

# GOD'S WAYS AND GOD'S THOUGHTS

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*"He made known His ways unto Moses..." (Psalm 103:7) "How weighty also are Thy thoughts unto me, O God!" (Psalm 139:17)*

Teaching English to hundreds of foreign students has taught me some important lessons about God's ways and God's thoughts. I taught English as a foreign language for seven years. My pupils were young and old, rich and poor, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, immigrants, tourists, and college students. A typical class sometimes consisted of pupils from as many as a dozen different countries and cultures. The students' differences did not matter in the classroom, though. What mattered was the one thing that united all the students: a desire to learn the English language.

Anyone who has ever learned a foreign language well enough to actually use it knows that it requires time, determination, and intense mental concentration during the study of the target language. Some foreign students come to America with the mistaken notion that they will learn English by osmosis. They believe that being in an English-speaking environment will automatically guarantee success. Students with this attitude put very little effort into their language learning. In class they mouth the words without thinking of the meaning. When the teacher speaks, they hear the teacher's voice but they do not really listen. Sometimes they fall asleep in class. They do very little homework and rarely use English outside the classroom. The students who believe in this "language-learning-by-osmosis" theory pick up a few English words and phrases and manage to understand a little spoken English. But in real-life situations that require the actual use of English, they simply cannot function. They have absolutely no degree of fluency, and it is only with extreme difficulty that they can utter a statement that is coherent

to a native speaker of English.

When I think of language learning, I see some interesting parallels to the way we learn spiritual truths. When we come together with God's people in a church or synagogue, we are like students coming to learn a foreign language, because the worship of God requires the learning of His ways and thoughts, which are like a foreign language to man: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith Yahweh. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8f).

Learning God's ways and thoughts, like learning a foreign language, requires time, determination, and intense mental concentration. Yet many people seem to believe in "religion by osmosis." They think that just being in church or synagogue will automatically guarantee all the understanding and learning of God's ways that they need. Like some of the students I taught, these worshippers mouth the words of the hymns and prayer books without thinking very deeply about the meaning of the words. They let their minds wander as they passively listen to the sermon, much like pupils who gaze out the window during the teacher's lecture. Some fall asleep during services. They do no homework - no private prayer or Bible study. And like foreign students who rarely use English outside the classroom, these people rarely speak of spiritual things outside the walls of the church or synagogue.

The funny thing about language learners who believe the osmosis theory is this: Even though Americans are unable to understand their speech, these students can often understand each other. On several occasions a pupil in my classroom would ask me a question which was totally unintelligible to me. After asking him to repeat the question four or five times, I would

hear another student say to me, in a condescending tone of voice, "He said..." and then proceed to explain the first student's question. Every time this happened, I knew what the students were thinking: "I understood Hiroki's question the first time he asked it. Why couldn't the teacher understand him? Does the teacher have a problem understanding spoken English?"

Of course the reason such students understand one another's English is because they all say it the same wrong way. As one of my pupils, a Russian Jew, told me, "In Russia, I thought I knew English, because I spoke English only with other Russians. Now in America, I speak with Americans and I find out I don't know English."

In the words of the Apostle Paul, "they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves among themselves" (2 Cor. 10:12). Making this mistake in language learning is relatively harmless. When it comes to learning spiritual truths, however, we dare not assume something is right simply because the majority of our religious peers say so. Spiritual truth is not determined by the opinion of the majority. God's ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts. His ways and His thoughts can be learned, but not without intense study, sincere prayer, and deep thought about the issues. It takes time.

The textbook for learning God's ways and thoughts is the Bible. The teacher is the Holy Spirit, whom Yeshua said "shall teach you all things" and "will guide you into all truth" (John 14:26; 16:13). We need to let God's Spirit teach us God's ways and thoughts from the Scriptures, and stop "measuring ourselves by ourselves and comparing ourselves among ourselves." Then we will be on the road to learning the difference between God's truth and man's opinions. Q