



SCRIPTURE:

Romans 1:18-20

RECAP:

We continue our series "The Cloud" today. Last week we talked about Justin Martyr. This is a series that explores individuals from church history that Christians today should know. The reason is we want to learn from their lives and faith. We're not the first Christians to walk in the world. There have been two thousand years worth of believers who have run the race and fought the good fight of faith. So we want to avoid what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery," thinking we are so much better, knowledgeable, and equipped today than people before us were. We continue today by looking at the life of a controversial figure: **Thomas Aquinas**. One of the huge contributions of Aquinas is his work on what is called "natural law" or "natural theology."

Psalm 19:1-2 -- *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.*

What is this passage saying? It is saying that the world around us, the creation, is declaring the glory of God. It is revealing information. The Creation is God's handiwork, and so the creation itself tells you something about the Creator. Day to day pours out speech about that Creator. Night to night reveals knowledge about that Creator. That's what Psalm 19:1-2 declares. And it is true. The universe reveals something about its Maker.

This is true of human works of creation too. Someone who composes a poem, a book, a song, a house, a painting, a car, a short story, or anything else, reveals something about themselves through what they create. You can't help but do it. The reason we can't help doing it is that we are made in the image of a Creator who reveals Himself in the things that He has made. Our passage today shows us this.

Exegesis of Romans 1:18-20

VS 18 -- The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. How? Through divine judgments in history. God providentially brings about judgment for sin against the wickedness of men. The cup of God's wrath mounts and sometimes spills over in the world in acts of judgment.

Examples:

- Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah
- Striking down of the first born sons in Egypt
- The serpents sent on the camp in the wilderness
- Uzzah's death for steadying the ark of the covenant
- Anannias and Sapphira's death for lying about their giving
- Herod's death for not giving glory to God when the crowd yelled "the voice of a God and not of a man."

There are tornados, tsunamis, volcano eruptions, hurricanes, sinkholes, and all sorts of things today that take human lives. Are these just random, chaotic accidents? No. The Lord is over nature. And just like we see God bring judgment and wrath throughout Scripture, we see it in the world today too, even though we rarely label it, or consider it, as such.

Jesus teaches something fascinating in Luke 13 that we often ignore or read past because we don't know what to do with it. It goes against our predetermined interpretations.

Luke 13:4-5 - "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

A tower had fallen and killed 18 people in Siloam. Everyone apparently knew about the event. It was a tragic thing. It would be like one of the gazillion stories we hear or see on the news or social media. But Jesus asks if the 18 were somehow worse sinners than everyone else in Jerusalem. Of course not. But Jesus says to those listening that they will likewise perish unless they repent.

In other words, every example of God's judgment falling on man, from the Bible to our world today, is a reminder of what every sin deserves, and if we get something different, then we should let the kindness of God lead us to repentance.

John Piper -- Every deadly calamity is a merciful call from God for the living to repent.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven every day against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

In their unrighteousness, they suppress the truth. They push it down. They try to keep it from surfacing. They don't want God's righteous ways or law to surface. They don't want to see it, so they push it down and out of their sight. All men know the truth, but they suppress the truth because they don't want to face it and be accountable to it.

VS 19 -- Here's specifically what they suppress in unrighteousness: what is known about God. What can be known about God is plain to them, but they suppress it. How do we know they have knowledge of God? Because He has shown it to them.

VS 20 -- What has God shown people about Himself that they can't deny? He has revealed His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature. His eternal power is on display because the universe itself is a product and display of His omnipotence. This is a power that is eternal in the nature of the God who is eternal. This is the display of the divine nature of God. SO people can know this about God. These things have been clearly perceived since the creation of the world. So from the beginning, there has been a knowledge of God available to mankind. It is *clearly* perceived. It's not fuzzy or questionable. It is clear. We know.

Where does this knowledge derive from? From the creation itself. The world God has made reveals the God who made it. And this is the conclusion: so we are without excuse. Mankind cannot say they don't know there is a God. Everyone knows there is a God, but works to suppress that truth in unrighteousness. We want to be our own God. But God has left a testimony of Himself in the world that everyone knows and will be held accountable for.

This brings us to the person of Thomas Aquinas.

Biographical Sketch:

San Tommaso d'Aquino (Italian), better known in its English form, Thomas Aquinas, was born in 1224 in Italy.

Thomas was placed in a monastery near his home as a young boy (6 years old). His parents believed that perhaps he would rise up the ranks and improve their station in life. In 1239, after nine years in this sanctuary of spiritual and cultural life, 14-year-old Thomas was forced to return to his family when the Emperor expelled the monks because they were too obedient to the pope. Thomas went from there to the University of Naples. He joined a new, study-oriented Dominican order, but his family opposed the decision. Why? Because they wanted him to become an influential and financially secured abbot or archbishop in the church rather than take a monk's vow of poverty. The Dominicans were a radical expression of the faith that made church leaders nervous. The Dominicans stressed that Jesus wasn't a wealthy aristocrat living in luxury, but rather a poor man without a place to rest his head. The Dominican order wanted to live this type of radical life and was known as one of the new 'begging orders,' since the monks would hold no wealth at all and live on hand-outs from others.

So when Thomas' parents couldn't convince Thomas of their view, his parents sent his brothers to kidnap him and held him confined for over a year. They even tempted him with a prostitute. Legend has it that Thomas chased the prostitute out of the room with a hot poker, and as the door slammed shut behind her, he traced a black cross on the door. Everything failed. Thomas went to Paris, which was the heart of medieval Europe's theological study. It was there the authorities in the Dominican order sent him to learn from the famous theologian: Albert the Great. They recognized Thomas' intellect and abilities. But not everyone loved Thomas.

He may have been brilliant, but apparently his looks did not aid in his fame. He was colossally fat, suffered from edema (dropsy), and one eye dwarfed his other in size. He also wasn't a very sociable, dynamic, or charismatic figure. He was introspective and silent most of the time, and when he did speak, it was often completely unrelated to the conversation. His classmates in college called him "the dumb ox." But he wasn't dumb. From 1245-1248, he studied under Albert the Great and made such an impression that when Albert was transferred to a different university, he took Thomas with him as a personal assistant.

At 32 years of age (1256), Thomas was teaching at the University of Paris as a Master of Theology, the medieval equivalent of a university professorship. After teaching at Paris

for three years, the Dominicans moved Thomas back to Italy, where he taught in Naples (from 1259-1261), Orvieto (1261-1265), and Rome (1265-1268). It was during this period, perhaps in Rome, that Thomas began work on his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*.

Thomas ended up teaching at the University of Paris again as a regent Master from 1268-1272. While he was at the University of Paris, Thomas also famously disputed with philosophers who contended on Aristotelian grounds—wrongly in Thomas' view—that all human beings shared one intellect, a doctrine that Thomas argued was incompatible with personal immortality and moral responsibility, not to mention our experience of ourselves as individual knowers.

In 1272, the Dominicans moved Thomas back to Naples, where he taught for a year. In the middle of composing his treatise on the sacraments for the *Summa Theologiae* around December of 1273, Thomas had a particularly powerful religious experience. After the experience, despite constant urging from his confessor and assistant Reginald of Piperno, Thomas refused to do any more writing. He was called to be a theological consultant at the Second Council of Lyon, but he died in Fossanova, Italy, on March 7, 1274, after getting sick while making his way to the council. He was 49 years old.

I want to take a moment to highlight the significance of Aquinas and what factors shaped him. It is impossible to dive into everything surrounding Aquinas' teaching. He wrote so much and covered so much territory, we couldn't possibly exhaust it. Within his large body of work, Thomas deals with most of the major sub-disciplines of philosophy, including: logic, philosophy of nature, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical psychology, philosophy of mind, philosophical theology, the philosophy of language, ethics, and political philosophy.

From an apologetics/philosophy standpoint, Thomas is most famous for his "five ways" of attempting to demonstrate the existence of God. These five short arguments constitute an introduction to his project in natural theology. His most influential contribution to theology and philosophy, however, is his model for the correct relationship between the disciplines of philosophy and theology, or faith and reason. It is fair to say that, as a theologian, Thomas is one of the most important in the history of Western civilization, given the extent of his influence on the development of Roman Catholic theology since the 14th century. However, it also seems right to say—given the sheer influence of his work on countless philosophers and intellectuals in every century since the 13th, as well as on persons in countries as culturally diverse as Argentina, Canada, England, France,

Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Poland, Spain, and the United States— that, globally, Thomas is one of the 10 most influential philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition.

A good way to understand Thomas Aquinas is to grasp his relationship to Aristotle (the 300s BC Greek philosopher) and Augustine (the 300s/400s AD North African theologian and philosopher). The philosophy of Aristotle dominated the Medieval European world. Aristotle did not teach that the Greek gods or religion controlled the world and its people. Instead, his observations led him to conclude that nature was purposeful and driven by natural laws that human reason could discover. These natural laws provided a way to explain the world and the place of humans within it. His ideas were seen as a threat by the church. Hundreds of years after Aristotle, the theology and philosophy of Augustine became dominant in the church. As Thomas Aquinas studied theology, he came to land on many of the positions Augustine held: original sin, man's fallen nature, God's work in saving the elect, and many other Augustinian distinctions. But Aquinas was also fascinated by Aristotle's teaching and dealing with the problem it seemed to pose between faith and reason. Aquinas' answer was simple: faith and reason don't contradict one another, but support with another. They both have their role. Thomas Aquinas, much like Aristotle, wrote that nature is organized for good purposes. Unlike Aristotle, however, Aquinas went on to say that God created nature and rules the world by "divine reason." Reason, said Thomas (following Aristotle), is based on sensory data—what we can see, feel, hear, smell, and touch. Revelation is based on more. While reason can lead us to believe in God —something that other theologians had already proposed—only revelation can show us God as he really is, the triune God of the Bible. **"In order that men might have knowledge of God, free of doubt and uncertainty, it was necessary for divine truth to be delivered to them by way of faith, being told to them as it were, by God himself who cannot lie."**

Aquinas described four kinds of law. **Eternal law** was God's perfect plan, not fully knowable to humans. It determined the way things such as animals and planets behaved and how people should behave. **Divine law**, primarily from the Bible, guided individuals beyond the world to "eternal happiness" in what St. Augustine had called the "City of God." **Natural law** was, "the light of reason is placed by nature [and thus by God] in every man to guide him in his acts." Therefore, human beings, alone among God's creatures, use reason to lead their lives. This is natural law. The master principle of natural law, wrote Aquinas, was that "good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided." Aquinas stated that reason reveals particular natural laws that are good for humans such as self-preservation, marriage and family, and the desire to know God. Reason, he taught, also enables humans to understand things that are evil such as adultery, suicide, and

lying. Lastly, **human law** could vary with time, place, and circumstance. Aquinas defined this last type of law as "an ordinance of reason for the common good" made and enforced by a ruler or government. He warned, however, that people were not bound to obey laws made by humans that conflicted with natural law.

Application/Take-aways:

1. We don't have to agree with everything a theologian or pastor says to be helped by the things they get right.

To appreciate Aquinas's contributions to theology does not mean that Protestants are entirely happy with each of his teachings. He taught things about justification, for example, that were thoroughly medieval, namely that grace infuses into us at baptism and it is then our responsibility to cooperate with grace for our final justification. His teachings on the sacraments were also influential in the development of Catholic views of transubstantiation. We could go on, but there is not a short list of things people question in Aquinas's teachings.

When we stop to appreciate Aquinas as an historical figure, then, it is not because we love everything we see. But the long Protestant engagement with Aquinas on things like faith and reason and other doctrines is not weakened by our profound disagreement on other matters.

We can look back at how the Reformers like Calvin, Martin Bucer, and even Luther in his quieter moments—respected the theologian who has shaped our thinking for nearly 800 years. This is why I may recommend somebody for a particular subject, but not on other subjects. I would recommend N.T. Wright's work on the historical Jesus, but I don't recommend him for studying justification by faith. I think Aquinas has something for us Protestants to consider as he speaks about faith and reason, and natural law, but I don't actively recommend him as a resource to read. After the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church used a lot of Aquinas' writings to develop some of their ideas at what was called the Council of Trent. For this reason, many Protestants today have problems with Aquinas. But I think we err with ignoring him, completely dismissing his work, or neglecting how influential of a thinker he has been, not only in church history, but in world history.

2. Natural law demonstrates that all human beings know there is a God.

Natural law is divinely engrafted knowledge of morality in human reason and conscience, that which all human beings share by virtue of their creation in God's image.

Theologically speaking, I think this understanding of nature points back to our original creation in God's image, but it also anticipates the fall into sin, where the divine image was corrupted but not destroyed. This is what Thomas believed: nature was corrupted because of sin, including our reason, but grace helps to restore reason.

God does not save the world through natural law, nor does he reconcile the world through the pursuit of justice; but he does provide a public record of his eternal power and divinity through the law written on the heart. In order to be reconciled to God, sinners need the special revelation of Scripture. But mankind is not without witness everywhere they turn. We as Christians believe that the authority of Jesus expands from heaven to earth and over every molecule. He is also Lord over every pagan heart that exists in the world. We want to declare the authority of the Triune God and natural law helps us to do that.

Natural law shows us that morality is objective. Humans have innate moral compasses even if we don't have the Bible to know what things are forbidden. Natural law shows us the longing for justice inside every heart. We want wrongs made right. Nobody has to read the Bible for us to know that is right and good. Nor do we need the Bible to give us this longing. It is there by nature. It is there by God. It is clear that natural law has a moral component. The person who is created sees this natural law at work and is responsible to obey it. If we weren't responsible, Paul wouldn't say we are without excuse. As we interact with an unbelieving world, they may not listen to the claims of the Bible. This is one of the tools of natural law. Natural law is something within all people. The unbeliever cannot account for this natural law within the framework of his worldview, but it is there nonetheless. We know what is evil and we know what is good. We are to pursue the good. We use our reason to pursue the good. Even the unbeliever can do that according to Aquinas, despite it being fallen.

The Basic "Goods" we pursue:

- **Life** (the preservation and protection of it), **Reproduction** (having children), **Education** (teaching children and passing on knowledge/wisdom), **Worship** (giving what is due to God), **Law and Order** (justice)

When someone commits murder, how do we know this is sin/evil apart from Scripture? How is it revealed through natural law? Well, it goes against our basic good of "life" and preserving life. So it is evil, and should be punished according to natural law. Having a school that educates children is something that corresponds with "education" and therefore would be good according to natural law. If two neighbors have a dispute about

the boundary line of their properties, they can't resolve it by the stronger one killing the weaker one (this violates our basic good of life, it is evil). So they have determined another way to arrive at a just decision (this is the basic good of law and order/justice). Take abortion as an example. Three basic goods are violated: life, reproduction, and law & order. Therefore, abortion according to the natural law (even without a Bible verse) is evil. The natural law reveals a thing to be good or evil. These are all God-given, and knowable by nature. That's why men are without excuse. Aquinas spent a good amount of time writing on these issues.

Romans 1 makes it clear that all men know there is a God, and they are without excuse for not obeying the natural law implanted on their hearts. But natural law will not show men where deliverance and redemption are found. Only the gospel can do that. Only Christ can deliver the human race from sin, bondage, and guilt. This is why it was necessary for Christ to die. Aquinas writes on this issue:

"Whether it was necessary for Christ to suffer for the deliverance of the human race? That man should be delivered by Christ's Passion was in keeping with both His mercy and His justice. With His justice, because by His Passion Christ made satisfaction for the sin of the human race; and so man was set free by Christ's justice: and with His mercy, for since man of himself could not satisfy for the sin of all human nature, God gave him His Son to satisfy for him, according to Romans 3:24-25: "Being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood." And this came of more copious mercy than if He had forgiven sins without satisfaction. Hence it is said (Ephesians 2:4): "God, who is rich in mercy, for His exceeding charity wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together in Christ."

The Heavens declare the glory of God but we must be the ones who declare the gospel of God. May we join creation in declaring the glory of God, and more particularly, the good news of redemption through Jesus the Savior, who died and rose again that he might reconcile us to God.

QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss some of the ways the earth and the heavens declare the glory of God. Do you see the glory of God when you look at His creation?
2. Discuss the difference between General Revelation and Special Revelation.
3. How do you answer someone who says God is unjust for allowing evil or calamity?
4. What are some key takeaways you have from Aquinas' life?

5. Why is it important to set Scripture above any other writing?
6. How does understanding the natural law prove there is a grand design to the universe?
7. Read Romans 2:14-16 and discuss how this applies to the natural law.