

WHAT BEN AND TOM COULD NOT SEE

Last Sunday, we started reading Psalm 139 and left off considering a false world view that seems to be getting is harder and harder for people to deal with—this false claim that God has just too many other things on His mind in a world as vast as this that He'd pay any attention to me or you on an individual basis. Interestingly, this false worldview has a long history in our country, going all the way back to the Founding Fathers of this nation. In the late 1700's when our Constitution was being written and the foundations of our nation were being laid, men like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine were influenced in varying degrees by a distorted philosophy known as *Deism*. Now, we don't have time this morning to discuss all the false nuances of Deism and how it so adversely affected some of our Foundation Father's understanding of God and their relationship with Jesus Christ, but suffice it to say that Franklin and Jefferson both denied that any of the miracles performed in the Bible ever happened—including a denial of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And they doubted Jesus' resurrection from the dead because they doubted the deity of Christ—i.e., they did not believe Him to be the Son of God. If they or anyone else holds to such false beliefs throughout their lives and fail to repent of them before they die, I wonder how they will fare come Judgment Day? Exactly, what is it that they will hear when they come face to face with Jesus?—well, we'll hold that thought to the end. And yet many today have adopted views not unlike that of Franklin and Jefferson—some who even call themselves Christians. So what is it about Deism that led so many astray during our nation's past, and continues to lead so very many on a wayward path today?

Well, consider this brief summary statement about Deism that is provided by James Breig in an article published by the *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*. Commenting on the nature of Deism during period following the American Revolution, Brieg states: “[Some of the Founding Fathers] preferred Deism's contention that **God was a watchmaker who did not interfere with the operation of the universe he wound up.** . . .”¹ So what are the consequences of this understanding of God?

Well, first and foremost, it teaches a lie about God. It teaches that God created everything, including you and me, and then just walked away and abandoned us—just sort of left us to fend for ourselves. And because of that—according to this erroneous view—God couldn't care less about you. But, what does the Bible tell us? More specifically, again take Psalm 139—what does David have to say in that particular psalm? He tells you that any such claim as that of Deism is not only wrong, but completely misrepresents the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Good News is that Jesus longs to have a very intimate, a very personal relationship with you. In this regard, Jesus says: “Look! I stand at the

door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends." Revelation 3:20 (NLT2) Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart every day and wants to be your best and closest friend. God doesn't create you and then turn and walk a million miles away. James, the brother of Jesus, speaks truly when he states that God wants you to draw near to Him so that He can draw near to you.² And this isn't just a "*sometimes*"—sort of thing, it's a permanent effort on God's part. Think about it. When did God first ***draw near to you?*** When did He first pay any attention to you? Was it when you were a maturing child who was just learning right from wrong? Was it once you finished school, or got married, or started raising a family? Was it any of those times that God first started to take an interest in you? No!—long before any of those things happened, you were the apple of God's eye. David, in verses 15 and 16 of Psalm 139, tells us that: ¹⁵ "You [God] watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb." ¹⁶ "You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in Your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed." (NLT2) In other words, Psalm 139 is saying that God first noticed you when you were just a gleam in your mother's eye. He knew you, cared about you, and loved you even before that embryo was knitting itself together in your mother's womb and on through your life as you matured into the present day you.

And the question is this: If God does see us at such an early stage, then how often does He take the time to do so from then on? In other words, how frequently does God think about us? Once a week?—once a month?—a year? Again, no! God has you on His mind ***constantly***. In verses 17 and 18, the David proclaims: ¹⁷ "How precious it is, Lord, to realize that you are thinking about me constantly!" ¹⁸ "I can't even count how many times a day your thoughts turn toward me. And when I waken in the morning, you are still thinking of me!" Psalm 139:17-18 (TLB) Isn't that a wonderful thought? For those who put their faith in God, He has got your back every moment of every day!

There is a story that's told by a man named Walt Handelsman who was a cartoonist for a newspaper down in New Orleans. And one of his favorite fellow-cartoonists that he had always admired the most was the Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist, Jeff MacNelly. Handelsman says: "***I once received a call from [a friend], complimenting me on a cartoon and saying that he and Jeff MacNelly had just been talking about how much they liked it. When I got off the phone I told my editor that was the highlight of my career—just knowing that Jeff MacNelly knew who I was.***" We should have that kind of response a thousand times over when we think about the God of all Creation—Who loves us and thinks about our well-being ***all the time!***³

And think about this as well: God not only has His eyes upon us constantly in a caring way, His care follows us wherever we go. Sometimes the circumstances of life take us to some pretty tough spots. But, it doesn't matter where we are—God is there with you, guiding you—if you will let Him. David lifts up praise to God acknowledging the reality of God's presence and His guidance: ³ You chart the path ahead of me and tell me where to stop and rest. Every moment you know where I am. ⁴ You know what I am going to say before I even say it. ⁵ You both precede and follow me and place your hand of blessing on my head. ⁶ This is too glorious, too wonderful to believe! ⁷ I can never be lost to your Spirit! I can never get away from my God! ⁸ If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, you are there. ⁹ If I ride the morning winds to the farthest oceans, ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me, your strength will support me. ¹¹ If I try to hide in the darkness, the night becomes light around me. ¹² For even darkness cannot hide from God; to you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are both alike to you. Psalm 139:3-12 (TLB)

Astronomers tell us that the highest physical place that they know of is a galaxy of stars 13.8 billion miles away in outer space. On the other hand, the deepest depth on this earth is in a trench 6.8 miles beneath the Pacific Ocean near the Island of Guam. That's what David is saying—if you could travel to a galaxy far, far away with its zero gravity, or to the deepest pit in the oceans to a place where the atmospheric pressure is 1,000-times what it is here on the surface, God's care, protection and guidance is still there. You can't escape God's love.⁴

Although they won't admit it, even atheists, deep down inside, know this to be true. Not too long ago, an article appeared in the Washington Post written by an atheist entitled, ***"I'm an atheist. So why can't I shake God?"*** The author stated that during her teenage years she'd turned away from her Christian faith because she didn't like the Bible's prohibitions against homosexual behavior or premarital sex. She thought that her new-found ***"faith"*** in atheism would bring her peace. And yet, despite her ***"conversion"*** to atheism, she remained conflicted and ill at ease. She wrote: ***"Somehow God has found a way to stick around in my mind."*** She tried to rationalize it, as atheists tend to do, by believing ***"God's lingering presence [could be attributed to] the inner-workings of the human mind."*** In frustration, she finally admitted, ***"If I could . . . banish this figure [of God] from my psyche, I would. [But,] I have no choice but to accept that I'm an atheist with a sense for God . . . , [but] why can't I shake God?"*** Finally, she came to the conclusion that: ***"[It] turns out it's pretty hard to believe in nothing when your psyche is wired for faith."***⁵

Well, with that latter point, she at least got one thing right. Human beings are wired for faith, so no one really has any excuse for not believing in God. But, unlike that atheist, we ***do believe*** in

Someone and in **something**. That **Someone** is God and that **something** is His Word. But, so many “**Ben’s and Tom’s**” in our society doubt the truth of God’s Word. But, the problem isn’t with the reality of these truths about God or these lessons that His Word teaches us. No, the problem lies in those who tend to think of God as only being concerned about **big, powerful and important things**, and mistakenly believing that they are too little, too weak, too insignificant for the Mighty God of the Universe to take any interest in them. And some pretty smart people have made that mistake.

Ben Franklin made that mistake. Thomas Jefferson made that mistake. But, don’t you make that mistake. So what can you do to avoid such a serious miscalculation of God’s love? One thing you can do is read and **think seriously** about God’s Word, because if you will do just that, then you can’t help but to notice something. The more you read it, something just jumps out at you, and this is it: **God favors the humble, the small, the weak, and the few**. And to show this, He expresses this truth in these very same terms throughout the entire Bible. For example, God tells Abraham that He will spare the wicked City of Sodom—not if Abraham could find a 1,000 or 500 hundred righteous people, but if he could show to God **only as few as ten**.⁶ It doesn’t take the gathering of thousands of people in some mega-church cathedral for the presence of Jesus Christ to abide with His people—Jesus assures us that He is present where **only two or three gather** in His name.⁷ When Jesus stood by the Temple and watched people give their offerings, He wasn’t impressed by the heaping handfuls of gold and silver thrown in the collection plate by the rich and wealthy, but by the widow’s **two very small copper coins** given with the charity of a very large heart.⁸ Jesus didn’t order a host of angels to come down and cater a meal for the crowd of 5,000—rather, He made due with just **five loaves of bread** and **two small fish** from the little lunch pail of a mere a boy.⁹ And while Jesus fed this vast crowd of people, He opted to share His most important meal—not with a multitude of people—but with His **twelve disciples** when He inaugurated the Lord’s Supper.¹⁰ Upon breaking the bonds of death and rising from the empty tomb, Jesus didn’t at first appear before an audience of thousands, but only to **one single forlorn woman named Mary Magdalene**¹¹, and then later to no more than **two dejected followers** on the road to Emmaus.¹² Jesus’ parables and illustrations tend to emphasize small and insignificant things like the **mustard seed**¹³, the **pearl of great price**¹⁴, the **leaven in the loaf of bread**¹⁵, the **one lost sheep**¹⁶ and the **one lost coin**.¹⁷ He assures us that **His eye is on the sparrow**, and that He has a constant inventory count of the very hairs on our heads.¹⁸ These are all powerful theological signs that Jesus is not so much concern with the mighty in size or numbers as He is in a humble heart with a mighty faith.¹⁹

You would have thought that Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson would have understood this since both of them were quite familiar with the content of the Bible. In fact, Jefferson had read the

Bible extensively in Greek, French and Latin—not to mention English.²⁰ Ben Franklin claimed that he had read the entire Bible by the time he was five years old.²¹ So, what was Ben’s and Tom’s mistake? Well, their biggest mistake was the same one made by so many people today: ***They lost their way in a fog created by their own supposed intelligence.*** How does that happen? Well, the most frequent way to become lost in life is to ignore what verses 3 and 10 of Psalm 139 tell us. They indicate that God charts our way and gives us guidance. A similar thought is provided in the 23rd Psalm: “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” Psalm 23:2 (ESV) But, it doesn’t do any good if God charts your course and then leads you beside those green pastures and still waters, but you still refuse to follow His guidance, and proceed on in your own errant path simply because you think that you know more than God. The only solution—the only way back—is through a renewed faith in Jesus Christ and to turn around from your old self-charted direction. Then, commit yourself to following the path that God has planned for you. And these are really great plans, for as the Lord proclaims through the prophet Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT2) But, someone might object, ***“I became of Christian, but my situation got worse!”*** So how do we answer that? Why is it that, even among Christians, many days that have been charted for us seem filled with set-backs, suffering and pain? Well, there are many examples of people in the Bible who went through the exact opposite—and yet things didn’t turn out so well for them either. Some of these biblical characters enjoyed a sustained length of time where they ***didn’t*** experience set-backs, or failures or pain or suffering. But, as they were experiencing such great times and success, they ended up straying from God’s charted path. Why?—because during these extended failure-free and pain-free periods, they too came to think that they didn’t need God anymore, and they truly lost their way. This happened to Gideon and Solomon toward the ends of their lives, and it even happened to David when he had his fling with Bathsheba—just to mention a few.

The truth is that sometimes the trials of life are the very things that bring us closer to God. James, the brother of Jesus tells us: “If your faith remains strong, even while surrounded by life’s difficulties, you will continue to experience the untold blessings of God! True happiness comes as you pass the test with faith, and receive the victorious crown of life promised to every lover of God!” James 1:12 (Passion New Testament) But, even through these times of trials, Jesus continues to be concerned for you, and wants to help you—as a true friend would want to do. And through Jesus, God has shown that He loves us too much to ever abandon us, no matter what bad times that you may be experiencing—no

matter what evil we've done. This is summed up by what Paul tells us in his letter to the Church in Rome: "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8 ESV

This past week Flo and I took a couple days off and went up to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to see the Sight & Sound production of the play, *Jesus*. It was a very good show and I would recommend it to anyone. But to me, one of the most amazing things about the show didn't have to do with the actors or singers or the amazing props and special effects. The most moving part occurred during the crucifixion scene, just before the cross upon which Jesus had been nailed was raised between the two thieves. While this was about to happen, it was quiet in the theater. Nobody made a sound in the audience except for one young man who was particularly moved by what he could see. I had happened to notice this young man earlier during intermission. He appeared to be in his early to mid-teens and I watched as his friends helped him find his way back to his seat as the intermission was ending up. You see, this young man was affected by *downs syndrome* and during the busy intermission with so many people milling around and talking, he had become confused and needed a little help from his friends to get seated again. And yet, he was evidently a highly functional young man who was deeply moved by what he could see as this graphic scene depicting Jesus' death on the cross was unfolding. While the rest of the audience watched in silence, this young man could apparently see far more than the rest of us—for as Jesus was dying, he was the only one who said right out loud in the most mournful and pitiful of voices that I have ever heard: "**Oh no! Oh no!—PLEASE NO!**" And what I found so uplifting was that this young man seemed to grasp the reality of what Christ had done for him, and for me and for you, more than anyone else in the entire theatre, as this scene played out with all of Christ's pain and suffering so realistically replayed on that stage. The young man seemed to have eyes to see the reality of what this scene was depicting with a clearness far beyond the rest of us. And his sad moans emphasized the terrible price that Jesus paid on the Cross with greater clarity than anything that the actors or producers were otherwise able to achieve.

And when I heard his mournful pleas, it reminded me, oddly enough, of both Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Ben and Tom with their immense I.Q.'s couldn't see something that was so very clear to that young man who was afflicted with *downs syndrome* watching the Jesus play. Ben and Tom had brains to think such lofty thoughts, but they possessed no eyes that could see.²² They could read God's Word over and over—even in different languages, but could never fully apprehend the truthfulness of the miracles presented in Scripture, nor could they come to surrender their lives to Christ as the Son of God and their Lord and Savior as they continued, from all indications, to the very end of their lives to

doubt the deity of Christ. And so they remained blind. Ironically, these two so-called “*brilliant*” Founding Father’s remained foolish and ignorant of the truth that God so freely gave to them.²³

And so when those “*Ben Franklin’s*” and “*Thomas Jefferson’s*” of our day strut about proclaiming that the miracles of Jesus, including His resurrection from the dead, are mere superstitious legends, then we need to remind them of something. We need to kindly and gently remind them of the what the Scriptures have to say about people like them—especially the one that says: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV) And if they doubt that Jesus cares about themselves or about you and me, remind them of what He told His disciples before He went to the Cross: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” John 15:13 (NLT2) And to those like “*Ben and Tom*”, maybe they need to be apprised of something else as well. Maybe they need to understand that their great wealth of worldly knowledge and the riches of their tremendous intellects do not provide the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. And hopefully, before it is too late, their eyes will see and their brains will catch up to the reality of knowing the great sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Because if they continue on the path that they are on, one day (that final day) Jesus is going to look them right in the face and deliver this final tragic news concerning the wealth of their worldly knowledge—He will tell them: “You say [to yourselves], ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”²⁴ And then, they’ll hear the saddest words of all, perhaps even sadder than those of that young man in the theater, when Jesus will say: “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”²⁵

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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¹ James Breig, “Deism: One Nation Under A Clockwork God?, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation,” www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Spring 2009.

² James 4:8 (NASB) Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

³ *USA Today*, (6/9/00); quoted in “To Illustrate,” *Leadership*, Vol. 21, no. 4, (Fall 2000), *Volume 5*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: “GOD’S PEOPLE”.

⁴ Mark Batterson, *If* (Baker Books, 2015), page 281.

⁵ Elizabeth King, *Washington Post* (2-4-16).

⁶ Genesis 18:32 (NIV) Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

⁷ Matthew 18:20 (NIV) For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

⁸ Luke 21:2-4 (NIV) ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ “I tell you the truth,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.

⁹ Matthew 14:19-20 (NIV) ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

¹⁰ Matthew 26:26 (NIV) While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

¹¹ John 20:16 (ESV) Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

¹² Luke 24:13-16, 30-31 (NIV) ¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. . . ³⁰ As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

¹³ Matthew 17:20 (NLT2) "You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."

¹⁴ Matthew 13:45-46 (NLT2) ⁴⁵ "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls.

⁴⁶ When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!

¹⁵ Matthew 13:33 (NLT2) Jesus also used this illustration: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough."

¹⁶ Matthew 18:12-13 (NLT2) ¹² "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost? ¹³ And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn't wander away!

¹⁷ Luke 15:8-10 (NLT2) ⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

¹⁸ Matthew 10:29-31 (NIV) ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

¹⁹ Stan Friedman. *Leadership*, Vol. 20, no. 3, *Today's Best Illustrations, Volume 5*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "GOD".

²⁰ Philip Kopper, "Jefferson on the Bible," www.americanheritage.com (2011).

²¹ Thomas S. Kidd, "The Complicated Religious Life of Ben Franklin," www.baylor.edu/alumni/magazine (Fall 2017).

²² Isaiah 44:18 (NIV) They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. Matthew 6:23 (NIV) But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! ³ 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 (NIV) And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

²³ Matthew 13:13-14 (NIV) ¹³ "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'"

²⁴ Revelation 3:17 (NIV).

²⁵ Matthew 7:23 (NIV).