

The Nations Research Council

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's very nice to see you all, and there's been some good things happening around that I, well, I don't know that I'll tell you about them, but I'm just grateful and glad to be here.

I was telling them Sunday morning that I, last Wednesday afternoon, as I drove around in the car, I was listening to a radio program in which some fellow who emcees a radio broadcast up in the north, which is among native people all the time.

And this is, I'm sure this is a politically incorrect statement to make, but it appealed to me anyway, that he had a song which was popular on his network, which was part of Aboriginal spirituality, and the song read, or the words of it had to do with Christianity stole my religion away.

Goodness gracious. Well, that's not very good publicity, but as I thought about it, I was grateful to know that that's what St. Paul could have said too. So.

The thing that I want to talk about today is this passage from Deuteronomy 29 under the heading of the Nation Research Council.

[1 : 3 6] And it's very brief, as you know, the secret things belong to our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of the law.

And part of the significance of this that appealed to me in a big way anyway was that the simple fact that religion is almost always associated with mystery, that we don't know what the answers are.

So we take speculative guesses or we try and make mystical inquiries or we try and search spiritual depths in order that the things that are hidden from us, we might know.

And once we know them, then we will know how we are to live. But Deuteronomy takes a very different point of view and says, you already know.

It's been made abundantly clear. There's nothing more you need to know. And that's after 30 chapters of, almost 30 chapters of Deuteronomy.

[2 : 4 5] But he says, there's no secrets. It's all there for you. And you don't have to probe any deep mysteries in order to find out how you are to live your life.

And the reason that it's there for you is because God has revealed it. And he's revealed it for the purpose that it will be something which belongs to you, which is your heritage, which belongs to you and to your children forever.

However, if you were to look at Deuteronomy 29, you'd find this comes a little earlier on in the chapter when it says these words.

And I'll read them to you. He's talking to them. You see, they've been wandering for 40 years. He says, your eyes have seen all that the Lord God did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials, to all his land.

You remember the locusts and the water turning to blood and the gnats and the flies and all the other things that God did to you. He says, you saw all these things with your own eyes.

[4 : 03] The great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders that were performed in Egypt. But to this day, the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.

During the 40 years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet.

You ate no bread, drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God.

Now, I think that this is a kind of picture of what happens to us in our world. That we are not aware of what's going on.

We don't understand the times in which we live. We do not understand the circumstances in which we live our lives. We carry on with the routines and the things that we do from day to day.

[5 : 18] But we don't really understand what's happening. I mean, we're all, I mean, we have, we're, nobody knows what this GATT thing is going to be, what it's going to do.

I mean, it is a monstrous proposal and it might produce enormous wealth. We don't know. I mean, people who propose it, I guess, think that's what it'll do.

But we don't know that that's what it'll do. The North American free trade zone. We don't know what that all means. We don't know what the results of some of the great breakthroughs in our society are going to produce in the next generation.

We don't know what's going to happen to our children and to our grandchildren as the result of the things that we've done and the decisions we've made. We simply don't know. And that doesn't mean we're not curious.

But we don't know. We don't understand. We have this. We have our lives. But we don't know what it means. And looking at, we're looking at the first epistle of John where he says, that which we have seen and heard, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled of the word of life.

[6 : 36] We've had this firsthand experience of the life of Jesus Christ. But he said, that's not enough because lots of people know about Jesus Christ who don't know him in any kind of personal way.

So we are surrounded by massive ignorance. We don't understand our own lives.

We now, as Paul says, we know in part, but only a small part of the meaning of our own existence. We don't know God.

We don't know the partner that we have lived with. It comes up time and time again that after a man and wife have lived together for 35 years, they come together one evening over supper and say, you know, John, I don't think I really know who you are.

And that conversation could go either way. But the fact is that we don't know our children.

[7 : 51] Our children don't know us. We are, we're surrounded by a lot. And we certainly don't know anything about what's going to happen in the next moment. I mean, it's lovely to get philosophers talking about this.

You know, that you are absolutely and totally ignorant of what this afternoon holds for you. You no doubt have a book and a calendar and you have certain appointments which you're going to meet. But you simply don't know.

We've lived and we're used to the fact that we don't know and we have certain established expectations. But we simply don't know because we are surrounded by this kind of ignorance.

Things that we don't know because they are secret to us and we can't penetrate them. So let me just put some words to you so that you will see what I think this means.

When it says that we don't know. To know in the Bible is a much broader spectrum word than it is the way we use it.

[8 : 55] We use it in a technical and scientific kind of sense that it's a highly focused thing. That's what it means to know. You know, we know that E equals MC squared or we know that 2 plus 2 makes 4.

Those things, it's a very narrow kind of definition. Know in the Bible is a much broader and much more comprehensive kind of word. It's to perceive, to learn, to understand, to exercise a skill like a carpenter or a mason.

It's to experience good or bad. One of the delightful uses, if you like, of the verb to know in the Bible is when it says that Adam knew Eve and she bore a son.

Which compared to what you might call the kind of bare functionalism of the F word, as we use it in common language.

To know is quite a beautiful concept of the relationship between a man and a woman. And it's that kind of knowledge. And it suggests to me, at least, that one of the problems of our sexuality is that we want sex without knowing the person we're involved with.

[10 : 21] Or, you know, that you want to keep that kind of anonymous. So that this knowing word is a very comprehensive kind of word. It's not an abstract.

And so that it's not the fact that you know God in terms of, you know, the philosophical concept or the transcendental being or the ultimate reality in the metaphysical world or something like that.

That isn't what knowing is talking about in the Bible. It is knowing a person and being in relationship to that person. Understanding what the purpose of that person is.

And understanding what it means for you to obey. And part of your knowledge of God is to obey him. So that knowing is a much more complicated and fulfilling word than we might at first think.

To know is recognition and obedience. Now, when you look at the text, it says that the secret things, the things we don't know, belong to God.

[11 : 33] The, when, the, the, this sort of probing of, of the mystery.

I mean, I'm sure that that's, I'm sure that that's one of the main stimulating factors in the publishing industry. In that there's books about so many topics and so many issues.

And they're all there. And what they're doing is exploring the things that we don't know and probably can't know. But it's suggestive in the title that by reading this book you will know.

And you know how many times you've taken such a book that told you they will tell you the answer. And then 273 pages later, the question remains. And you're no further ahead.

Because they're exploring the secret things. The things we can't know. The things we can't relate to in terms of who we are ourselves. Or they just, they're just, they just don't belong to our world.

[12 : 42] So those are, those are the secret things that belong to God. And, and must inevitably remain part of the mystery that surrounds our lives.

One of the, one of the glimpses into that mystery, which I've told you about before. But it's such a lovely thing because we'd like to know ourselves and we don't. And my friend who said one day to me, he said that if you could see yourself as God sees you, you'd be thrilled, you know.

I mean, the expectation is that you would be less than nothing. But it's, it's that I think that's why people go to counselors to try and explore the secret things.

Will you help me to know at least in part who I am? And I, and I, if you go with your wife to a family counselor or your husband, the kind of thing that happens is that in the presence of a third party, you can try and explain to your wife or husband or friend or whoever it is who you are.

And the counselor stands there now, what do you hear him saying? And that's very helpful. Because, because then that kind of communication, I think is, is helpful to people as they try and explore the things we don't know.

[14:27] But then it goes on to say, this passage goes on to say that things revealed belong to us and to our children forever. Now, again, the secret things are, are hidden from us and inevitably must be so.

They're, they're not, they're not subject to scientific inquiry. Now, science is, is a new kind of very specific knowledge.

You know, where, or you have, do you remember that, that, that lovely illustration of science about, about the, the, the fellow down in California who, who, who landed a spacecraft on one of the remote planets and he landed it within sort of an hour of the time that it was projected and within half a mile of the spot on which it was projected by calculations that had been made five years before this thing took off.

And, and, and, and he said of that man that he's probably the most spaced out character of anybody in North America.

But brilliant in terms of his knowledge of science. And, of course, we, we, we put a lot of, we put a lot of emphasis on the intellectual credibility of scientific people who know a great deal up here.

[16:04] But, but, but that, that's a very specific kind of thing. And it's, it's, it's not, it's not that science is, and I think we once thought this.

I think the Bible was misinterpreted in this way when it talked about the secret things. It said we're not supposed to know those kind of things. And I think that was a prevalent attitude until the kind of knowledge revolution came in.

And people made the discovery that, that this world we live in is capable of being known. And, and when it, and the things that are capable of being known, I think we are responsible to come to know them.

But there are things that we can't know. And the assumption that we do know them is what does, does the, does, puts the, the wrench in the work, so to speak.

Science can, can teach us a lot of things. What, what's happening in our world now is that we are undermining, I think we're undermining even science.

[17:16] It's, you know, that, that lovely little poem, To think that two and two make four, and neither five nor three, The heart of man has long been sore, and long is like to be. That, that you get, you get in our world, at the moment, Somebody come making the brilliant discovery That maybe we've been wrong for centuries.

And maybe we haven't really understood. And maybe two and two make five. So let's work on that thesis for a while and see where we get to. Well, you can imagine where you get to.

If you were to work on it for a while. To think, to, to, to work on the basis that two and two make five. And the, the kind of damage you would have done by, by the time all your calculations were built on that, And all your arithmetic was built on that, And everything would start going wrong, And you'd wonder why they were going wrong.

And you would, nobody would think, well, how did we start? Well, we started the two and two make five. Well, that's where you're wrong, you know. It's not, and that, it's that kind of thing that we do a lot of right now.

That we're very, we're, we're prepared to speculate about things, On the grounds that we can say what the truth is and work on it. And that there might be a whole new world.

[18 : 29] And I think a lot of the arguments that we get into as a, as a society, Are in, are of that order. And I think that science and reason have a commitment to one another, The, the exercise of reason.

So that, uh, it's universally true that water boils at 212 degrees. That, that is a scientific fact. That's something that is not one of the secret things that we have discovered And so taken power away from God.

That gravity pulls, you know, that the fat man and the thin man Jump off the top of the building and both hit the sidewalk at the same time. You know, to our great consternation. But I, uh, and theirs.

But, uh, those kinds of things are, are, are not what's being talked about here. The secret things are, are the things that, uh, that, uh, belong to God.

And the things that he's made known are the things which, of which the word is, They are the revealed things. Now, revealed is not, you know, it's not like a striptease dancer.

[19 : 40] It's not like a magician with a cape who takes it away and you can suddenly see what it's all about. Or it's not somebody pulling the curtains. Uh, the word revealed, apparently in the Bible, Almost exclusively refers to God telling us about himself.

Revelation is God speaking about himself. And God is the one who is revealed and he is the one who reveals.

And so when it says, the things revealed belong to us and to our children, They are revealed in the sense that God has revealed something about himself And that he has, he has made that known to us.

So that, uh, in, in our, uh, in our world, you see what, what, what, what the way it works for us in our world is the, is the, is the, is the business of reason and revelation and tradition.

And, uh, that Christians are those who take very seriously, That's, that's what's happened.

[21 : 08] That's how we know God. We know God because he has revealed himself. He has made himself known. We don't know God because we have discovered him.

We know him because he's made himself known to us. And the means by which he's made himself known to us is the scriptures. And that's why the scriptures are an exclusive kind of book, like no other book.

Uh, they are, they are like no other book because they are God's revelation of himself. And that's why we, you know, that we get hyped on the Bible.

Why you develop Bible thumpers and all sorts of people who seem to be verging on bibliolatry, as they say. Because, because they, uh, because they, uh, because they, uh, because the, the Bible is God's revelation of himself.

And in, in, in a way that thunderstorms and lightning and sunsets and waterfalls are not. They may stimulate you to think into the realm of the metaphysical.

[22 : 22] But they don't tell you anything about God. And God has told us about himself in the scriptures. And that's why in the church today there is this terrible tension between reason and revelation.

Because, because, uh, we, we find that, uh, you know, that we have lots of people who think that revelation is unreasonable.

That this isn't what God should do. It isn't how God should behave. God has not revealed himself in this way. We don't know God this way. The only way we know is by this very powerful instrument we have, which is our own human reason.

Now, uh, you know, that's, uh, it's a fascinating problem. But, you see, the, the difficulty is that the exercise of reason also depends upon the fact that, uh, that we believe that whoever it was that put the universe together, put it together in a way that it was subject to reasoned understanding of it.

And, uh, but we, we don't know who it was that did it. And, uh, reason won't tell us about him. Only revelation will. So that, uh, you have this, uh, you have this reason, which, uh, you know that this, this old saw, as it were.

[23 : 51] But, uh, you know that, that reason is in, revelation is reasonable and revelation, which is reasonable is preserved in tradition.

And, uh, tradition is, uh, what we have in the church in order to, uh, to show how we should respond. Now, if you're a Pentecostal, you remember, uh, you have, you have spontaneous traditions.

If you're a Greek Orthodox, you have, you have, uh, spontaneity in slow motion. And, uh, so, uh, there's, uh, you know, you, you have that.

But, uh, we all have to live with it. But, uh, that is, is why I think, uh, Christians are in a, you know, are in hot water most of the time now.

Because we live in a society which considers reason to be the, uh, the, the, the basic reality. That the only thing you can know, you can know by, you, you know by reason.

[25 : 02] And what, what, uh, what was established a long time ago is that there are things you can't know. The things you can know about God and his purpose you can know only because God has chosen to reveal them.

Uh, in my capacity as a grandfather, I went into a bookstore the other day to find a small book on the Christmas story to read to a small child.

And there were wonderful, I mean, the, the, the bookstore was full of wonderful children's books about dinosaurs and rainbows and foxes and rabbits and a million different things on, and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, everything.

Because the whole idea of Christmas allows a million stories to be written. And, uh, and, uh, and is very stimulating to the creative imagination of people who want to tell stories.

But you see, all those stories depend on the story to have their meaning. They, uh, that, you know, Scrooge, the story of Scrooge, or, uh, uh, do you know Jimmy Stewart and It's a Wonderful Life?

[26 : 22] How many of you have ever seen that film? Have you? I'd never heard of it before, so I'm surprised to find out it's so well known.

But, uh, you see, what, what underlies all this is that there is a story. And the peculiar part about our times at the moment is, are that, that we're producing story after story after story and generating a whole lot of creative imagination about things that are good and bad and right and honorable and so on.

We're doing all those things, but we're not looking at the story which gives meaning to them all. You know, uh, in a world where there is neither good nor bad, so what to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?

So he was stupid enough to get suckered into leading that, uh, uh, the slave, you know. Uh, no, there is, there is the story.

And the story is based on the revelation of God. And the supreme revelation of God is his son being born of a virgin in a stable in Bethlehem in the time of Herod the king.

[27 : 46] And that is the story. And that that child that is born there, whom God attests to by miracles and signs and wonders that far surpasses anything that ever happened in Egypt, that, that child that was born there is declared to be the son of God.

And, uh, the whole understanding of, of Christmas is that this is the supreme revelation that God has made of himself.

And so what we see in our society is not that Christ is being left out of Christmas. That, that was 10, 20 years ago we used to talk about that.

But now what's happening is that Christmas is losing its meaning altogether. Because it is out of touch with the story. There's nothing to Christmas except a commercial enterprise and one system of one person conning another into purchasing something at this time of year for reasons that nobody remembers.

And, uh, so that you have this, you have this serious breakdown. Because we have rejected the revelation that God has made of himself in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 06] The things which are revealed belong to us and to our children. We do know who God is because he has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

We do know what God's purpose is. Because in Christ's death on the cross is the death of death. So that God's purpose is somehow to have victory over death.

And we do know the reality of our lives is an eternal reality. Because it's God's purpose. Not that we are confined to time.

But that we are called to share in eternity. To have eternal life. And we do know that as far as this world is concerned, the big responsibility we have is to live in the knowledge that he who came to Bethlehem is coming again.

And we ultimately will be held accountable and responsible before him. And so, you see, the thing that I want to leave with you to think about over Christmas is that there are secret things.

[30 : 20] There are things we don't know. There are things we don't know. But our faith is not to spend our lives exploring the things we don't know and perhaps can't know.

There are things we can know which we are responsible to discover. But at the heart of our lives are the things that are revealed. And this is about God and about his purpose towards us.

And we are to respond to the things that are revealed because that is our heritage. That is our inheritance. That's what belongs to us and to our children.

And so, we are to live in the light of God having revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. And that that's how we are to live because that's to be at the center of our life is God's self-revelation of himself to us in Christ.

And in the light of that revelation, remember, this isn't just an intellectual knowledge. This is the total idea of knowing in the Old Testament where it's a total response of yourself to what God has revealed of himself.

[31 : 36] So that, you know, in the words of William Temple, what it means to be a Christian is to commit as much of yourself as you know to as much of God as you know.

And you know both those things by God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Let me pray. Our God and Father, help us to live not in the kind of blind groping for meaning in a world which is denied that there is meaning.

But to live in the light of the fact that you have revealed yourself to us in the scriptures. You have revealed yourself to us primarily in Jesus Christ.

And that we do know what you have made known to us. And that we are responsible to live in that light.

Grant to each of us in our homes and in our families the love and the joy and the peace, which don't necessarily emerge out of our human circumstances, but do emerge out of the reality that you have, into our human circumstances, made yourself known to us in Christ.

[33 : 04] We pray in his name. Amen.