Care about Us?

A. Conditions in the world today and in times past have caused people to doubt the existence of God or, if He exists, that He has any care for his human creation.

1. The great plagues of the Middle Ages
2. The Holocaust--"The Hiding Place" scene in the prison camp: the violinist whose hands were now useless for her art.
3. "God Is Dead" Movement--If He ever did exist and care about us, he must be dead now because He is not intervening to avert human tragedies.
Terrible droughts and hunger
Violence in the schools
Gang violence
Drugs--the destruction it brings to lives
Great Flood of '93

(What is really dying is not God, but the influence of God in the conduct of the human race, especially love for our fellow men and women.)

4. Racial, ethnic, and religious hatred and wars--India, Ireland, Lebanon, the Middle East in general, South Africa, Yugoslavia/Bosnia, Somalia, etc.
5. Genocide against a nation's own people--Cambodia.
6. New insidious, incurable diseases--AIDS.

- B. If this is all we had to look at in thinking about God, what would we conclude? - That He is dead, He doesn't care, He doesn't have the power to do anything about these circumstances, or these things continue to catch Him off guard and He just doesn't know what to do.

II. God Does Exist and Care About Us

We believe this, but - How Do We Know? How can we know anything for sure about an invisible God?

- A. There are ways we can learn about God. Paul tells us:

Rom. 1:18-20 (NASB)--"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because **that which is known about God is evident within them**; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world **His invisible attributes**, His eternal power and divine nature, **have been clearly seen, being understood through that which has been made**, so that they are without excuse."

1. "Evident Within Them"--Reason and Conscience Within Man

Rom. 2:14-15 (NASB)--"For when the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law unto themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternatively accusing or else defending themselves. . . ."

2. "His Invisible Attributes ... Have Been Clearly Seen, Being Understood Through That Which Has Been Made"--The Visible Works of God: The Natural World Around Us

Eccl. 1:4-7 (NASB)--"A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there again. Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along, and on its circular courses the wind returns. All rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full.

[The water returns] To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again.

The physical world shows design, order, systematic process, self-restoring systems, efficiency, etc. They tell us something about the Creator, about our God.

God through his Holy Spirit revealed wisdom about the order of the natural world to Solomon, who recorded these things approximately 3,000 years ago. Some of these facts have been validated by man through scientific means only in relatively recent times.

B. What Do Reason, Conscience, and the Natural World Reveal to Us About God? They Reveal:

1. GOD'S LOVE, CARE, AND PROVISION FOR US (AND HIS OTHER CREATURES)

Wrote Lewis Thomas in "Discover" magazine: "The greatest of all cosmological scientific puzzles, confounding all our efforts to comprehend it, is the earth. We are only now beginning to appreciate how strange and splendid it is, how it catches the breath, the loveliest object afloat around the sun, enclosed in its own blue bubble of atmosphere, manufacturing and breathing its own oxygen, fixing its own nitrogen from the air into its own soil, generating its own weather."

God's love for his creatures is shown in that, in forming the earth, he provided in it all that his creatures would need to sustain life, develop, and grow. Earth teems with life, sustained by very complex systems that provide light, air, heat, water, and food, all in exquisite balance. It shows evidence of having been specially built to accommodate living things comfortably--like a magnificent house.

a. Light and Heat

Among the many precise conditions vital to life on earth is

the amount of light and heat received from the sun. The earth gets only a small fraction of the sun's energy. Yet, it is just the right amount required to sustain life. This is because the earth is just the right distance from the sun--an average 93,000,000 miles.

As it orbits the sun once a year the earth travels at a speed of about 66,000 miles an hour. That speed is just right to offset the gravitational pull of the sun and keep the earth at the proper distance. In addition, the earth consistently makes a complete rotation on its axis every 24 hours. This provides regular periods of light and darkness. But what if the earth rotated on its axis, say, only once a year? It would mean that the same side of the earth would be facing the sun all year. That side would likely become a furnace-like desert, while the other side would likely become a sub-zero wasteland. Few, if any, living things could exist in those extreme circumstances.

b. The Atmosphere

- It has just the right proportions of gases to sustain life.
- Too much oxygen would be toxic to us and materials would be more flammable in higher levels of oxygen.
- Lightning causes the nitrogen in the air to form compounds with oxygen which then fertilize our soil when it comes to earth in rain.
- The ozone layer filters out harmful radiation from the sun.
- The atmosphere also shields the earth from meteors--they burn up as they pass through the atmosphere.
- The atmosphere insulates the earth, retaining warmth and protecting us from the cold of space.
- The atmosphere itself is kept from escaping by the gravitational pull of the earth.

When was the last time you thought about all these purposes which the atmosphere plays and about how carefully God prepared your earthly habitation?

Most of us appreciate the atmosphere on a daily basis by the beauty it provides in sunrises, sunsets, cloud patterns, moonlit nights, starry skies.

Think of it! God not only made the atmosphere functional, but he also made it to be beautiful so that we can enjoy it.

Think for a moment about the "mansions" that have been prepared for the faithful overcomers of this Age. Can you imagine how marvelously they have been prepared?

c. Water

- The most abundant substance on earth has many properties essential for life.
- One of its many advantages is that it occurs as a solid, liquid, and gas all within earth's normal temperature range. Think of what this has meant to the technological progress of civilization in terms of water power and transportation, steam power, food preservation. etc.
- It will dissolve more substances than any other liquid--all living things are dependent on it to dissolve the substances on which they feed.

Water is also extraordinary in the way it freezes. As water in lakes and seas cool, it becomes heavier and sinks. This forces the lighter, warmer water to rise to the top. Yet as water approaches the freezing point, the process reverses! The colder water now becomes lighter and rises. When it freezes into ice, it floats. The ice acts as an insulator and keeps the deeper waters underneath from freezing, thus protecting marine life. Without this unique quality, every winter more and more ice would sink to the bottom where the sun's rays could not melt it the following summer. Soon, much of the water in rivers, lakes, and the oceans would become solid ice. All marine life would perish. The earth would turn into any icy

planet that would be inhospitable to all life.

d. Summary: God's Love, Care, and Provision for Us

The natural world around us proclaims God's love, care, and provision for his human creation and all other living parts of his creation. How perfectly he prepared it for us. Parents, think of how well you would design and build a house for your son or daughter and their family to live in (if resources to do it were no object!)--how much care and love you would put into it.

Another message that the natural world declare very clearly--THE CREATION HAD A CREATOR! Did all of these bountiful provisions just happen? by chance?

2. PARTNERSHIPS--HELPING ONE ANOTHER

a. Symbiosis--"the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship"

Certain plants and animals need each other to exist.

- Certain figs and wasps need each other in order to reproduce. [I once saw a program on this, how the wasps lay their eggs inside the fig, and the larvae grow up and live inside the fig. I've forgotten exactly why this is essential to the fig, but it is! I've not had much interest in eating a fig since that program.]

- Termites eat wood but need protozoa in their bodies to digest it.

Stinging ants live in the hollow thorns of acacia trees.

They keep leaf eating insects off the tree and they cut up and kill vines that try to climb on the tree. In return, the tree secretes a sugary fluid that the ants relish, and it also produces small false fruit, which serves as food for the ants. Did the ant first protect the tree and then the tree rewarded it with fruit? Or did the tree make a fruit for the ant and the ant then thanked it with protection? Or did it

all chance to happen at once?

Insect pollinate flowers. Example--the Dutchman's pipe cannot pollinate itself but needs insects to bring in pollen from another flower. The plant has a tubular leaf that envelops its flower, and this leaf is coated with wax. Insects, attracted by the smell of the flower, land on the leaf and plunge down the slippery slide to a chamber at the bottom. There, ripe stigmas receive the pollen that the insects brought in, and pollination takes place. But for three more days the insects are trapped there by hairs and the waxed sides. After that, the flower's own pollen ripens and dusts the insects. Only then do the hairs wilt, and the waxed slide bends over until it is level. The insects walk out and, with their new supply of pollen, fly to another Dutchman's pipe to pollinate it. The insects do not mind their 3-day visit, since they feast on nectar stored there for them. Did all this happen by chance? Or did it happen by intelligent design?

- b. Photosynthesis--"synthesis of chemical compounds with the aid of radiant energy and esp. light; esp. formation of carbohydrates in the chlorophyll-containing tissues of plants exposed to light"

This is nature's food producing process. It takes place in tiny cell bodies called chloroplasts. They are so small that 400,000 could fit on the period at the end of a sentence. Within these chloroplasts, there are about 70 separate chemical reactions that take place in photosynthesis. Everything works together, in the right order, to produce the basic organic building blocks of our world. Did it all sort of happen? What do you think?

And think about the partnership between the plant and animal kingdom:

- Animals use oxygen and produce carbon dioxide.
- Plants use carbon dioxide and produce oxygen.

- c. Summary: God values partnerships, working together, helping one another. His creation declares it.

So does his revealed Word:

2 Cor. 1:3-4 (NASB)--Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

2 Cor. 8:14-15 (NASB)--"at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality, as it is written, `He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack.'"

Phil. 1:27 (NASB)--"Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel"

3. JUSTICE, DISCIPLINE, LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

God has designed the world so that there is a system of checks and balances--called natural consequences. It works in the physical world as well as in human society. Sometimes things appear to be a bit out of balance, generally because man through his ingenuity manages to delay or temporarily avert the natural consequences of his actions. But, there comes a time when consequences can not be denied their lawful operation.

- There is a justice to this system.
- The system of natural consequences teaches or should teach discipline--accepting the reality of the way things work and working with, rather than against, the laws of the universe.
- By having a system that operates by laws, God has designed mankind's habitation in a way that it is a self-teaching system--teaching by experience.

Natural consequences:

- Tampering with earth's natural systems, or overloading them beyond their ability to restore themselves
- Toxics--business greed or ignorance
- Water pollution
- Human personalities--even in this realm there are natural consequences from which can be learned that:
 - hatred breeds hatred; forgiving leads to forgiving
 - kindness breeds kindness; love produces loving responses

Despite the certain-ness of natural consequences, generally, as a teacher from which we can learn, an elder of our fellowship once observed in a discourse:

"The only thing man learns from history, is that man never learns from history."

Gal. 6:7 (KJV)--"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

(Excerpt from Mark Twain)

4. GOD'S APPRECIATION FOR BEAUTY AND VARIETY/DIVERSITY

- a. Variety of plant and animal life--with different growth patterns and resource requirements. Assures survival of life after natural catastrophes.
Variety of environments and ecosystems--necessary for the mix of plant and animal life
- b. Tilt of the earth's axis--produces seasons and the varying display of nature--autumn colors, snow draped trees in winter, new life and flowers in the spring, warm weather in the summer for outdoor activities
- c. Summary: God appreciates variety

We can see this in the physical and biological world around us, as well as in the human family.

God has arranged for diversity in the Church. He develops them in different environments. Variety leads to balance, harmony, beauty.

I Cor. 12:14-18 (NASB)--"For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would

the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.”

5. THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD AND HIS LOVE FOR ORDER/ORGANIZATION

Ps. 19:1-6--"The heavens declare [rehearse, i.e., repetitiously] the glory of God; and the firmament [expanse] sheweth His handiwork. Day unto [after] day uttereth [constantly poureth forth] speech, and night unto [after] night sheweth [NASB--reveals] knowledge [intelligence]. [Yet] There is no speech or language [words], their voice [sound] is not heard. Their line [sound] is gone out through all the earth, and their words [NASB--utterances] to the end of the world. In them hath He set a tabernacle [tent, house--referring to the Zodiac?] for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber [bridal canopy]; it rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race [NASB--his course]. His [Its] going forth [rising] is from the end of heavens, and his [its] circuit unto the ends of it; and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof."

Our Milky Way galaxy contains over 100 billion stars. The diameter of our galaxy spans so vast a distance that if you could travel as fast as the speed of light (186,282 miles per second), it would take you 100,000 years to cross it! Our Milky Way galaxy is 600 quadrillion miles in diameter! The average distance between stars within the galaxy is said to be about 6 light-years, or about 36 trillion miles.

So many galaxies have now been detected that it has been said that they "are about as common as blades of grass in a meadow." About 10 billion galaxies are in the observable universe!

These awesome galaxies are not scattered haphazardly in space. Instead, they are usually arranged in definite groups called clusters, like grapes in a bunch. The Milky Way, for example, it

part of a cluster of about 20 galaxies. There is even evidence that the cluster themselves are arranged in "superclusters," like bunches of grapes on a vine.

Consider the order of our solar system--the planets move around the sun with such precision that astronomers can accurately predict where they will be at any time in the future.

Consider the basic structure of matter--the atom. It is like a miniature solar system. It has a nucleus made up of protons and neutrons, surrounded by orbiting electrons. What accounts for the different elemental substances on earth and their differing properties is the number of protons and neutrons in the nucleus and the number and arrangement of the orbiting electrons.

[Our entire experience in life teaches us that everything organized must have an Organizer.]

Universal laws--gravity, sound, light, heat. Rocket expert Dr. Wernher von Braun: "The natural laws of the universe are so precise that we have no difficulty building a spaceship to fly to the moon and can time the flight with the precision of a fraction of a second. These laws must have been set by somebody."

6. GOD'S POWER

Where, when did the universe have its beginning? Scientist Carl Sagan says: "At the beginning of this universe, there were no galaxies, stars or planets, no life or civilizations." He refers to the change from that state to the present universe as "the most awesome transformation of matter and energy that we have been privileged to glimpse." The relationship between matter and energy was verified by Albert Einstein and described in his famous equation-- $E=mc^2$. Astrophysicist Josip Kleczek stated: "Most and possibly all elementary particles may be created by the materialization of energy."

Today, nearly all scientists agree that the universe did have a beginning. Almost all recent discussions of the origin of the

universe are based on the "Big Bang" theory--the idea that there was a cosmic explosion at the beginning of the universe. But could an explosion, which normally results in destruction, disorder, and chaos, bring about the ordered creation we see about us? Only if directed and controlled by the power of God--the Creator, Organizer, and Lawgiver of the universe!
 Heb. 3:4 (NASB)--"For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God."

Isa. 40:22 (NASB)--"It is He who sits above the circle [sphere] of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in."

III. WITH ALL OF GOD'S PLANNING FOR THE DETAILS OF THE UNIVERSE AROUND US, CAN WE DOUBT THAT HE HAS NOT ALSO PLANNED EVERY DETAIL FOR THE EVENTUAL AND ETERNAL HAPPINESS OF HIS HUMAN CREATION?

Rom 8:19-21 (NASB)--"For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God."

IV. WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT AN INVISIBLE GOD?

Much. But what we know has to be known on the basis of faith in His word and what the natural world reveals.