

WHO IS THE LORD?

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

For my own Part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that “nothing happens” when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.”

C.S. LEWIS “ON THE READING OF OLD BOOKS” FROM ATHANASIUS ON THE INCARNATION

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

SCHEDULE

Week 1 - Knowing God: How do we talk about God?

Week 2 - Attributes of God 1: Characteristics that make God utterly unique

Week 3 - Attributes of God 2: Characteristics of God that he shares with us

Goal: What we are exploring, is learning to love God as he is, not merely for what he has done. We seek to know and love him through how he has revealed himself to us in his words and works.

“There is none like you, O Lord; You are great, and your name is great in might.”

Jeremiah 10:6

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”

“Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured. For, because all of us are inclined by nature to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us.”

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1:1:1 & 1:1:2

BUT HOW DO WE DO THIS?
HOW DO WE SEE GOD FOR WHO HE IS, NOT AS WE
WISH HIM TO BE?

HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?

TWO BASIC CATEGORIES FOR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

General Revelation - Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-23

How God reveals himself *indirectly* through creation. His *fingerprints* can be found indirectly through the natural order of things, in the providence of history, and in human conscience (Erickson). We may know God as Creator but not as Savior.

Special Revelation - Gen. 12:1-4; Ex. 3:1; Jn. 1:18; 14:5-14; Acts 9:3-6; Heb. 1:1-3

God's self-revelation in human history directly through his words and deeds so that we may know him and find life in him. Jesus Christ has revealed all we need to know for life and salvation, because Christ has revealed God and thus we know him not only as Creator but also as our Savior and Lord.

Scripture is a *primary* means of knowing God but it is *not the only* source of knowledge. Tradition, reason, and experience play a vital role, but do not function authoritatively.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH THESE VERSES?

Psalm 18:31 (NIV)

For who is God besides the Lord? And **who is the Rock except our God?**

Exodus 3:2 (NIV)

There **the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.** Moses saw that though **the bush was on fire it did not burn up.**

1 John 4:8 (NIV)

Whoever does not love does not know God, because **God is love.**

Romans 11:36 (NIV)

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

1 Samuel 15:11, 29 (NIV)

"I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions."

He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind."

Exodus 24:11 (NIV)

But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

WHO IS THE LORD?

Is God literally a rock (Ps. 18)? But how can he also be a shepherd (Ps. 23:1) ? Or Spirit (Jn. 4)?

Is God male? Does God have a hand? A Back (Ex. 33-34)?

Is God love, all love? What is the relationship of love to God? Is it the same as human love, different from human love? Why? How?

Furthermore, what do we *really* mean when we say God is omnipotent, unchanging, all-knowing, infinite, eternal, glorious, etc?

Q: What other questions have you asked or been asked about God that are difficult, humorous, confusing, etc.?

Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and “leading” the proud “to be old without their knowledge” (Job 9:5, Old Latin version); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking: you love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you “repent” (Gen. 6:6) without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find, yet have never lost. Never in any need, you rejoice in your gains (Luke 15:7); you are never avaricious, yet you require interest (Matt. 25:27). We pay you more than you require so as to make you our debtor, yet who has anything which does not belong to you? (1 Cor. 4:7). You pay off debts, though owing nothing to anyone; you cancel debts and incur no loss. But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say.

ST AUGUSTINE, CONFESSIONS, 1:4, AS QUOTED IN BARRETT, MATTHEW. NONE GREATER (PP. 5-6). BAKER PUBLISHING GROUP.

GOD MUST REVEAL HIMSELF

THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. — 1 Timothy 6:15-16

We are talking about a God to whom no one compares (Is. 40; 46:5,9), to whom nothing greater can be conceived (Anselm), who is infinite, eternal, and unapproachable.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. – Matthew 11:27

Thomas Aquinas says, “The infinite cannot be contained in the finite. God exists infinitely and nothing finite can grasp him infinitely... It is impossible for a created mind to understand God infinitely; it is impossible, therefore, to comprehend him.”

KNOWING GOD IS A GIFT OF GRACE

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We cannot know this God in his essence, as he truly is, *unless* he makes himself known to us.

Trying to approach God is like trying to approach the sun, we will burn up. He is so bright that merely attempting to gaze at him will blind us. But we can know the sun by its effects, how it illuminates other things. (Ex. 3:5; 33:20)

God making himself known to us is an act of grace. Being infinite, incomprehensible, he accommodates himself to us. We can know him *truly* but not *exhaustively*.

It is like new parents using “baby talk” to communicate to their child. This is what God has done for us through scripture. God uses metaphors, anthropomorphisms, and acts to reveal himself.

THEOLOGY = "GOD TALK"

Divine Accommodation or "Condescension"

We cannot speak *univocally*, that is in exactly the same way as God knows himself.

Example: God cannot be a rock univocally or literally. This will lead us to rationalism, equating our thoughts about God with God's thoughts about himself exactly, that we can know God through human reason alone. It will make scripture words about God sound ridiculous and we may become prideful and arrogant in our understanding of God, which is idolatry.

We cannot speak *equivocally*, that is in a completely different way, or an ambiguous way as God knows himself.

Example: The word ball can mean a dance or an object of sport. God is a rock equivocally means it does not correspond to something meaningful about God as he is. An equivocation would view theology or even the Bible itself as man-made terms to speak of God that do not correspond to God in a meaningful way. This can lead to subjectivism or mystical meaninglessness, that we cannot know truly through his revealed word.*

But God accommodates us in speaking to us in human language and by acting in history to reveal himself to us.

“GOD TALK” IS ANALOGICAL

SCRIPTURE AND DIVINE ACCOMMODATION

We speak of God analogically, meaning God’s goodness is similar to our sense of goodness and dissimilar to sense of goodness.

Example: God is a rock is analogical. It does not mean he is hard like a rock or a composite of materials pressed together overtime through geological processes. It means he is reliable, sure, trustworthy, and strong.

Implication - God’s goodness is not merely quantitatively better than ours. It is qualitatively better, being of a different kind.*

That is to say, we cannot use our understanding of goodness and project it onto God. We have to humbly surrender to what God tells us about his own goodness.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

— Is. 55:8-9

WHAT ARE THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD?

God's Essence and Attributes

God's Attributes are his Essence. God does not possess love, God *IS* love.

God does not have a son. God is Father, Son, and Spirit. God's attributes are not a composite mix of different qualities but *he is* them infinitely and eternally.

Hence, God is pure act, with no potentiality. (Aquinas)

"so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." — Isaiah 55:11

Incommunicable Attributes - Attributes proper to God alone in a negative sense (unchanging)

Communicable Attributes - Attributes God shares with us *analogically* in a positive sense (all-knowing)

WHAT ARE THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Incommunicable Attributes, Part I next week

Can be used of God alone and we tend to speak of them *negatively*, as what He is not.

Simplicity, Aseity, Immutability, Impassibility, Invisible, Infinite, Incomprehensible, and Eternal

Communicable Attributes, Part II in two weeks

Analogously shared by his creatures and we tend to speak of them positively

Omniscient, Omnipotent, Sovereign, Goodness, Love, Mercy, Holiness, Righteousness, Justice, Jealousy, and Wrath

I ask you for the moment to stop your ears to those who tell you there is no road to knowledge about God, and come a little way with me and see. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and anyone who is actually following a recognized road will not be too worried if he hears nontravelers telling each other that no such road exists.

J.I. PACKER, KNOWING GOD

BUT HOW DO WE MAKE SENSE OF WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS?

EVERYONE IS A THEOLOGIAN, MEANING EVERYONE HAS THOUGHT ABOUT GOD AND THE BIBLE.

It is likely, for each of us, scripture, community/tradition, reason, and experience all played a role in us coming to know and grow in Christ.

But we tend to think some of these are objective (scripture) and some subjective (experience). The objective versus subjective dichotomy is not very helpful with God for he is not a thing, but a person. We may be skeptical on anything that seems subjective or are skeptical about any claims to objectivity. We all have a “tacit knowledge,” an intuitive sense, knowledge we bring to the table that may or may not be conducive to faith in God.

Instead, knowledge is a personal act engaging all the various ways of knowing by faith. **The dynamic or dichotomy is between the knower and the thing or person being known.**

R: Consider this quote from T.F. Torrance

A child by the age of five has learned, we are told, an astonishing amount about the physical world to which he or she has become spontaneously and intuitively adapted — far more than the child could ever understand if he or she turned out to be the most brilliant of physicists. Likewise, I believe, we learn far more about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into whose name we are baptized, within the family and fellowship and living tradition of the Church than we can ever say: it becomes built into the structures of our souls and minds, and we know much more than we can ever tell. This is what happens evangelically and personally to us within the membership of the Church, the Body of Christ in the world, when through the transforming power of his Word and Spirit our minds become inwardly and intuitively adapted to know the living God. We become spiritually and intellectually implicated in patterns of divine order that are beyond our powers fully to articulate in explicit terms, but we are aware of being apprehended by divine Truth as it is in Jesus which steadily presses for increasing realization in our understanding, articulation, and confession of faith. That is how Christian history gains its initial impetus, and is then reinforced through constant reading and study of the Bible within the community of the faithful.

T.F. TORRANCE, THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD: ONE BEING THREE PERSONS

HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?

FOUR BASIC FACTORS IN OUR EFFORTS TO DO THEOLOGY

Scripture - *sola scriptura* means it governs all other forms of knowledge of God. It *does not mean* it is the only means of knowing anything at all about God or life. But Scripture serves what God has said and done (cf. the Trinity)

Tradition/Church Community - the church universal, throughout Christian history, that serves as the best interpreters of God's self-revelation. The creeds, confessions, or doctrinal statements can guide us to what scripture is about.

Reason - modernism elevated this above all others. What we need is Christian rationality as opposed to secular rationalism. Sadly, Christians are too frequently guilty of anti-intellectualism, being suspicious of sophisticated reasoning.

Experience - postmodernism (or properly hyper-modernism) elevated experience above all others. Experience needs to be interpreted, in community, in conjunction with the "great cloud of witnesses," and through the lens of scripture.

Faith becomes of a means of knowing God through each of these in a dynamic way, through our "tacit knowledge."

Q: Reflecting on your journey of faith, how does this help you identify ways you have done theology in your own life?