

We Believe in God

LESSON
ONE

What We Know About God Discussion Forum



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We Believe in God

Lesson One: What We Know About God

Discussion Forum

With

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Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Guy Waters
Dr. Michael D. Williams
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

Question 1:

What can we know about God from the Bible's portrayal of him as King?

Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe

The Bible often speaks of God as King, and it's... We know what a human king is like, and the Bible speaks of God, then, as a king who rules. A good example of this occurs in Exodus 15. This is the Song of Moses. To get the setting, God has just delivered Israel out of Egypt. They were slaves under Pharaoh and he has set them free from Egypt, and Moses sings this song dedicated to Yahweh, that because:

[Yahweh] has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea (Exodus 15:1, ESV).

And then at the end of the song, verse 18, it says,

[Yahweh] will reign, forever and ever (Exodus 15:18, ESV).

So the idea is that Yahweh has established that he is in charge, not Pharaoh; that he is the king, not Pharaoh; that Yahweh is ruling over the nations and over what happens and especially over his people, Israel, not Pharaoh. And so, Yahweh kind of asserts himself and asserts his rule, and in this case his rule is good news. It means salvation from bondage in Egypt. So, the rule of God in the Bible doesn't just mean that he's in charge, but very often it means that he rules to the benefit of his people... as opposed to some evil oppressor being in charge and ruling, so that Yahweh has won the victory and shown himself to be the King... He is a good king. He's a righteous king. He's a gracious king. So that's good news.

Dr. R. Todd Mangum

Well, there are a number of portrayals of God in an authoritative position throughout the Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, but New and Old. In an authoritative position, God can be portrayed as a parent, God can be portrayed as a shepherd. One of the most common, particularly in the Old Testament, is God being portrayed as a king. Now, in contemporary understanding, that can be confusing because a number of kings that we know of or think of are either really pompous or are some sort of despot. But in the ancient world, the common form of government would have been of a monarch, of a ruler with complete and absolute authority. God fits that. God fits that better than any human monarch because he really is in control, he really does have the authority to make commands and demands and issue decrees that we are — as his subjects, being his creatures — are obliged to obey. His commands are good, his commands benefit the subjects that are under that obligation, and thus it's appropriate to refer to God and portray God as a benevolent king.

Dr. Dorian Coover-Cox

The idea that the Lord is King shows up throughout the Bible as a way of helping us to understand who he is. One of the problems that I think Americans have is that we have very little experience with human kings. Meanwhile, other places in the world have experience with kings, and they're bad ones. So, it's easy to have a mistaken notion about the Lord being King. In the book of Exodus, we get a strong idea of God's kingship, and it helps us to understand what's going on in that book. When Moses comes to talk to Pharaoh, he comes and speaks to Pharaoh in the way an ancient Near Eastern messenger would who was coming from a great king. At that time in Egypt, and in the ancient Near East as a whole... people knew that there were five great kings as a, basically, a title — lots of little kings but five big ones at the time. Egypt, the people of Egypt, particularly Pharaoh, were convinced that, really, there was only one king. It was Pharaoh. And he thought of all the rest of the kings as chiefs. But Moses came and talked to him as the representative of his superior, as the King who is superior to Pharaoh. Pharaoh wants no part of that. But a big part of what's going on in the book is the demonstration that the Lord is the King who is Pharaoh's superior and to whom Pharaoh needs to give allegiance. Oh, and by the way, the Israelites need to give allegiance, and the nations need to give allegiance, and you and I need to give allegiance because he's the King. Years ago, a friend of mine who grew up in Belgium mentioned that the King of Belgium had died, and she was sad about that. She's an ordinary citizen, not part of the royal family, but she was sad that the king had died and she said, "He was a good king." I thought, I've never had that experience. He was someone whose voice she heard during World War II over the radio when Belgium had been overrun by the Nazis. He pictured for her, in a sense, the nation, what the best of the nation was about. Well, to know the Lord as the great King is to know, "Oh, this is what we're supposed to be like. This is the one who rules over our lesser kings and chiefs and judges." And we need that.

Question 2:

How should Christians today respond to the kingship of God?

Dr. Richard Lints

We use the language of king as a reference to God to refer to the way in which he rules over all that is — over his creation, over his people, over the church. Now, making sense of that in modern society is difficult. We realize how significant that language is in its ancient context, but in the modern world, the language of king and kingdom, though we recognize those terms, doesn't resonate in our own political experience; we live in democracies. And so, mindful that as we read the Scriptures and it uses the language of God as King, it's pulling this term from a context quite different from ours. On the other hand, we do still bump into authorities that tell us what to do regardless of our own convictions, regardless of our own opinions. The police car that pulls us aside after we've gone over the speed limit, nonetheless, tells us what to do, and we listen. There are authorities in our lives that impose limits. A king imposes ultimate limits, an ultimate king especially. And so, we're affirming in God's kingly office that God rules with an imposed order. Gracious, kind, merciful, wise, all of the above, yes, but at the end of the day, God is King.

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

I love particularly in the book of Daniel you see this interaction between Nebuchadnezzar, who at that time was the most powerful individual in the known world, made humble, and for many years, until finally he realized who actually is the King. And in that moment, his sanity is restored to him. I think that concept, however, is kind of hard for moderns to grapple with. In our cultures, the move to democracy is seen as progressive and the right way, and kingship and kingdoms seem so antiquated and so the wrong way to do things. The reality is that democracy is only good because man is actually wicked, and we need all these checks and balances. God as a king is a really good thing. We want a king. We want God as our king. I remember once hearing a quote — it was wonderful — it says, "I'm not against slavery because men are not fit to be slaves. I'm against slavery because men are not fit to be masters." That's absolutely right, because the heart of man is wicked. So there is one righteous One, and that is God, and he is the King, and that's something that we can all take comfort in.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

God is King in that he rules and reigns over everything in his creation. He protects as a king, he defends as a king, he provides as a king. His rule and reign, though, is everywhere. It's not limited to certain geographical boundaries. It's everywhere because he's the Creator of everything. And so that means we're his subjects. We submit to him as King. We depend on him for our protection and our provisions as King as well. And so, we're part of his kingdom as his people, and he rules over his kingdom as our King.

Question 3:

What are the main ways we can come to know God?

Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia

When we come to the issue of knowing God, we don't have to go too far because God's knowledge is in the footprint of creation. Scientists are still trying to wonder the way human body is put together, the way the nature is put together, the universe is put together... But it's not just limited to that. God gave us a specific revelation in the form of the Bible, and right from Genesis 1:1 all the way to Revelation, he explained to us how we can know him; not only know him, how we can have personal relationship with him. And there's an inner consciousness that God has created, that if you want to not believe in God, you have to fight to come up with the ways that there is no God. But even a child, you know, a six-month-old kid does something wrong and you can see that on their face that, "I've done something wrong." Why does he feel that way? Because there is the imprint of God upon our conscience about right and wrong... Just look around, you'll see the evidence of God. But there's more than that. It is special revelation in the written form in the Bible.

Dr. William Edgar

Some of the main ways we can come to know God are by what theologians call "general revelation" — this means revelation outside of Scripture and miracles. General revelation includes the world around us. It speaks of God; it articulates God, as the Psalms tells us. It also can mean special providences, history, culture, all kinds of evidence from the world outside. It includes internal revelation. We know God because we're constituted to know him. We are made after his image, and part of that image that we bear is dependent on a God-consciousness. So we know him from sure internal evidence. It can take the form of moral leanings, conscience. It can take the form of knowing that God is there. Romans 1 is extremely clear that we know God, not just we know something is out there somewhere, but we really know God himself in his attributes, his power and divinity. And then the other way we know Scripture is through special revelation, which includes things like miracles, prophecies, and the inscripturation of God's revelation in a form that's been handed down over the centuries and in a form which we can have in translation. We call it the Bible. The center of the Bible is Jesus Christ, so he would be the central way we can come to know God. General and special revelation complement one another; they're dependent on one another. So it's not that you start with one and end with the other. They both have authority and sufficiency and clarity and necessity, they both function appropriately for their purpose. And so, the knowledge of God is inescapable, fortunately for us, but that also means we are responsible for what we know, and we can't come up to the judgment, the day of accountability and say, "God, I really couldn't find you anywhere." The story goes that Bertrand Russell, the great atheist, he was asked, what if you go on the other side and you appear for God? What are you going to say to him? He said, "Oh, I'll say there wasn't enough evidence." I guess, I don't think that ever happened. There's plenty of evidence even for skeptics and

atheists. Sometimes the evidence cuts across their claims, but that knowledge of God is inescapable.

Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

The only way we could come to know God is if God takes the initiative to disclose himself, to reveal himself, to make himself known to us. And the Scripture teaches that he has done so in three main ways. He has revealed himself in his word that God speaks, and though sometimes, God reveals himself in his word that is mediated through humans — that the Scriptures are the words of God mediated through human spokespersons — God reveals himself in his Word. Scriptures teach that God reveals himself in his world. God reveals himself, the psalmist says in Psalm 19, in the heavens and the earth. Then Paul says in Romans 1 that creation reveals God's eternal power and divine nature. So, God reveals himself in the world. And then God reveals himself primarily, ultimately, finally in the Word who has come into the world. And what John does in John 1 is take us back to Genesis 1, that the Word of creation is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. So, we know who God is in three, by means of three main forms of revelation: his word, his world, and the Word who has come into the world. And the final Word is the most important word — that we know who God is because he's revealed in his Son.

Dr. Matt Friedeman

I love the Hebrew word for “know.” It means to experience or to encounter. And so, when we come to know the Lord, to experience him and to encounter, it's interesting the various ways that we might be able to do that. One of the ways is, first off, God, in his prevenient grace is coming to us and preparing our lives for him. Prevenient grace simply means “the grace that goes before”; he's preparing all hearts to receive the Lord. Then of course you get down to something like general revelation. I mean, the mountains bespeak of his glory, the stars, the rivers, the grass and the flowers. And then of course you've got specific revelation, special revelation that comes to us; we can know God through the Bible. We can know God through a conversational life with him, otherwise known as prayer. We can know God as someone disciples us and pours their life into us. We can know God as we worship corporately together. So there are various ways we can experience him, to encounter him, and that's what God wants. He wants us to *know* him.

Question 4:

What does creation tell us about God?

Dr. Simon Vibert

The Bible teaches that God's creation tells us something about the very nature of God. For example, this verse in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” And Paul says here what is reflected in the rest of the Scriptures, places like Psalm 19 for

example, which indicate that God is to be seen in his creation. So, as we look at the created world around us, there's a sense in which the Creator has left his fingerprints all over his creation so that as we look at creation we can see something of the identify of God, a God who is creative, a God who is glorious, and a God who continues to care for his created world.

Dr. Joel C. Hunter

It says in Romans ... that from the beginning of time, from the beginning of the creation that God's invisible attributes, divine nature, so on and so forth, had been clearly seen through that which has been made. And so, when we look at creation, we can notice two things. First of all, we can notice the tremendous artistry of God, just the beauty of his creation, and the intricacy of his operation. We know that there is a God who is sovereign, who is in control, but who doesn't just create things so that they will work. He creates things in order to engage ultimately the appreciative part of his creation, people. But he also does this in such a way that he communicates his methods of operation, that is, we sense in his creation... Kepler said one time when he had made a discovery, "I am thinking God's thoughts after him." There's this sense in which as God communicates himself through general revelation, that is, through the book of nature, it makes out specific revelation, that is, our Bible, the Scriptures, make all kinds of sense because you can see the same principles that he used in the specific revelation, our Bible, in the general revelation. And you can teach about who God is through his creation. And so, both theologian and scientist can come together in praise out of what they have seen and what they've experienced.

Dr. Michael D. Williams

God wants to reveal himself. He's not hiding. I sometimes use the analogy here of fingerprints. We human beings, we can't help but leave our fingerprints all over the place; everything we make says something about us. This chair just didn't happen. It says something about the values, the expertise of its maker. And that's true of God too. Augustine called it the "divine *vestigia*," the prints of his fingers. Of course, that line comes straight from Psalm 8. But the prints of his fingers, now here, we're learning that it's not just an accident that God's fingerprints are all over the place. It's intentional. Let me put it this way: God signs his work. And *Westminster* put this in a wonderful way. If I can quote from *Westminster* here, this is Chapter 7, paragraph 1:

The distance between God and the creature is so great that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part.

In other words, God himself crosses the boundary between his majesty and our creatureliness. Calvin spoke of it as an accommodation, or famously as a nurse lisping to an infant... It's an act ... of God's benevolence that he wants to speak himself into his creation and speak himself to his creatures so that we can have relationship with him. Now, that right there comes with all kinds of benefits, that he has revealed himself in the order of creation. Psalm 19 so wonderfully puts it, "day

after day,” that he reveals himself. It’s going on all the time. And it’s saying something about what God values. After human beings rebelled and brought sin into God’s world, it didn’t stop the fact that he wanted to reveal himself. It didn’t stop the fact that he values his creation. It didn’t stop the fact that he values human beings.

Question 5:

What are the benefits of general revelation for theology, and in particular, for the doctrine of God?

Dr. Bruce L. Fields

The benefits of general revelation have to be determined by, or at least are shaped by, what you understand general revelation to be. I understand it as that which we learn about God from the observance of the created realm, from creation in general — human beings understood as being part of that creation — and that there is an involvement of the intellect, the mind, to engage surroundings, and to form some conclusions. I believe that Romans 1 is particularly helpful in this realm to alert us to the fact that God’s divinity, God’s power, can be perceived in all of creation. I believe that that can be accentuated as you contemplate what human beings are and what human beings are capable of doing as created beings of God. And general revelation, not everyone would agree with this, but I do think that it kind of sets the tone or sets certain parameters of understanding for the eventual engagement, the hope for eventual engagement, with special revelation. Now, let me just say that it is general revelation, that I believe that another benefit of it is, it is the realm that we engage the nonbeliever. Believers and nonbelievers share this creation, and with all that happens in creation in general, it can provide platforms, frameworks, by which we can investigate why people understand God or why they understand deity the way that they do and have hopeful opportunity to then share biblical, Christian understanding. But it does provide this common ground with a nonbeliever that I see as a benefit.

Dr. Jeffery Moore

Anybody can tell when they look around them that there is a God, and without that basic thing happening inside of a person — specific revelation, you know, when God speaks to us through his holy Word — would be handicapped, I think. If you didn’t have a sense that God existed at all because you see him in creation, then would you look for him? Would you wonder about him? What, you know, would you want to learn more about him?

Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

For the last couple of centuries theologians have distinguished between two forms of divine revelation. Both forms come from God. They are the revelation, the unveiling disclosure of God in general revelation and special revelation: general revelation including things like creation, which are available to everyone, special revelation which are limited in time in space... I believe Romans 1 teaches us that what is revealed in creation is God’s eternal power and his divine nature, and so that any

understanding of God that fails to include and consider what we know about God from what he has made, is a theology of God that is incomplete and perhaps even inaccurate, because if God's revelation in creation, in nature, is plain, clear — Paul says it is understood and rejected — we know more than there is a powerful Creator, we know that there is an *eternal*, powerful Creator, and only the God who is, possesses the attribute of eternity.

Question 6: **What is natural theology?**

Dr. Steven C. Roy

Natural theology is a study of God and truths that we learn about God from his general revelation. Christians have always felt that our knowledge of God must start with God, with his revelation. God being infinite, we being finite, we can ever reach up to him ourselves... God must take the initiative, through his revelation. And Scripture indicates that God reveals himself in two broad ways: general revelation and special revelation. The general revelation involves God's revelation of himself through the created order, the created universe, which Psalm 19 tells us, "declares the glory of God," through human persons who are created in the image of God, and so to study them either individually or collectively. Special revelation, on the other hand, comes through his word, in Scripture, and supremely through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Natural theology is a knowledge of God that is gained by general revelation alone. It's gained through the use of human reason analyzing what God has revealed through that created universe and through human persons made in the image of God. The key thing to understand about natural theology is that it doesn't use any of the special revelation through Scripture at all. It's knowledge of God gained through general revelation alone.

Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Natural theology, I would say, is the formulation, the building of a system of theology with full disclosure of an understanding of God, and man, humanity — these kinds of categories — that is largely built upon, though, the building blocks of general revelation. That is to say that there is an involvement of projection. Human beings are constructed a certain way. We love; we have these feelings, these capacities. And what oftentimes happens in the realm of natural theology is the projection, or the ideal level of human capacity that is then projected into God. All right, so that it is possible to construct a view of God in terms of who he is and what he is like ... but it is largely built upon, first, the building blocks from general revelation, but then admittedly things like analogy of being, projection into this formulation of God, and then subsequent areas of theology can be deduced from this initial understanding of who God is and what God is like.

Question 7: Can human beings be saved by general revelation alone?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Psalm 19 says that, "the heavens declare the glory of God." Indeed, everything in creation tells us something of who God is. Its reason for its existence is to display the glory of God, to show who he is, different things about him. And so Romans 1 tells us that from general revelation, that revelation of God available to all people at all times, can tell us vital and important things about God, like his power, his wisdom, his greatness. But it can never tell us that he loves us. It can never tell us that he sent his Son to die for us. For that, we need him to speak to us directly and personally. And that's what he does in his Word. That's why the power of general revelation is wonderful. But without the specific revelation God's given us in Scripture, we wouldn't ever be able to have a relationship with him that we do in Christ, that we desperately need.

Dr. Michael D. Williams

Despite all the positive things we can say about general revelation ... there is no redemptive word within it. Certainly the Shorter Catechism begins by asking the question, "What's the chief end of man?" That word "end" is so wonderful — *telos* — it could be both purpose and destiny. The chief end of man is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But under the reality of our sinfulness, our fallenness, something else is necessary. And hear the *Confession of Faith*, how it begins in Chapter 1, paragraph 1 is this:

Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God as to leave men unexcusable; yet [they're] not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and ... His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore, it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners to reveal Himself.

As fallen creatures we need — and I'm going to use Calvin's imagery here — we need to be returned to a knowledge of God as our Creator, and we need to be brought to a knowledge of God as our Redeemer.

Dr. Simon Vibert

Christian theologians talk about general revelation as well as special revelation, and when we speak about general revelation, it helps us have a common language with nonbelievers about the personhood and the doctrine of God. So, the assumption is that everybody has imprinted upon them a conscience, a sense, an awareness of God in which, without the help of special revelation, it won't go very far, but it enables us to tap into that, as it were, in talking to nonbelievers. Similarly, with the created world around, in the early chapters of Romans, Paul talks about the fact that God has been eloquent through the general revelation that comes through the created world. Now,

we need more, but it enables us to have a first conversation and have expectations that God is at work, even through the nonbelieving world, because the whole of creation is still his.

Question 8:

How important are the Scriptures in the life of the believer?

Dr. Guy Waters

2 Timothy 3 offers us one of the most important statements about the Scripture in Scripture. Paul begins by reminding Timothy — he’s not telling Timothy this for the first time, but he’s reminding him — that the Scripture is “God-breathed.” It’s the only place in the New Testament where that word shows up. And it’s telling us that every word of the Bible proceeds from the mouth of God, and it is the Word of God from start to finish and down to the very words. But then he goes on to explain what the Word of God does in the life of God’s people, and he says the Word of God teaches us, it’s given to us for doctrine, it brings correction into our life, and it trains us. So, it tells us the sins that we’re to avoid, it shows us the commands that God has given us to keep, and all of this, of course, points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one in whom we have life. He is the one who teaches us. He is the one who, as our prophet, guides us in the way of righteousness, and he does that in the words of Scripture.

Dr. Joseph D. Fantin

Second Timothy 3:16 is a great verse for us to remember what Scripture is. Paul, reflecting on his Scriptures, probably the Old Testament and by application I think we can assume the New Testament would affirm today, but first of all, he suggested the Scriptures are God-breathed, they are inspired, they are coming from God. And we see this even in Galatians that he talks about learning God’s revelation, about specific aspects of his theology. So, this is an important part of his understanding of Scripture. It’s not just for knowledge, though. It’s for us to be trained. It’s for us to be equipped. It’s for us to be reproved. It’s for us to, essentially, be made better people. So, the Christian really does need to stay in the Scriptures, and that’s what they’re there for, one of the reasons they’re there for.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

First and foremost, the Scripture is God-breathed, and being breathed out by God, they are beneficial, profitable for us, the children of God, for the purpose of: number 1, sanctification; number 2, in addition to sanctification, also for equipping us for every good work in the world. And so we look to the Scriptures, and as we look to the Scriptures, not only are we being sanctified, not only are we being matured spiritually, God is also equipping us and preparing us to be his representatives in the world, to be salt, to be light, and in that regard, impacting the world around us.

Question 9:

Why does Scripture sometimes describe God as mysterious?

Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

The Bible actually talks about mystery in a couple of different important ways. It's important to clarify the differences because sometimes in English, when we think about the word "mystery," we think about a certain thing that's strange, or unknowable, or something we can't understand. And in the Bible, when it talks about mystery — it talks about the mystery of God, the mystery of the gospel — one of the ways that it talks about that is that it was something that was hidden at one time but that it became known at another time. So, a mystery becomes something that wasn't fully comprehended or understood. There were elements that were revealed, but it wasn't until later on in the plan and purpose of God that that mystery was finally unveiled and we began to see the fruition of that idea that God had, for example in the Old Testament, began to explain the mystery of his plan of salvation. But in the New Testament, it becomes an unveiling of that plan through Christ... The second kind of mystery, which most people in English-speaking countries think of, is that kind of idea that God is not as easily known, or he is somehow hard to understand, that, "God is a mystery to me." And so, that second notion is that there is still an element of uncertainty or unknowability in God and that the concept of mystery encapsulates the idea that God has revealed things, he has purposes and plans, he has let us know who he is in his character, but part of that character and that infinity that God possesses within himself is a mystery to us. Our finite minds can't fully grasp that notion of all that God is and all that God has in store.

Dr. Lynn Cohick

Scripture will talk about God as mysterious, and I think part of that is that God is holy. And humans now, in our existence now, after the Fall, are not. And so there's a mystery of holiness and purity that is beyond our experiences as we exist now, and so there's a mystery there. I think also, there's a mystery in terms of God's mercy. God doesn't act as humans do. God is not out for, as Shakespeare says, "a pound of flesh." He doesn't have our selfish instincts. And that can come off as mysterious. Then I would say also, there's another way that at least the apostle Paul uses the word "mysterious." Paul will talk about God's salvation plan as a mystery now revealed. In Ephesians 3, for example, he'll talk about this mystery that has been made known now — this mystery that Gentiles are included with Jews in Christ to make the church. And Paul says this is mysterious and that the powers and principalities look on this in surprise at God's amazing wisdom, at God's amazing love. So those are some of the ways that Scripture talks about God as mysterious.

Question 10:

What do theologians mean when they say that God is incomprehensible?

Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.

The incomprehensibility of God pertains to the truth that we're not going to grasp everything there is to grasp about God. Even when we're with him in heaven, we're still not going to really grasp him. If we could grasp him, we ourselves would be God. So there are certain elements both in our existence now and our future eternal existence where we're just not going to get our brains around. That's a reality we can't beat. Now in the early church, there was a theological development, we call this "apophatic theology." Apophatic theology focuses on what we can't really even say about God — God's unknowability. Today it seems in many theological circles we want to focus on the things that we *can* say about God, which is great. But in modernity it seems that the drive is to solve all the mysteries, to rule out all the incongruities, and to have everything ironed out and stated. But the Bible never promises that. Sometimes we take our enlightenment modern lens and say, "You know, unless we solve every riddle, this doesn't make sense." We hold God up to a bar of rationalism. That's what the enlightenment teaches us to do. That's not what Scripture teaches us to do.

Dr. Gary H. Burge

When theologians say that God is incomprehensible what they're trying to describe is the ineffable mystery who God is. God is not a creature. God is not a part of this creation at all. God comes from a life and reality that is beyond our imagining. So in John 1, John's gospel says clearly that no one has ever seen God. In fact, if you were to see God in his fullness you would not be able to survive. You would die. He's too great, too overwhelming, too majestic, too powerful. So therefore when God presents himself to us as creatures, he has to present himself in a creaturely form. Moses meets God up on mount Sinai; he meets God as a burning bush, because Moses would have never been able to see God in the fullness of his full identity. So likewise with us, we cannot understand God in who he is completely, but God has bridged that gap of knowledge by presenting himself to us in his Son Jesus Christ. Now, here's the key. We then can know God through Jesus Christ and that means that as we know the Son, we will be able to know the Father. So God has really helped us understand who he is by reducing himself, condensing himself, as in Philippians 2, "emptying himself, taking on the form of a servant," whom we know to be Jesus Christ.

Dr. Gareth Cockerill

The incomprehensibility of God is ... an important part of our worship. When I come to worship God, the Lord, the Triune God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and provided for our salvation through Christ's death on the cross, through his incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension and session at God's right hand, who sits there now ready to minister to me and to all of his people the grace that we need, the forgiveness and cleansing and grace that we need to live. When I

worship him, I worship him with adoration for all that I know about him, for his great love and his redemption. But I also worship with a sense of awe, because I realize that this God is so much more than what I understand... C.S. Lewis has a good statement somewhere, though, that the prayer before all prayers is that it be the real "I" who prays, and it be the real "Thou" to whom I pray. And so, it's important, if we're going to pray to the real God and not to some God that we've made up in our own minds, some limited idea of God — which really turns out to be an idol even if it is not shaped in an image — that we remember that he has revealed himself and that revelation is wonderful, it's our salvation, we are accountable before it, and we are amazed at his love for us. And yet, he is far, far more than that. I think sometimes some of the hard passages in the Bible help us to remember that, some of the things that people were squeamish about in the Old Testament. You know, you just need to remember that we can't put God in our box. And when we say, "define the love of God," it's not defined by my idea of love, it's defined by God himself in Scripture, in what he has done, and how he has revealed himself... He is knowable in that he has revealed himself. If he hadn't have revealed himself we wouldn't know anything. But he is knowable in that he has revealed himself, but he is incomprehensible in his fullness, is very, very important in our understanding of God and in our worship of him and obedience to him.

Question 11:

Does the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility mean that we can't really know God?

Dr. Steven C. Roy

When we speak of God being incomprehensible or the incomprehensibility of God, we mean that we, as humans, can never know God fully or exhaustively understand him. Now that truth must be balanced out against the complementary truth, also found in Scripture, that God is knowable. In other words, by God's grace to us and through his revelation, we are able to know true realities about God and, far more importantly, to know God personally. So, the knowability and the incomprehensibility of God are both realities that we must hold together. And that's very important.

When you think about the incomprehensibility of God and you say, "Why would this be true?" three reasons come to mind. First of all, God is infinite and we as humans are finite. So how in the world could finite human brains ever hope to fully comprehend an infinite God? Secondly, God is holy, and we fallen humans are sinful, and our sin separates us from God. And so this gap, already huge, because of the Creator-creature gap — infinite Creator, finite creature — now is intensified with a moral gap. And thirdly and finally, there are some things that God chooses not to reveal to us. The book of Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy 29:29, distinguishes, says that "the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever." There are some things that God chooses not to reveal to us and so we will not, we never will know them. For those three reasons, God always will remain incomprehensible to us. While we can know God truly, we will never

know God fully or exhaustively... I want to suggest that it's really important for us as Christians to hold to both sides of these complementary truths of his incomprehensibility and his knowability. God's incomprehensibility guards us against an over-rationalism that seeks to, sort of, arrogantly assert that we can understand everything about God and we can wrap it all up in a nice little box. The knowability of God guards us against an utter agnosticism that says that because God is so vast we can't know anything about him. Surely there is a way in the middle that holds together both truths of God's incomprehensibility and his knowability.

Rev. Dan Hendley

Theologians may mean different things when they say God is incomprehensible. Some would suggest by that term that we really can't know anything about God. But Christians can't say that; those who believe God has revealed himself in the Scripture would never say that. But we still believe that God is incomprehensible in this sense, that we can never wrap our minds around who God is, we can never fully grasp who God is. Any God that can speak and throw galaxies into existence is certainly going to be a creature beyond my puny capacity to figure out completely. But what the Bible tells us is that God can be known, *truly* known, but he's never going to be known completely. And that's what theologians typically mean when they speak of God's incomprehensibility.

Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

Incomprehensibility in God is an interesting idea because we often think of revelation as having God revealed himself and made himself known in various and a variety of ways. But when we really think about the nature of who God is, we have to understand that we only know, even from general and special revelation, a tiny fraction, portion, of his actual nature, because of his infinitude. The fact that we are finite and God is infinite makes it an incomprehensible adventure to think about the idea that God, the God of the universe, the God of all creation — and the size of the universe as we understand it increasingly through astronomy and the study of galaxies and stars and planets, and the immensity of creation — we realize, wow, we know very, very little about how infinite, how majestic, how magnificent God is. And so, when we talk about incomprehensibility, we don't mean that we don't know anything about God or that we can't understand him, but we are referring to the fact that God is so much greater than our finite and small understanding and comprehension of him, that it really helps us appreciate the fact that he would stoop to our level, reveal something of himself, but also that we will spend an eternity together with him, plumbing the depths and we will never get to the bottom of who he is... So, it's important as we talk about incomprehensibility to make sure that we're not talking about that God can't be known, but we are talking about that we have true knowledge of God, but we do not have *comprehensive* knowledge of God, and that the knowledge we have is right and good and understandable, but that God is so far beyond our categories and abilities of understanding that he is, in fact, in that regard, incomprehensible.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

Well, when theologians say that God is incomprehensible, it doesn't mean that we know nothing about God, but it does mean we don't know everything about God. There are things that God has revealed about who God is, and there are things that he hasn't yet revealed, things that are going to be beyond us. So, his thoughts are above our thoughts, his ways are above our ways, the prophet Isaiah tells us, so that's a reminder that there are things that God has let us know about himself, and there are things that he hasn't. And the incomprehensibility is a recognition there are things we don't know about God, that does not need to alarm us. There are things we don't know about ourselves or about other people, but clearly God, on some vastly grander scale, there are things about him we just don't know.

Rev. Clete Hux

When theologians talk about God being incomprehensible, they're not talking about God being illogical or irrational. The incomprehensibility, actually the burden of that, is placed on us. We cannot fully comprehend God in his fullness. We know in part; we see in part; so even if we were not fallen in our original natures, we as creatures still couldn't really fully comprehend all that God is.

Question 12:

What is the doctrine of the Trinity, and how should we distinguish between the persons of God and his essence?

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

When we talk about the doctrine of the Trinity, the classic language is we have one God in three persons — one substance in three persons. Well, what do we mean by that? Well, we're saying there is only one God. So, this is a very important thing that Christians want to affirm. This is the great revelation we get throughout the Scriptures. There's only one God, not three. One. One God. But what we find is this one God reveals who God is in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons; not three people but the three persons of the one God. So, we have the Father who sends the Son, the Son who after his death and resurrection goes to the Father, and they send the Spirit. So, we can think about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It doesn't mean they only suddenly began in the creation. No, we can go back before the creation; God was already Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, one God in three persons. But what we see in the world, in the creation, that God interacts with the world as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus taught us to call God Father. Jesus taught us about the Holy Spirit. So, perhaps the most direct way unto understanding this is there's only one God in three persons. And perhaps, the other thing that's helpful to me is if you go to a place like Matthew 10 and you hear Jesus talking about whoever receives one of these little ones, one of my disciples, in my name, they receive me, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me. So, what we're seeing there, the disciple who has the Spirit of God in them, is not just receiving that disciple, they receive the Son of God. And when they receive the Son of God, they receive the

Father. That's clearly not three separate people. It's one God in three persons. I know we're getting complicated there. I'm going to back off, but what we're trying to say is it's one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Dr. Jeffery Moore

In Christian theology we talk about God as triune — the Trinity, one in three and three in one — because that's how the Bible talks about him. We don't try to fit God into this Trinity-shaped box or whatever it is. You know, so many folks that don't understand God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who don't like the idea of Trinity, fuss about the fact the Bible doesn't use that term and so forth. But the term is irrelevant. The point is to talk about God in ways that are consistent with the way the Bible talks about God... And so we come up with terms like "essence" and "person." When I say "we," I'm talking about Christians a long time ago who took words that existed in Greek and Latin, and now we use the words person and essence, for example, to talk about the Trinity. God's essence is one; his person is three. To try to understand how those all fit together, we just go back to the Bible and find that the Bible talks about God as Father, and so we talk about this person of Father. It talks about God as Son. It talks about God as Holy Spirit... As long as we're constantly checking against what the Bible actually says, we'll stay in the right parameters and hopefully have some useful dialogue that helps us think about God's great love for us and how he wants to relate to us.

Rev. Clete Hux

In the doctrine of the Trinity, distinguishing between the person *and* the essence is we talk about being one, we're referring to his essence or nature or substance. But when we talk about God being three, we're talking about not tri-theism or polytheism, we're talking about three persons that all share in that one essence or nature that is God.

Question 13:

What is an attribute of God?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

An attribute of God is simply an aspect of his character. It's something we know to be true about him. It's important, though, to think about attributes personally and wholistically. As soon as we think about attributes, it's plural, and we want to make a list of them, which is appropriate and helpful, but we would never want to reduce God to a list of anything, because he's a person and we need to think of him as wholistically as we can. I wouldn't want to be reduced to a mere list of things, although those can be helpful to get to know me. And so, to describe an aspect of God's character is a necessary and helpful thing to do, but only to get us to a wholistic, personal understanding of God as we can possibly get.

Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia

Attribute of God you could say, in a sense, is the quality, the essence, or one way to display his character, his being. And the mistake often time people have made, or other religions, or other systems, that you take an attribute and you start worshipping that attribute. For example, in Greek mythology, in Roman mythology, even in today in Hinduism you have that. For example, the Bible says that God is love. So now you make the "God of love," so you start worshipping the attribute rather than the God whose attributes you are talking about. So, attributes are like love, mercy, his faithfulness, his attribute to forgive, attribute of commitment, those are the essence of a person that you define the person of God, and those different characters, those different ways to understand him to know him is through his attributes.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

An attribute of God is a characteristic of God. It describes what God is like, it gives you some of the features that we recognize in God — God is love, God is good. It tells us the characteristics of God, like a character description of Almighty God.

Dr. Joel C. Hunter

An attribute of God is like an attribute of anyone. It's a way you know them because they have certain characteristics that are part of who they are. And with God, there are communicable attributes, that is, mercy and love and kindness, that as you get closer to him, those attributes become a part of who you are. There are also non-communicable attributes ... that we'll never have. But the important thing about an attribute is that you understand that person better so that you can form a more accurate relationship with them. In Christianity, it's all about the relationship. It's not just about understanding. It's understanding *so that* you can form a more close and more accurate, and therefore, a more intimate relationship with them.

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