

“The heavens are telling of the glory of God.” —Psalm 19:1a (NASB)

“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.” —Deuteronomy 29:29

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

Our previous study focused on that perfection of God which must be recognized before all others: *incomprehensibility*. 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. Not even our best thoughts about God can ever come close to reflecting who God is in His majesty. There is a great intellectual (epistemological) distance between Him and us—between what God knows about Himself, and what we can possibly know about Him.

This reality is intensely humbling. In fact, by itself, the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility naturally leads to hopeless conclusions:

- 1) **Agnosticism – nothing is known or can be known about the existence or nature of God.** The agnostic says, “God may be out there, but I just cannot know, and I’m not to blame.” The famous Greek philosopher Protagoras (c. 490 BC–c. 420 BC) expressed it this way: “With regard to the gods I do not have the ability to know whether they exist or not. For there are many things that prevent a person from knowing; for example, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.” The 19th-century American agnostic Robert Ingersoll concurred, asking sarcastically: “Is it possible for the human mind to conceive of an infinite personality? Can it imagine a beginningless being, infinitely powerful and intelligent?”
- 2) **Mysticism – although God cannot be comprehended with the mind, He can be apprehended by other means.** Advocating a “doctrineless Christianity” that questions the ability to know anything truly, Brian McLaren states, “Doubt need not be the death of faith. It can be, instead, the birth of a new kind of faith, a faith beyond beliefs, a faith that expresses itself in love, a deepening and expanding faith that can save your life and save the world” (*Faith after Doubt*, 212). McLaren and countless other mystics believe God can be *experienced*, but this happens *apart from* knowledge.

Indeed, God’s incomprehensibility leaves us in darkness, with no option but to state foolish kinds of things like Protagoras and McLaren. But we do have hope. Why? Because of God’s *knowability*. As John Calvin well stated, “The situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him” (*Institutes*, 2.12.1).

Foundational to this hope is the reality of a thing called “**revelation**.” As John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue explain, revelation is **God’s act of “making known what is unknown, unveiling what is veiled”** (*Biblical Doctrine*, 936). God’s knowledge of Himself is secret and unknowable to us unless He chooses to reveal that knowledge to us. *And He has!* Consequently, to the extent that God reveals Himself, we can know God.

REVELATION:

God’s act of disclosing His knowledge to His creatures, granting them the opportunity to share in that knowledge

In other words, this knowledge is possible as an expression of divine condescension, of divine considerateness of our state, of divine grace to the unworthy. Knowing God is never a result of human achievement; it is always the result of God’s achievement. As J. I. Packer rightly stated, “Revelation does not mean man finding God, but God finding man, God sharing His secrets with us, God showing us Himself” (*God Has Spoken*, 47).

Thus, while it is the doctrine divine incomprehensibility that leads us to declare, “Surely I am more stupid than any man” (see Prov 30:2–4), it is the doctrine of divine knowability that leads us to *hope*—and accountability.

I. Definition of “Divine Knowability”

Simply stated, *the knowability of God testifies to God’s intrinsic disposition and His unhindered ability to make specific knowledge of Himself knowable to His creation.*

Expounding this definition further, three emphases can be made about God’s knowability:

- **God is not *compelled* to reveal knowledge about Himself.** He does so freely, motivated by His own good pleasure. It is an act of His own free will; He is not under compulsion. His acts of making Himself knowable are never forced by the intellectual pursuits of men. Man does not ascend to knock on heaven’s door. God—on His own accord—descends to make Himself known to man.
- **God is not *incapable* of revealing knowledge about Himself.** He does so effectively, facing no frustration in the delivery. He knows His creatures perfectly, including what they are capable of knowing. In His acts of revealing Himself to them, He never comes up short in His effort to cross the great Creator-creature divide. And when that revelation is not understood by His creatures, the fault is never God’s fault. The creature is always culpable for his ignorance, since God reveals Himself clearly.
- **God is not *compromised* in revealing knowledge about Himself.** He reveals what is true, even though that truth accommodated to our level. Certainly, God cannot share His knowledge of Himself as He shares it within the triune Godhead. The contrast is immeasurable. But when God stoops to speak in our language, nothing of the truthfulness of His revelation is lost. Like a father changing his tone and language to interact with his newborn, God does so to us, all the while never compromising Himself or His message.

“Man cannot give a definition of God in the proper sense of the word, but only a partial description. . . . At the same time, it is maintained that man can obtain a knowledge of God that is perfectly adequate for the realization of the divine purpose in the life of man. However, true knowledge of God can be acquired only from the divine self-revelation, and only by the man who accepts this with childlike faith.”

—Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 30

II. Biblical Testimony to God’s Knowability

Despite its strong emphasis on divine incomprehensibility, Scripture resounds with testimony that God—in His considerateness of man’s state—has made Himself *knowable*. He has told man His own *name* and has defined His own *attributes*:

- **Exodus 3:13–14** – “Then Moses said to God, ‘Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you.” Now they may say to me, “What is His name?” What shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”
- The phrase “and you shall know that I am the LORD” occurs with unusual frequency in the book of Exodus, repeated over a dozen times (Exod 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:11; 9:16; 10:2; 14:4, 18; 16:12; 18:11; 29:45-46; 31:13).
- **Exodus 34:5–7**
- **Psalm 76:1**
- **Proverbs 30:2–6** describes both divine incomprehensibility (vv. 2–4) and divine revelation (vv. 5–6).
- **Isaiah 55:8–11** describes both divine incomprehensibility (vv. 8–9) and divine revelation (vv. 10–11).
- **John 17:3**
- **1 Corinthians 2:11–13** also describes divine incomprehensibility (v. 11), as well as divine revelation (vv. 12–13).

God’s self-revelation takes three forms, each with its own distinct nature and purpose:

A. General Revelation

General revelation refers to God's self-disclosure through His *creation*. He has left a self-identifying fingerprint on everything He has made, particularly on man himself:

- Psalm 19:1–6
- Psalm 111:2
- Ecclesiastes 3:11
- Acts 14:17
- Romans 1:20
- Romans 2:14–15

This knowledge of God is called “general” because it is knowledge that is universal. There is nowhere where one can go where it is not present. It is called “revelation” because it is not a knowledge *discovered* or *attained* by man through effort or achievement. It is instead *proclaimed* or *declared* to him; it is an *evident* knowledge (Rom 1:19).

This knowledge also has a certain message. It reveals God's *glory* (Ps 19:1), His *goodness* (Acts 14:17), His *power* (Rom 1:20), and His *holiness* (Rom 2:14–15). It serves to elicit *praise* and *thanksgiving* (Rom 1:21), and then to render man *guilty* (Rom 1:20) for his refusal to acknowledge this message.

B. Special Revelation

Special revelation refers to God's unique acts of self-disclosure through His *word* and through His *acts of redemption*.

- Exodus 6:7
- Deuteronomy 29:29
- Deuteronomy 30:11–14
- Psalm 19:7–9
- Isaiah 55:10–11
- Romans 10:17
- 1 Corinthians 2:12–13

This knowledge of God is called “special” because it is not everywhere present. It is limited particularly to the words which God has spoken through His servants the prophets—words which have been recorded on the pages of Scripture. It is through this “special” revelation that God provides the knowledge of the way of salvation. As B. B. Warfield states, “The one [general revelation] is addressed generally to all intelligent creatures, and is therefore accessible to all men; the other [special revelation] is addressed to a special class of sinners, to whom God would make known His salvation. The one has in view to meet and supply the natural need of creatures for knowledge of their God; the other to rescue broken and deformed sinners from their sin and its consequences” (*Revelation and Inspiration*, 6).

C. Jesus Christ

The ultimate revelation of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

- John 1:1, 18
- John 14:8–10
- Hebrews 1:1–2
- 1 John 5:20

GOD'S THREE FORMS OF SELF-REVELATION:

1. General Revelation
2. Special Revelation
3. The person of Jesus Christ

Certainly, the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ still comes to us from the pages of holy Scripture (“special revelation”); it is not accessible to us apart from the apostolic witness. But in a way that supersedes all other forms of revelation, the person of Jesus Christ reveals the character of God.

III. What Knowability Demands from Us

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

- A. **We must recognize our accountability.** Ignorance is not an option. That God has willed to make Himself known through creation, Scripture, and Jesus Christ leaves all men “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). Consequently, the response of agnosticism or mysticism are indefensible. Building an altar “to an unknown God” (Acts 17:22–23) is a spiritual crime. God is there and He is not silent.
- B. **We must utilize the means.** As we’ve already seen, the knowledge of God must be a matter of ultimacy. There can be nothing more important and determinative in all of life (Jer 9:23–24). Consequently, if we really believe this, then we will make every effort to utilize the means God has used to communicate knowledge about Himself, and to use those means for their proper purposes.
- C. **We must revere the Revealer.** God did not have to speak—but He *did*, and He did so at our level, in a way that we could understand. As John Calvin stated, “He condescends to our ignorance; and, therefore, when God prattles to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style, let us know that this is done on account of the love which he bears to us” (John Calvin, commentary on John 1:12). This divine considerateness should elicit our greatest adoration and reverence.
- D. **We must embrace the certainty.** Indeed, we must reject any notion of sufficiency and certainty in ourselves (Prov. 3:5–6; Rom 12:16). However, because God has willed to be known, we cannot treat His revelation with skepticism, indecision, or criticism. We must yield to the divine testimony and embrace it as the sure and steady anchor of life. Because God has spoken, we can—and must—make assertions.
- E. **We must speak with courage.** That God wills to be known is the ultimate basis for gospel proclamation. As Geerhardus Vos wrote, “God is not a philanthropist who likes to do good in secret without its becoming known; His delight is in seeing Himself and His perfections mirrored in the consciousness of the religious subject” (*Biblical Theology*, 235). Our Great Commission is to see the knowledge of the one true God “mirrored” in the consciousness of others, for their eternal good, and God’s ultimate glory.

For Further Study

Memorize: John 1:18; 1 John 5:20

Pray: Thank God for how He has revealed Himself in creation, in His words and works of redemption, and particularly in Jesus Christ. Adore Jesus Christ as the One who has so marvelously “explained” God to you. Ask for courage to communicate God’s revelation to others with fresh courage and confidence.

Sing: “O Great God” (*Hymns of Grace* #35); “Speak, O Lord” (*Hymns of Grace* #368)

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God’s “knowability.”
- 2) In what three ways has God revealed knowledge about Himself to us? Describe each one.
- 3) Compare Psalm 19:1–6 (general revelation) and 19:7–11 (special revelation). What differences are apparent from David’s description of these two types of revelation?
- 4) In light of the fact that God *can* be known, what are you doing to acquire a deeper, truer knowledge of Him? Describe the efforts you are making, and what needs to be improved.
- 5) Our world scorns the concept of objective truth, especially with respect to God. But why are we to have *certainty* in our knowledge of Him? Why is certainty in God’s word not the same thing as pride?
- 6) Describe how this perfection of God has practically deepened your worship of Him.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: October 12, 7pm, “Aseity” (no meeting on October 5)