

Known from Eternity

Isaiah 46, Acts 15:12–18

Last week we looked at this text from the perspective of the church, which is a *people*, a *tabernacle*, a *witness*—a much-needed message in our highly individualistic culture. Today, we’ll spend the entire time on verse 18, “Known to God from eternity are all His works.”

Look at this verse in your Bible. Some of your Bibles might not have the whole verse. And the missing words likely will not be in a footnote, either. Why not? To understand this, we need a little background on how the Bible came to us.

The Bible was written before the invention of the printing press. The books of the New Testament, as the Old before it, were originally written—painstakingly, letter by letter—by hand. Copies were made in scriptoria—rooms where a reader would read the original aloud, and multiple scribes would write down what they heard. Minor variations, such as in the spelling of proper names, would result, but they would not change the meaning of the text.

There are two basic text-types of New Testament manuscripts—the Byzantine and the Alexandrian. The Byzantine is the form found in the largest number of surviving manuscripts from all over the Greek-speaking world. The Alexandrian text-type is found in two older manuscripts (codices, bound like our books), Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, as well as a handful of papyri. The *Textus Receptus*, from which the KJV and NKJV are translated, is based on the Byzantine text, but most translations made since 1900 use the Alexandrian text. The argument in favor of the Alexandrian texts is their comparative age. They *are* older, but this is an accident of nature: it is wetter and more humid in Byzantium. Alexandria and the Sinai desert are drier, so writing materials last longer. Another factor: manuscripts in constant use wear out over time; the Byzantine texts wore out from being used in worship, so fresh handwritten copies were made to replace them. The surviving Byzantine texts, therefore, are newer. When I was at Bible college and seminary we used the Alexandrian text, but after much study I have become convinced that the Byzantine text-form is superior. The God who *inspired* his word promised to *preserve* his word. “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). It is unthinkable that God meant to say, “My people will not have the pure text of Scripture for 1500 years, but it will be rediscovered toward the end of the nineteenth century.” No! The Bible was given to the church, to be used by the people of God in worship. The covenant community has had the word of God continuously. The Reformers had the word of God. The Westminster Assembly had the word of God. Our fathers in the faith had the word of God. “Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89). Amen.

As to the text of Acts 15:18, the complete verse is found in all the Byzantine manuscripts—copies of the Bible that were in use in the Greek churches. These

were not manuscripts found in a library or in a wastebasket. These were the holy Scriptures that were in current use in the public worship of God. There were thousands of them in use before the invention of the printing press. The complete text of Acts 15:18 is found in the Latin Vulgate translation made by Jerome in the late fourth century. In the English it is found in the translations of Wycliffe (1380), Tyndale (1534), Cranmer (1539), Geneva (1557) and Rheims (1582); as well as the Authorized (1611). It is found in Luther's German Bible (1522), which had great influence not only on theology but on the development of the German language.

With the exception of the New King James Version, most modern translations of Acts 15:18 follow the Alexandrian text—a verse consisting of only three words in the original Greek (rendered various ways in English): “known from of old.” (The Alexandrian readings tend to be shorter, leaving out certain phrases, but the longer reading of Acts 15:18 is attested in several Alexandrian manuscripts.) But consider the reading “known from of old.” What does it mean?

Since these words mean nothing by themselves, they are appended to the last clause of the previous verse, to make it read: “says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.” The implication is that the fact that the elect Gentiles would seek the Lord was made “known from of old”—that is, made known from eternity. But is it *true* that this fact was made known from eternity? In eternity there was only God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The three Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—existed in perfect unity from eternity. There was nothing else, for this was before anything—including time—was created (John 1:3). Since God alone existed from eternity, to whom was this fact made known in eternity, since there was no created being to whom it might be made known? On its face the Alexandrian text of Acts 15:18 does not make sense. However, the Byzantine reading *does* make sense. The previous verse concludes with the words, “... says the Lord who does all these things.” Full stop. New sentence: “Known to God from eternity are all His works.” The meaning is understandable. In the apostle James' quotation from the prophet Amos God says that he will rebuild the ruined tabernacle of David, which had fallen down. He will rebuild it and set it up again. With the coming of Christ, Israel would truly become a light to the Gentiles, and the elect Gentiles (those called by God's name) would be brought to faith. This was God's plan, for “known to God from eternity are all His works.” God's plan for all the ages was in his mind from eternity past, and he had determined to bring it to pass. This is consistent with what our Catechism calls God's “eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.”¹ One of the Scripture proofs for this

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism 7

statement is Isaiah 14:24, “The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.” God’s thoughts are known to him from eternity. He never forgets a one! As he has thought, so shall it come to pass, as he has purposed—eternally—so shall it stand. This is demonstrated conclusively in the apostle Peter’s amazing statement concerning the death of Christ earlier in Acts: “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). Those who in their impassioned hatred of God’s Messiah plotted to kill him were unwittingly fulfilling God’s secret plan that was determined way back in eternity past. In fact, *whatever* happens in this world is part of his perfect plan. God is the orchestrator of history. He is absolutely powerful, and he is perfectly knowledgeable.

Here is a precious truth to Christians. “Known to God from eternity are all His works.” Let there be no mistaking: God knows! What does he know? “All his works.” Here is the doctrine of God’s absolute omniscience (his knowledge of everything—every possibility, every contingency, every actuality, past, present and future). What kind of a God do we serve? There are only two possibilities: one who knows everything, or one who does not know everything. Think of it: one is God, the other is *not* God. The God of the Bible knows and determines everything. Even the free and voluntary actions of humans are known to God from eternity and are used by him to accomplish his eternal purpose. You and I and all people make thousands of decisions every day. The decisions that we make are voluntary—God is not a puppeteer pulling strings. We are, all of us, responsible for the decisions that we make; we will give account for them on the day of judgment. But the Bible’s teaching is that whatever happens in history—everything!—is part of God’s perfect plan. “All his works” that have been known to him from eternity past will certainly come to pass.

The idea of a God who is truly *God* frightens many people—a God who knows absolutely everything, a God who has planned absolutely everything from all eternity—that is, *everything*: every possibility, every contingency, every actuality, everything on a cosmic scale, everything, right down to the smallest detail. The God of the Bible is a God who knows all minds and hearts, a God of whom it is said, “There is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether” (Ps. 139:4). The God of the Bible is the God whom the apostle Paul says “will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Rom. 2:16). The “secrets” of men’s hearts will be judged by an all-knowing God! How can he judge the secrets of men’s hearts? They are fully known to him. A man may not know his own heart, but God knows it! A man cannot know with certainty what is in another person’s heart, but God knows! Man may think that he can fool God—can pull a fast one on God—but he can’t! One of Norma’s piano students—a

precocious youngster—that once told her, “I can fool God.” The young fellow said, “I can pretend that I’m going to do something—keep pretending, keep pretending—but I can change it at the last minute, and I can fool God.” Norma replied, “No, young man, you can’t!” If you could fool God, then *you* would be God. *Man* would be God—and we would all be in trouble! A good poker player can develop a “poker face.” He can keep the same facial expression and not let on to his opponents what he is planning to do. In ice hockey there is a *deke* (from *decoy*), a deceptive movement that induces an opponent to move out of position. In boxing or fencing there is a *feint* (from the word *feign*, to pretend). A feint is a deceptive or pretended blow or thrust. A boxer might make a deceptive or distracting movement. He might *feint* with his right, then swing with his left, hoping to gain an advantage. He might try to fake his opponent out of position, pretending to attack toward one part in order to distract attention from the point he really intends to attack. A player who masters these movements can gain an advantage over his opponents. But make no mistake, we cannot fool God.

An old hymn says, “God holds the key to all unknown, and I am glad. If other men should hold the key, or if he trusted it to me, I would be sad.” Indeed! Would you trust *any* other human being to run the universe—your spouse? Your neighbor? A college professor? A salesman? A politician? A bureaucrat? The pope? If you would trust any other person, that person is your god! The Bible says, “Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.”² Why? Because man is mortal. “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth.” He’s going to die! He cannot possibly be God, who is immortal.

“Known to God *from eternity* are all His works.” Some translations use such words as *from long ago*, *from of old*, *from the beginning of the world*. All these are inadequate to describe God’s omniscience. God didn’t just gain his knowledge lately—in time. The Greek word used by James in his speech to the Jerusalem council is αἰών, from which we get our word *eon*, an immeasurably or indefinitely long age or period of time. This is the word used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was in use before the coming of Christ, the translation that Jesus himself would have certainly heard in the synagogues of the Decapolis or other Greek-speaking areas. The word αἰών—*eon*—is used in the Greek rendering of Psalm 90, which begins, “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.” In the Greek the phrase “from everlasting to everlasting” is “from *eon* to *eon*.” God is eternal. He has existed from eternity past and will continue to exist through eternity future. He will never cease to exist. God is not a creature, like

² Ps. 143:6

man. He had no father or mother. No one created him. (If anyone did, *that* person would be God.) God has always been and always will be. He is eternal, and his *promises* are eternal. He is completely and utterly reliable. Every promise he has made will surely come to pass. He will never disappoint.

In our Old Testament text, Isaiah 46, the God of heaven contrasts himself with idols: “Bel bows down, Nebo stoops.” These false idols had to be carried around on beasts of burden. God reminds his people that they had been upheld by him from birth. God himself had upheld them in the past, and would continue to uphold them in the future. He says, “Even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.” He says, “Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.” Nobody else could ever speak like this. Only the God of heaven could declare the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done. Only the God of heaven could say, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.” Only the God of heaven could say, “Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.”

Humans make plans all the time that never come to pass. We might have sincerely intended to do something, but on the way to do it, something else happened that prevented it. There were people riding on the municipal bus in Pittsburgh on Friday who planned to make it to their destination, but a bridge collapsed, grinding their sleek tandem bus to a sudden halt, and some of them made unexpected trips to the hospital instead. A car that was on the bridge was thrown off and landed upside-down on its windshield. The people who were on that busy bridge all had other plans. Which of them, waking up that morning, would have thought, *the route I will be taking today includes a bridge over a ravine; I wonder if that bridge will collapse while I am on it?* Now I’m sure that bridge is periodically inspected by the department of transportation. It may have been certified as safe. Who would have guessed that it would go down that day? It was not an act of sabotage. Nobody attached explosives to its girders. It went down entirely by natural causes—freezing and thawing, erosion, the settling of the ground on which it was built. Who could have foretold that it would collapse? But God knew!

The Bible warns, “Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1). Twice this week Norma and I had people stop by, and our day took a different turn from what we had planned. In both cases we

knew that our wise Father in heaven had better plans. God says, “‘I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for prosperity and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope’” (Jer. 29:11 NASB). The plans we make may not come to pass because something else came up which prevented them from happening. Or they may not come to pass because, in spite of our best intentions, we were unable to carry them out. An olympic athlete may have accomplished a particular jump many times before, but at a key moment in competition he or she may not have had the strength to carry it off. I might make an appointment for a specific date and time, and wake up that morning, deathly sick.

But God is not subject to any of these limitations. When he promises something, that something will surely come to pass. Nothing in heaven or earth can possibly prevent it. When he says, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” that will surely happen. When he says, “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved,” that’s the gospel truth. When he says, “I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish,” he means it. When he says, “Before me every knee shall bow,” he’s not kidding. When he says, “All the nations will be gathered before me, and I will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats,” that is surely going to happen. Not the devil nor all the demons of hell can prevent it.

God’s knowledge is from eternity, from before there was time. Whatever disappointment, trouble or difficulty you are going through at this moment, rest assured, believer, that your God planned it from eternity. It did not take him by surprise. Nobody tricked him into doing something that he didn’t want to do. Whatever it was, he planned it for his glory and your *good*—no exceptions! The believer at all times can say with the Psalmist, “It is *good* for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Ps. 119:71). It might not have *felt* good at the time. As a matter of fact, it might have been absolutely horrible. But God meant it for your good, that you might learn by experience that he will absolutely not leave you nor forsake you.

“Known to God from eternity are all His works.” “All his works” includes everything, especially the work of salvation wrought by Christ upon the cross. Believer, *you too* have been known by God from all eternity. “Whom he did *foreknow*, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”³ Believer, put your trust in the God who loved you with an everlasting love, the God who from eternity planned the way of salvation, the God who from eternity determined to send his Son to die for

³ Romans 8:29–30

unworthy sinners, who from eternity planned to draw to himself a multitude of worshipers—men, women and children who love him and love to gather together with his church and sing his praises, who look forward to worshipping him forever in the courts of heaven. At that final day our focus will not be on ourselves—*our* wants, *our* pleasures—but on the Lamb who was slain to redeem us to God by his blood, our Lord Jesus, forevermore. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus”! Amen.