

“Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.” — Psalm 145:3 (NASB)

“He . . . is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen.” — 1 Timothy 6:15a–16 (NASB)

Before beginning an in-depth study of the character of God, it is important to identify and define several foundational terms that will be used throughout the study:

- **“Theology proper”**: the study of God’s existence and character. Whereas the term “theology” in general refers to the study of God, theologians use “theology proper” to indicate they are narrowing their study from all kinds of things related to God to focus on the character of God Himself.
- **“Attribute”**: an essential, inherent quality. When used to refer to God, “attributes” refer to characteristics of God that define Him as He has revealed Himself to be.
- **“Perfection”**: the absence of inadequacy or blemish. When used to refer to God, “perfections” are synonymous with “attributes,” but emphasize more the fact that there is an absolute fullness and beauty in all that God is.

To set the course for the study of God’s perfections, we must begin with the quality of God that influences our study of all the rest. This quality is that of *divine incomprehensibility*.

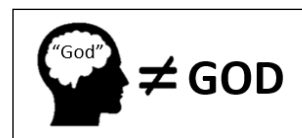
## I. Definition of “Divine Incomprehensibility”

### A. What *incomprehensibility* means.

Simply stated, the *incomprehensibility of God* is that quality of God which makes Him incapable of being fully understood or defined by anyone other than Himself.

God is wholly different from us and everything else in creation. This difference is not just one of *degree* (He is like humans or angels, but better), but one of *essence*. He is a being of His own kind—an existence which He alone defines and which He shares with none other. He is ultimate; we are derived. He is infinite; we are limited. He is absolute; we are dependent. He is the archetype; we are, at best, a reflection.

Consequently, no mental apprehension of God by a creature is able to reflect all that God is. This is the great **Creator-creature distinction**. For all thinking creatures, there is and always will be an immeasurable difference between what can be conceived in the mind and who God is in reality. Indeed, as A. W. Tozer stated, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (*Knowledge of the Holy*, 1). But even when what comes into our minds about God is good and lofty and true, it will never fully reflect who God is in all His majesty.



That which cannot be conceived—what separates man’s knowing of God and God’s knowing of Himself—is what is properly called **mystery**. This kind of knowledge is impenetrable, inscrutable, unsearchable. And even though we can acknowledge that this mystery exists, we nonetheless cannot know what it is about.

### B. What *incomprehensibility* does not mean.

First, to affirm that God is incomprehensible **does not mean that He is irrational**—that His character defies or contradicts reason, or that what He knows and communicates about Himself is absurd. No, He is perfect.

Second, to affirm that God is incomprehensible **does not mean that He is *unknowable***—that He cannot even be partly known by His creatures. No, to *know* someone does not require absolute comprehension.

Third, that God is incomprehensible **does not mean that He cannot be known *truly***—that because the knowledge that we have about God is limited, it will be misleading. No, as the next session will present (Lesson 3, “Knowability”), God in His considerateness has revealed to us knowledge about Himself that can be known in a way He intends for us to know. We can have a mental apprehension of God that, although only partial, is still faithful and pleasing to Him.

Finally, that God is *incomprehensible* **does not mean that creatures are not *responsible* for their thoughts of Him**—that we will not be held to account for our beliefs about Him. No, the knowledge He has revealed to us in both creation and in His word is clear and will serve as the standards by which our beliefs will be judged.

“We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder if you do not comprehend? For if you comprehend, it is not God you comprehend. Let it be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To attain some slight knowledge of God is a great blessing; to comprehend him, however, is totally impossible.”

—Augustine, *Sermon on John 1*

## II. Biblical Testimony to God’s Incomprehensibility

That God is comprehensible only to Himself and incomprehensible to us as creatures is a truth that is frequently emphasized in Scripture. Consider these examples:

- Exodus 33:12–23; 34:5–8
- Job 11:7–9; 36:26
- Psalm 40:5a; 139:6; 145:3; 147:5
- Isaiah 40:12–26; 55:8–9
- Romans 11:33–36
- 1 Timothy 6:15–16

In response to the overwhelming testimony of Scripture, Bavinck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:36, 47) states,

Neither in creation nor in re-creation does God reveal himself exhaustively. He cannot fully impart himself to creatures. For that to be possible they themselves would have to be divine. There is, therefore, no exhaustive knowledge of God. . . . Scripture and the church emphatically assert the unsearchable majesty and sovereign highness of God. There is no knowledge of God as he is in himself. We are human and he is the Lord our God. There is no name that fully expresses his being, no definition that captures him. He infinitely transcends our picture of him, our ideas of him, our language concerning him. He is not comparable to any creature. . . . He can be apprehended; he cannot be comprehended.

## III. What Incomprehensibility Demands from Us

The awareness that God is incomprehensible necessarily leads to several responses:

### A. We must recognize our creaturely limits.

One of the most immediate responses to the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is the recognition that ***God is great, and we are not***. That cannot be for us just a pious slogan. It must leave us silent, hurrying to bow in the dust before a God whose greatness and majesty abruptly overloads our best abilities to think.

The testimony of Job is helpful here. After being afflicted by a myriad of painful trials, Job attempted to put God in the dock to question Him about justice. In response, God answered Job “out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1) and “out of the storm” (40:6)—pictures that in themselves highlight God’s ineffable character. From the whirlwind God never provides Job with *any* answers to his questions, for Job could never understand them anyway. Instead, God gives Job a picture of His incomprehensibility:

- God's response to Job: **Job 38:1–3; 40:6–9**
- Job's response to God: **Job 40:3–5; 42:3–6**

The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility prevents us from **the ever-present danger of treating God with familiarity**. In difficult times, we—like Job—easily become cynical and bitter, acting as if we have the right to assess God on His job of being “God.” Conversely, during times of blessing, we become confident in ourselves and our grasp of reality, treating God as a “buddy” and thinking of Him as in it for us. It is precisely here where we need the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility. **Nothing cultivates true humility in a man like this doctrine.** And the one who has been humbled by this reality is the one with whom God is pleased:

- **Isaiah 57:15**

“Man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty.” —Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.3

## B. We must not go beyond what God has revealed.

- **Deuteronomy 29:29** — “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”

Moses draws an important distinction related to **kinds of knowledge**. On the one hand, there is the **knowledge that we can possess**—knowledge that “belongs to us” (v. 29b). This is the knowledge which God has graciously “revealed.” It is knowledge that can be studied, believed, obeyed, and even communicated by us as creatures to each other. (This is what theologians sometimes call “ectypal knowledge”—knowledge that is a copy in some way of an original.)

On the other hand, there is **knowledge that only God possess**—knowledge that “belongs to the LORD our God” (v. 29a). This knowledge is made up of “secret things”—mysterious things that are unsearchable, inscrutable, and incomprehensible to us. (This is what theologians call “archetypal knowledge”—knowledge that is original and from which all other kinds are derived.)

The problem with man is that he is so often dissatisfied in the first kind of knowledge (knowledge knowable to the creature) and is intent instead on seeking the second kind of knowledge (knowledge knowable only to God). Not only is achieving this second kind of knowledge impossible, it is an affront to God. So offensive is it that in the Mosaic Law God prescribed the harshest of penalties for those who departed from God's revelation and sought to access the “secret things” through mediums and spiritists (e.g., Lev 20:6, 27).

Consequently, we must always **beware of speculation**. If the enemy of our souls cannot extinguish our desire to know God, he will certainly tempt us to look for that knowledge in the wrong places. Wandering into areas not set forth in God's word is an affront to God. Forming mental pictures or definitions of God apart from a direct connection to His word is idolatry. As Calvin states bluntly, “it is not lawful for mortal men to intrude upon the secrets of God” (*Institutes*, 3.21.3).

## C. We must use language carefully.

In our effort to explain God we can easily make improper comparisons and draw unworthy conclusions. To help others grow in their knowledge of God, or even to benefit ourselves, we search for analogies and pictures that can help define “God.” On the one hand, this is acceptable and even necessary, for all of God's revelation of Himself to us is what we call **“analogous”—language suited to our limited abilities of comprehension**. On the other hand, when we seek to simplify things too far, or utilize word pictures that wander from Scripture, or approach discussions about God casually, or sing or pray without the right kind of terminology, we can easily say things by our language that are contrary to who God is in reality.

The seriousness with which God takes our pictures or words of Him is communicated in the second and third Commandments:

- Images: **Exodus 20:4** – “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.”
- Words: **Exodus 20:7** – “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”
- Images and words: **Ecclesiastes 5:1–3**

Indeed, **images and words are dangerous things**. Beware of making assertions and forming mental perceptions that cannot be tied tightly to the images and words that God Himself has given for us.

#### D. We must be led to worship.

We would fail to understand the quality of divine incomprehensibility if we did not recognize its impact on the biblical writers who testified to it. Wherever we see this perfection of God emphasized in Scripture, we see the response of profound worship.

- **Exodus 34:5–8** – “. . . Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship.”
- **Psalms 145:3** – “Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.”
- **Psalms 147:5** – “Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.”
- **Romans 11:33–36** – “. . . To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”
- **1 Timothy 6:16b** – “. . . To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen.”

This perfection of God rightly moves us to worship. After all, what kind of God would be worthy of our greatest adoration if He could fit within our feeble minds? To the contrary, God is worthy of our highest praise precisely because we cannot comprehend Him.

Ultimately, this perfection of God moves us to complete astonishment when we consider that this infinitely majestic and incomprehensible God stooped down to our level to reveal Himself in our most basic need and in our most basic experience.

- **John 1:18** – “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.”

#### For Further Study

**Memorize:** Psalm 145:3; 1 Timothy 6:15b–16

**Pray:** Confess treating God with familiarity, speculation, and careless language; acknowledge that in Himself He is too wonderful and lofty for you to comprehend; thank Him for how He has revealed Himself in Scripture and ultimately in Christ Jesus; ask Him to increase your awe of Him in response.

**Sing:** “How Great Thou Art” (*Hymns of Grace* #5); “Our Great God” (*Hymns of Grace* #42)

**Discuss:**

- 1) In your own words, define “divine incomprehensibility.”
- 2) Remember again A. W. Tozer’s statement: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” In light of God’s incomprehensibility, how can what comes into your mind when you think about God be idolatrous?
- 3) Since God is “wholly other,” we do need analogies to help us understand who He is. What determines whether these analogies are idolatrous and blasphemous or faithful and God-honoring?
- 4) How has the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility cultivated humility in your life?
- 5) Why is it that the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility leads us to a greater faithfulness to Scripture?
- 6) Describe how this perfection of God has practically deepened your worship of Him.

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** September 21, 7pm, Small Group Fellowship