

CHAPTER 8

"DID GOD REALLY SAY?"

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the creatures the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say ...?" (Genesis 3:1)

Imagine Moses trudging for hours up the rocky slopes of Sinai, sweat pouring down his sunburned face, at times gasping for breath. His heart racing with anticipation. The Creator of heaven and earth has invited him up the mountain to go deeper into the divine Person than any mortal has ever gone before. God is going to reveal His "ways" (Exodus 33:13), His "glory" (33:18), and His "name" (33:19). Then comes the awesome moment, the pinnacle revelation of God in the Old Testament, the phrase that would be repeated over and over and over again by prophets, apostles, and saints down through the ages.

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called on the

name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed in front of him and said, "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:5-6)

With a string of seven simple, easy to understand Hebrew words, the great mystery of the universe is unlocked. The very heart of God is revealed. Moses learns that God is more tenderhearted, forgiving, and willing than he ever imagined, and this all came directly from God's own mouth. He is more affectionate than a nursing mother ("compassionate"), always willing to help ("gracious"), impossibly patient ("slow to anger"), jaw-droppingly generous ("great in lovingkindness"), and He will never ever change ("faithfulness"). God speaks, and Moses falls to the ground in worship and wonder.

From this point on, the Bible says that Moses's face literally beams with glory whenever he meets with God (Exodus 34:29). *The Derakim* will forever come to serve as the great hope of Israel and the great hope of the Gentile nations, as well (Joel 2:13; Nehemiah 9:17; Jonah 4:2). It will inspire some of the most glorious passages of Scripture (like my personal favorite, Psalm 103). A millenium and a half later, it is what makes Jesus Christ so easily recognizable as God. He literally fleshes out the words of *The Derakim* before the eyes of a watching world. **"The Word became flesh."** *The Derakim* is also God's great message to His image-bearers—us. It's what He wants us all to be. The message is so simple, so wonderful, so liberating ... but is it really?

But I am afraid that just like Eve was tricked by the serpent's cunning, your minds will somehow be led away from a simple and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:3)

8.2 ENTER THE THEOLOGICAL POLICE

Now let's play another little imagination game. Picture Moses stumbling down the mountain right after the revelation is given. He is like a drunk man, intoxicated by God's glory. He is oblivious to the world around him. Again and again he has to stop, completely overcome with wonder, and fall to his knees and weep. Every so often he laughs out loud, claps his hands and shouts, "Hallelujah!" His people may be bent toward evil (e.g., the golden calf debacle), but God loves them with an everlasting, incomprehensible love. He always prefers mercy over wrath. Moses continues to turn the simple words over in his mind, "**... compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness.**"

About halfway down the mountain he walks past a massive outcropping of pinkish-grey granite. He rubs his eyes. *What's this?* A group of grey-bearded, long-robed, middle eastern-looking wise men are calling his name, waving him over. Moses approaches cautiously.

Before he has time to ask any questions, they inform him that they are (roughly translated) "the theological police." They begin interrogating Moses about what he thinks he just saw and heard on the mountaintop. The most serious looking among them takes the lead and says, "Before running

down this mountain and telling your congregation what you think you just saw and heard, we need to clarify a few things." He and his cronies then begin barraging Moses with huge polysyllabic words, and using tortured logic to explain how Moses needs to understand and interpret the data.

The theological police inform Moses that the words God just spoke should definitely *not* be taken at face value. They inform him that it is all non-literal language. More precisely, it is *anthropomorphic* language. Moses asks, "Anthropo-huh?" Then they give Moses a very confusing lecture about the sort of being that God is, His ontology, and try to explain the concept of infinite qualitative distinction. They proceed to ask Moses if he is familiar with the distinction between univocal, equivocal, and analogical language. (I know Aquinas isn't born yet, but just work with me here.) Moses scratches his head and mumbles, "Oy vey." The leader of the group, clearly offended, asks, "What's that you said?" Moses tries to clarify. "Guys, I'm not a philosopher. I've been herding sheep for the last several decades." The theological police shake their heads with grave concern.

The wise men begin to push even harder. "As a religious leader, Moses, it's absolutely vital that you understand this. It's what all the leading scholars and philosophers are saying. Your views are primitive, unsophisticated, embarrassing." Moses swallows hard and wrings his hands. *How could they all be wrong?* he wonders. Moses's mind begins to race. *Maybe my experience of God wasn't as simple and obvious as it first seemed. Maybe those beautiful words were just anagog ... analog ... whatever they said. Maybe I do need all these wise guys to help me.* The longer the sages talk at him, the more the simple clarity of the vision fades.

By the time the theological police are done working him over, Moses is not sure what he believes anymore. But one thing is certain—he doesn't feel much like singing and shouting.

The above story is obviously fictional. There were no theological police at the top of Sinai. God spoke, and He was perfectly aware of His original audience. Moses was never exposed to complex philosophical discussions about ontology, or the univocal versus equivocal understanding of language. God just showed up, and gave Moses the shepherd the most important description of Himself ever uttered to a human being. Moses then passed the simple message on to the faithful, and it was subsequently quoted over and over and over again by the biblical authors down through the centuries (with no complex clarifying addenda). These simple words then became the key for identifying Jesus Christ as God when He came on the scene. End of discussion.

But here is the tragedy. The theological police may not have intercepted Moses, but over the last two millennia they have certainly kept this glorious revelation from millions of other simple God worshippers. Thankfully, they didn't get to Marlena.

8.3 DON'T MESS WITH MARLENA

When Marlena came into our fellowship a few years ago, her life was in complete shambles. She had just been kicked out of a cheap hotel room she was sharing with a fellow meth addict. That very day, a couple of young people from our church invited her to our Tuesday night prayer meeting. There is a lot more to her crazy, wonderful story, but the long

and the short of it is that she walked into the prayer meeting a hardened atheist, and walked out believing in God. The very next day, I had the privilege of sharing the simple gospel with her. At 37 years old, she had never heard it before.

Marlena eagerly embraced the message of a loving God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. He wanted her so desperately that He was willing to give up what was most precious to Him in order to win her. **"God demonstrates His own love towards us in this way—while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8). Since that day, Marlena's life has been utterly transformed.¹

I mention Marlena here because I recently watched a video assignment she turned in for a discipleship class. She is part of an intensive study program our church offers. (We were surprised to learn that she has a way above average IQ.) In her assignment, she was commenting on a theology book the class was asked to read. It reviews the major Christian thinkers down through history (Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, etc.), and lays out what they had to say about God. Basically, this was Marlena's first exposure to the "high theology" that aspiring pastors learn when they go off to seminary.

So what did Marlena think? She was mad. In her own words, "I thought that God was good and loving, but they make Him out to be a jerk." I had to laugh. I am just going to come right out and say it—she is right. The vision of God we learn about in seminary does make God out to be pretty jerk-like (and to be perfectly honest, it's why a lot of Christian young people are jumping ship, or deconstructing, right now). This

God has no emotions, is incredibly selfish, and isn't open to discussion about anything.

At our church we take pains to protect new believers like Marlana from what I call "the theological bait and switch." Broken souls are often lured into our churches by a vision of a God who is personal, caring, and responsive; in short, He acts, reacts, and loves just like Jesus. Then at some point, someone pulls the old "theological bait and switch" on them. They are told God isn't really as wonderful as they first thought, and they are directed to a completely different vision of God.

These unsuspecting theological newbies are told that God is a philosophical complexity, immovable and machine-like, with about as much personal charm as time or gravity. They are led to believe that God the Father doesn't look, feel, think, act, and react at all like Jesus Christ. He is all about control. His primary role is forcing everything in the universe to submit to His awesome, unyielding will. (If you, reader, have not experienced this "bait and switch," it's only a matter of time.)

8.4 STAYIN' ALIVE

To stay alive spiritually, we need to know that God thinks, feels, responds, and loves like Jesus Christ. Full stop. As a pastor, one of my responsibilities is to never allow anyone to pull the old "bait-and-switch" on Marlana or anyone else under my spiritual care. They need to hear what God told Moses around 1500 B.C. when He first spoke *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6). God said the exact same thing about Himself

a millennium and a half later when “**the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**” (John 1:14). Any vision of God that attempts to replace or eclipse this is not just a secondary issue. According to Scripture, it's spiritual sabotage.

I'm not going to pull any punches here. Professors and preachers are teaching people to think about God in ways that are totally irreconcilable with what He clearly told us about Himself in *The Derakim*. They are obsessing over God in His infinite mode, trying to see what the Bible tells us cannot be seen. This is why *The Derakim* has never been taken seriously by orthodox Christian theologians. Even worse, this is why the God-Man Jesus Christ Himself has largely been irrelevant to said theologians. To prove this point, let's all take a journey up Mount Sinai (figuratively speaking) with the last theological professor I ever sat under. The year was 2020, and I thought I might give that whole PhD thing another crack.

8.5 AN EXEGETICAL CRIME

I trust that the last professor I sat under is a decent guy, and I assume he is a true brother in Christ. But I'm going to cry foul on him here (and the centuries of theologians whose pattern he is following).² He recently wrote a book on the doctrine of God, which seems to have sold pretty well. In the second chapter, he uses the story of Moses going up Sinai as his lead-in. (Yes, that's the chapter of the Bible that brings us to *The Derakim*.) The book, however, takes a turn that is an absolute gob smack.

Instead of telling us what God actually said to Moses (that He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness"), the book takes a hard left turn and introduces a vision of God that is nowhere to be found in the text itself. (Let me say that again. It's just not there.) The author follows the narrative quite nicely up to the climactic moment, and notes, "Moses seems to be asking for something that goes well beyond anything he's ever experienced before."³ Then the book completely dodges the description of God found in Exodus 34:6—God's own words from God's own mouth. What is put in its place? Readers are given a bunch of twenty-five cent terms that are found nowhere in the Bible, but originate in Greek philosophy, terms like "infinitude ... aseity ... immutability ... impassibility ... and timeless eternity."⁴

The view of God introduced in the above book is commonly referred to as Classical Theism, and we have already said a lot about it in previous chapters. Getting right to the point, in many ways this vision of God is totally incompatible with a straightforward reading of *The Derakim*. Classical Theism holds that God cannot respond, He can only dictate; He cannot be moved by anything, He can only move things. According to this view, God has no emotional reaction to suffering and need, and He cannot actually be affected by anything outside of Himself (like prayer). None of this would be disputed by the author of the book, or the generations of theologians who influenced him. They would give a hearty "Amen" to all of it.

Now don't get me wrong. Hopefully, if you have followed my argument this far you know that I believe a person is free to believe all this about infinite God if they want to. However,

we need to be honest and admit that it isn't what God told Moses on Sinai. If Classical Theism was what God wanted Moses and all the rest of us to know, why didn't He just say so? The passage would then read something like this:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with Moses as he called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed in front of him and said, "The LORD, the LORD, a God of aseity, immutability, impassibility, and timeless eternity."

God didn't highlight the above attributes because they weren't what He wanted His people obsessing over. Again, the facts are that the above attributes first make their appearance in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle.⁵ (And by the way, if Moses is talking to the God described by Classical Theism here, how is God responding to him? The God of Classical Theism can't respond to anything.)

In an attempt to argue the case, the book being challenged here drops a bunch of big names from Christian history—Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, and then talks about complex philosophical issues like the Creator-creature distinction, perfect being, archetypal and ectypal theology, etc. It seems that theologians expect those reading their books (twenty-somethings hoping to go into ministry) to just submit and say, "This is all above my pay grade. This guy has a PhD, so I'll just ignore the troubling incongruities."

In the Bible we are told to examine everything carefully, especially those who claim to represent God. The Bible doesn't criticize simple Christians who hold teachers (even the apostles) to account. It calls them “**noble minded**” (Acts 17:11). Every serious Christian is allowed to ask questions and blow the whistle on books, PhDs, pastors, and religious influencers. They have a God-given right to ask perfectly reasonable things like, “Why did that author completely ignore the words God actually spoke on Sinai?” and “Why doesn't the Bible ever mention that string of attributes this author is telling me are so vitally important?”

8.6 PASSING IT DOWN THE LINE

Don't get me wrong. I don't think the pastors, professors, and authors who are missing *The Derakim* are trying to mislead anyone. I assume that the vast majority of them are earnest, God-loving folks who sincerely believe in what they are doing and saying. They are passing on what they have been taught. At some point, they fell prey to the old theological bait and switch, too. Ironically, the book discussed above (more or less) tells us how this happened to the author. He was in his twenties before he discovered the complex vision of God he now espouses. He claims that prior to learning about it, he had a very active Christian life and studied the Bible often, but at some point he was handed several complex philosophical tomes. This is when his views changed. The author himself then asks a revealing question,

How could I be a Christian for so long, have studied the Bible for so many years, and been

in church so regularly, and yet never have heard about attributes like ... aseity, impassibility, and others?⁶

The answer is pretty clear to me. He never heard about these abstruse philosophical ideas because they aren't anywhere to be found in the Bible. He only "saw" them in the Bible after he was taught to read them into the Bible.

I was also a Christian for quite a while before encountering Classical Theism, but I immediately saw some big problems with it. Not only was it abundantly clear that it was profoundly shaped by pagan Greek philosophy, it was also clear to me that as a rule this "vision of God" is read into Scripture by scholars using bad exegesis (breaking the rules of good interpretation). A simple Christian reading through Scripture won't find it in the writings of the apostles and prophets. Let me put it this way: If some castaway were stuck on a deserted island with just a Bible, they wouldn't come up with the finer points of Classical Theism in a million years. For that, they would need the writings of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle to wash up on the beach.

8.7 THIS IS WAR

The theological and philosophical issues related to this can get complicated and confusing, but ultimately this is the issue. What we are talking about here is called "spiritual warfare." The Bible says that we have a real spiritual enemy and lies are his primary tool. What I am referring to here is the great character defamation campaign that Satan began in the Garden of Eden. It's not ultimately about what

professors, pastors, and authors are saying. *The Derakim* continues to be overlooked, undervalued, and explained away for one primary reason—*Satan doesn't want people to hear it*. The very last thing he wants people to see is "**the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ**" (2 Corinthians 4:6). He knows perfectly well that when people begin to see God as He described Himself in Exodus 34:6, miracles happen—revivals break out, mountains move, and souls like Marlena are snatched from the jaws of death.

Satan's number one warfare strategy has always been to corrupt our center, our vision of God. This has been happening since the beginning of human history, when God's nemesis threw the human race into confusion with that little phrase, "**Did God really say ...?**" (Genesis 3:1). This is exactly what is going on with *The Derakim*. God spoke clearly in Exodus 34:6 and He didn't stutter. He spoke clearly again when "**the Word became flesh.**" This description of God is perfectly clear, but Satan has used the theological police to obfuscate it into oblivion. Every single word of it has died the death of a thousand theological qualifications, and so it is left out of theological discussion.

Thankfully, I embraced a straightforward reading of *The Derakim* long before the theological police tried to change my mind about it (during my PhD studies). I had spent years memorizing books of Scripture, I knew the biblical languages, and I also knew the stories of the greatest get-it-done Christians in history. In addition, I had been out in the spiritual battle and had seen lives transformed by a simple, straightforward understanding of *The Derakim*. So when the theological police came along and told me, "God didn't literally, actually mean what He said in Exodus 34:6,"

I just said, "I don't believe you." Sure, they had PhDs and had written impressive books, but I knew that the Bible repeatedly tells us that human brilliance is often more of a hindrance than a help when it comes to knowing God.

8.8 DON'T BE A DUMB OX

Everyone who is well studied in Christian theology knows about the Dominican priest who was called "The Dumb Ox." This name was given to him because he was large, lumbering, and quiet, but the fact is that he was one of the greatest intellects in human history. The Dumb Ox was so brilliant, in fact, that sometimes four assistants would follow him around, recording the river of profound thoughts pouring from his prodigious brain. One of his superiors once said, "His bellowing in doctrine will one day resound throughout the world."

I am, of course, talking about the theological titan Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). His magnum opus, *Summa Theologica* (*Summary of Theology*), remains one of the most influential works in Western literature. To this day, millions admire Thomas Aquinas (in your neighborhood, you may have a Saint Thomas Church, Saint Thomas High School, etc.), but many are unaware of an amazing little detail of his life's story.

Most people don't know that in the midst of writing his great work, he set his pen down and refused to ever write again. The *Summa Theologica* was never completed. Why? Aquinas claimed that he had some sort of direct encounter with God that absolutely humbled him. When a friend asked

him why he stopped writing, he said, "All I have composed seems to me like so much straw compared with what ... has been revealed to me."⁷

Imagine that! One of the smartest Christian theologians who ever lived, after a lifetime of trying to figure out infinite God, basically gave up. Countless theologians (professional God-talkers) seem to be in denial about this fact of history. They don't want to admit that this ever happened, but the facts are the facts. Aquinas stopped writing his big book. If "The Dumb Ox," with his towering intellect, concluded that his attempts to reach heaven with his mind were futile, what hope is there for the rest of us? This is our hope: The Bible says again and again that a small child can accomplish what the greatest intellects on earth cannot. But there is only one way through the door.

8.9 IT'S THE HUMBLE PATH ... OR NOTHING

The idea that infinite God can be searched out by the human intellect flies in the face of what Jesus said. To enter the kingdom, we must become like little children. **"I tell you the truth, if you do not repent and become like little children, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 18:3). As I said previously, I know of no babies who can even pronounce the word *anthropomorphism*. This does not mean that brilliant folks can't come to know God, it just means that even a theological Einstein (like Aquinas) has to take the God-ordained path. They must enter simply, like a child. The apostle Paul was an intellectual colossus, but clearly understood the futility of the intellectual approach to God.

Don't let anyone deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. Because the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. (1 Corinthians 3:18-19)

Christian theologians down through history have been a little hardheaded about all this. They continue to resist the childlike (K.I.S.S.) approach to engaging God. They have turned God into a convoluted, complicated subject that scares the simple away. In fact, they can't even keep the word "simplicity" simple. Before Thomas Aquinas had his life-altering experience with God, this is how he defined God's "simplicity":

To understand this (*simplicity*), it must be noted that in things composed of matter and form, the nature or essence must differ from the suppositum, because the essence of nature connotes only what is included in the definition of the species ... Therefore suppositum and nature in them are identified. Since God then is not ... composed of matter and form, He must be His own Godhead, His own life, and whatever else is thus predicated of Him.⁸

For most Christians, the above quote would have made just as much sense if I had left it in Latin. (In G. K. Chesterton's

work on Thomas Aquinas, he tells a humorous story of a perplexed woman who said with a sigh, "Well, if that's His simplicity, I wonder what His complexity is like."⁹) Could this possibly be what Jesus had in mind when He spoke about coming to know the Father like a child?

Attempting to understand the infinite side of God would be like trying to explain quantum theory to a preschooler. "What I am trying to say, little Billy, is that a momentum eigenstate would be an infinite wave, and perfectly monochromatic, and as such would not be square-integrable." Obviously, this information is not helpful or useful in any way for little Billy. Actually, that comparison is not extreme enough. Little Billy might, some day, come to understand the above sentence. On the other hand, the idea that our finite human minds can grasp infinite God is more like believing a garden slug can understand the above excerpt from Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. It is utterly impossible. "No one can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20).

Does this mean that God is wholly out of reach? Not at all. It just means that we have to do things the way He instructs us. The secret to really knowing Him begins to open up to us on the day we (like Aquinas) have the humility to admit that our fancy philosophical theology is nothing but straw. We can't make a tower to the heavens with our human logic. The only way to engage God is to realize that He has condescended to us, taking on a form that is like ours. As Calvin says,

The sum is this—that God in Himself, that is, in His naked majesty, is invisible, and not to the eyes of the body merely, but also to the under-

standings of men ... We must beware of seeking Him elsewhere, for everything that would set itself off as a representation of God, apart from Christ, will be an idol.¹⁰

For anyone willing to embrace God with the simplicity of a child—the God revealed in the man Jesus Christ, the God described by the words of *The Derakim*—this could be the day that everything changes for you. I know, because this is exactly what happened to me.

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son ... He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.
(Hebrews 1:1-3)

The logic of all this is not hard to follow. God told Moses how He wants us to know Him—He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). God then put on flesh and lived out these words in front of us. "The Word became flesh ... and we beheld His glory" (John 1:14). God now wants us to reflect His glory by living this out before a dying world. "With our faces unveiled, we see the Lord's glory like a reflection in a mirror, and we are being transformed into the same image" (2 Corinthians 3:18). It's all so simple, so wonderful, so liberating ... but there is just one more thing we should touch on before wrapping up.

The next chapter will bring our discussion full circle by once again addressing that whole "fiery trials" thing we began the book with. Why? Because pain and suffering are the place where real change happens in our souls. As a rule, before God can show anyone His glory, He needs to first burn down a lot of what they think they know. Every one of us needs to understand how this process works, and let God have His way.

1. To see Marlena's testimony, go to "Refuge Narratives" channel on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHGPdCXmOug>
2. If anyone thinks I am picking on this author, I'm sure he can take it. He more or less said that views differing from his are like "unclean spirits" that need to be cast out of the church like demons. (Ouch!) He says, "The parable of the unclean spirits applies ... the last state is worse than the first (Matt 12:45). Such is our heritage. ... This book is meant to fill the house with good theology proper, the type that will keep the demons away for good." Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 18-19.
3. Ibid, 41.
4. Ibid, 29-30.
5. We previously showed how Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, for example, reads like a Christian Systematic Theology text book. (See Chapter 2, note 30.)

6. Barrett, 28.
7. "Straw" means "worthless" and is likely a reference to 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. This account from Aquinas's life can be found in G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933). See also Thurston and Attwater's revision of Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1956), 511.
8. Thomas Aquinas, "The Simplicity of God," in *Summa Theologica*.
9. See "Introductory Note" in G. K. Chesterton, *Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933).
10. Calvin Translation Society, *Colossians*, 150.