

## 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)*

**I** magine 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 upon 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 gentle than a nursing mother ("compassionate"), always willing to help ("gracious"), impossibly patient and forgiving ("slow to anger"), mind-blowingly 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 millenia-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 little 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)**

## **7.2 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. Every so often he laughs out loud, claps his hands and shouts, "Hallelujah!" Again and again he has to stop, completely overcome with wonder, and fall to his knees and weep. His people may be bent toward evil (at that very moment they were worshipping the golden calf), 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."**

But about halfway down the mountain he walks past a massive outcropping of pinkish-grey granite, and rubs his eyes and says, "Oy vey! What's this?" A group of grey-bearded, long-robed, middle eastern-looking wise men are calling his name, waving him over to them. 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 just saw and heard on the mountaintop. The most serious-looking among them then takes the lead and says, "Before running down this mountain and telling your congregation what you think you just saw, 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 what God just said can't be taken at face value—it was non-literal language, more precisely, *anthropomorphic language*. Moses asks, "Anthropo-*huh?*" Then they give Moses a very confusing lecture about the sort of being that God is—His ontology. (Evidently, a few of the wise men had spent years studying among Greek philosophers and found some of their ideas useful.) They then 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 something that sounds a lot like, "Meshugah" (translation: "Crazy"). The leader of the group, clearly offended, asks, "What's that you say?" Moses tries to clarify, "Guys, I'm not a philosopher. I've been shepherding sheep for the last several decades." The theological police all shake their heads with grave concern.

The group begins to push even harder. "As a religious leader, Moses, it's absolutely vital that you understand all this. It's what all the leading philosophers and theologians are saying these days. Your views are primitive, unsophisticated, embarrassing. To think otherwise is ... is heresy." Moses swallows hard. *How could they all be wrong*, he wonders. His mind races. *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 clarity of his vision of God fades. By the time the theological police are done working him over, Moses is not sure what he believes. But one thing is certain—he doesn't feel much like singing and shouting anymore.

The above story is, of course, fictional and 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 addendums). 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 description from millions of other simple God worshippers. Thankfully, they didn't get to Marlena.

### **7.3 Don't Mess with Marlena**

Marlena came into our fellowship a few years ago. Her life was in complete shambles. When we met her 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 she 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). He 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 Marlena from what I call "the theological bait and switch." Broken souls are 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 introduced to an alternative vision of God.

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. Over time 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.)

## **7.4 Stayin' Alive**

To stay alive spiritually, we need to know that God thinks, feels, responds, and loves exactly like Jesus Christ. As a pastor, one of my goals is never to allow anyone to pull the

old "bait-and-switch" on Marlena, or anyone else under my spiritual care. They need what God told Moses around 1500 B.C. when He first spoke *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6). Just in case we missed it, God said the exact same thing about Himself a millenia-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 God 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, and even worse, this is why the 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.

## 7.5 AN EXEGETICAL CRIME

I trust that the last professor I sat under is a decent enough guy, and I'll 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). If anyone thinks I am picking on him, 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!*).<sup>2</sup> His



name is Matthew Barrett, and he recently wrote a book on the doctrine of God. In the second chapter he uses the story of Moses going up Sinai as his lead in. (Yes, that's the chapter that leads up to *The Derakim*.) Barrett's book, however, takes a turn that is an absolute gob smack.

Instead of telling us what God actually said to Moses ("**compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness**"), Professor Barrett takes a hard left turn and introduces a vision of God that is nowhere to be found in the text. He follows the narrative quite nicely right up to the climactic moment, and rightly notes that, "Moses seems to be asking for something that goes well beyond anything he's ever experienced before."<sup>3</sup> Then Barrett completely dodges the description of God found in Exodus 34:6, (God's own words from God's own mouth). What does he put in their place? He introduces his readers to a bunch of twenty-five cent terms that originate in philosophy, like "infinite ... aseity ... immutability ... impassibility ... and timeless eternity."<sup>4</sup>

The God he introduces is commonly known as Classical Theism, and in many ways is completely incompatible with a simple reading of *The Derakim*. (We already covered a lot of this in previous chapters.) Among other things, Classical Theism holds that God has no emotional response to suffering and need, and God cannot actually be affected by anything outside of Himself (like prayer). He does not respond, He only dictates. He cannot be moved, He only moves. Barrett and the generations of theologians who influenced him would give a hearty "Amen" to all of this.

The glaring problem with Barrett's book, of course, is this—it's not what God Himself said on Sinai. If Classical Theism is what God wanted Moses and all the rest of us to obsess over, why didn't He just say so? Why doesn't the passage read as follows?

"The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him 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 these "attributes" ... because they were borrowed from the writings of pagan Greek philosophers.<sup>5</sup>)

To justify his alternative approach, Professor Barrett drops a bunch of big names from history—Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, and then talks about complex philosophical issues like the Creator-creature distinction, perfect being, archetypal and ectypal theology, etc. I would assume that most of his readers (twenty-somethings hoping to go into ministry) are expected to just submit and say, "He has a PhD, so I guess 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). Any serious Christian has the right to blow the whistle on PhDs and pastors, and ask questions like, "Why did you just

completely ignore the words God actually spoke?” and “Why doesn’t the Bible ever mention a single one of the attributes you are telling me are so vitally important?”

## 7.6 PASSING IT DOWN THE LINE

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t think Professor Barrett is misleading anyone on purpose. Many earnest God-loving men like him are just passing on what they have been taught. At some point they fell prey to the old theological bait and switch, too. Ironically, Barrett himself (more or less) explains how this happened. 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 some big fat philosophical theology books. This is when his views changed. Barrett 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?”<sup>6</sup> The answer is obvious 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.

Like Professor Barrett, I was a Christian for quite a while before encountering Classical Theism. But unlike him, I immediately took issue with it. It was during my first crack at a PhD back in the early 2000s that I really plunged into the history of Classical Theism, and what I found was extremely troubling. Not only was it abundantly clear that

it was profoundly shaped by pagan Greek philosophy, it was also clear to me that this "vision of God" could only be read into Scripture. An objective student alone with their Bible won't find it in the writings of the apostles and prophets. My personal opinion is that someone stuck on a deserted island with only Scripture wouldn't come up with the finer points of Classical Theism in a million years. (For that, they would need to have the writings of Plato and Aristotle wash up on the beach.)

## 7.7 Spiritual Warfare

To be blunt, what we are talking about here is called "spiritual warfare." Ultimately, the reason that *The Derakim* has been neglected is this—*Satan doesn't want us to hear it*. He knows perfectly well that when people begin to understand it, miracles happen—revivals break out, mountains move, and souls like Marlena are snatched from the jaws of hell.

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 the serpent 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*. This description of God is perfectly clear, but the theological police have obfuscated it into oblivion. Every single word of it has died the death of a thousand theological qualifications.

Fortunately I had embraced a straightforward reading of *The Derakim* long before the theological police ever got to me. I had already spent years memorizing books of Scrip-

ture, I learned the biblical languages, and I had studied the lives of the greatest get-it-done Christians in history. In addition, I had been out in the spiritual battle ... and seen lives completely transformed by *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 fat books, but I also knew that the Bible repeatedly says human brilliance is often more of a hinderance than a help when it comes to knowing God.

## 7.8 So Don't Be A Dumb Ox

Everyone who is well studied in Christian theology knows about a Dominican priest in the thirteenth century 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 most people 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, which 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."<sup>7</sup>

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.

## 7.9 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 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 3:19).**

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 it all into a complicated, convoluted mess. The fact is that 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.<sup>8</sup>

For most Christians, the above quote would have made just as much sense if I had left it in Latin. In Chesterton's work on Thomas Aquinas, he tells a humorous story of a woman who complained, "If this is God's simplicity, I would hate to see His complexity."<sup>9</sup> Could this possibly be what Jesus had in mind when He spoke about coming to know the Father like a child? I am not denying that God is infinite and wholly other (omni-this and omni-that), but as has been said many times, we can't do those physics, speak that language, or crack that code. This is why He condescends to us by taking on a human form.

Attempting to understand an infinite God is a bit 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. The idea that our finite little human minds can grasp infinite God's is more ridiculous than 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."**

Does this all 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 God 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 understandings 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 all 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).

But there is one more thing we need to touch on before wrapping things up, and it will bring our discussion full circle. It's that whole "fiery trials" thing we began the book with. We human beings have such a hard time changing our theological views, and this is one of the primary reasons that God allows fire (pain and suffering) into our lives. Getting right to the point. Before God can show us His glory, as a rule He needs to first burn down what we think we know. Let Him do it!

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1. To see Marlena's testimony, go to "Refuge Narratives" channel on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHGPDcXmOug>
  2. "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* (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 27.)
6. Ibid, 28.
7. "Straw" means "worthless" and is likely a reference to 2 Corinthians 3:12-15. This account from Aquinas' life can be found in Thurston and Attwater revision of Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1956), 511. See also G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933).
8. Thomas Aquinas, "The Simplicity of God," in *Summa Theologica*.
9. G. K. Chesterton, *Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933).
10. Calvin Translation Society, *Colossians*, 150.