

We Believe in God

Lesson Guide

LESSON
ONE

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT
GOD



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

Theology proper: the study of God himself

II. Revelation & Mysteries (1:49)

To understand who God is, we need to explore what God has disclosed about himself and what he's hidden.

A. Divine Revelation (2:17)

1. Basic Concept (2:55)

Divine Revelation: God's self-disclosure, always given in human terms and most fully given in Christ.

- God has always revealed himself in human terms

Anthropomorphic Revelation: God has disclosed himself in human form, or in ways that human beings can understand

Types of anthropomorphic revelation in Scripture:

- Human Characteristics – Use of human qualities (eyes, ears, emotions, etc.) as metaphorical descriptions of God.

- Social Structures – Descriptions of God as the supreme King of creation, in terms similar to descriptions of human emperors.

- Visible Appearances – "theophanies," such as God's appearing as smoke, fire, or a heavenly cloud of glory (Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17).

- Abstract Qualities – Descriptions of God using abstractions such as "just," "holy," and "powerful."

- God has revealed himself most fully in Christ.

Jesus is God's supreme revelation of himself to the human race (Colossians 1:15).

2. Types (10:15)

Two types of God's revelation:

- **General Revelation** – God's self-revelation to human beings through every experience of creation (Psalm 19).

Jesus often drew theological lessons from general revelation, using nature and human activities to teach about God.

Paul pointed Gentiles toward what they knew about God through reflection on nature and Greek poetry (Acts 14:17; 17:28).

Romans 1-2 teaches that we can learn many things about God through our experiences of life in God's creation.

God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. (Romans 1:20)

Romans 1-2 presents some negative outlooks on general revelation as well.

General revelation reveals "the wrath of God" rather than the way of his mercy and salvation (Romans 1:18; 1:25).

Sinful people lie to themselves and to others about what God has revealed through his creation.

Corrupt human hearts miss the truth about God disclosed in general revelation.

- **Special Revelation** – God's self-disclosure through supernatural means (e.g., dreams, visions, auditions, Christ).

Special revelation guides our attempts to understand general revelation and discloses the way of salvation.

Jesus taught his followers to devote themselves to God's special revelation in Scripture (Mark 12:28-34).

We can rely on Scripture to discern God's disclosures in both general revelation and special revelation throughout history.

B. Divine Mysteries (25:06)

1. Basic Concept (26:42)

Divine mysteries: Innumerable, undisclosed truths about God that limit our understanding of God.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Romans 11:33)

"There is infinitely more in God than we have any idea of; and what we do know, we know imperfectly" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, Part 1, chapter 4).

There's not a single thing about God that we understand fully.

Two ways divine mysteries limit what we know about God:

- Limited information

We see only a "poor reflection" of the truth of God, as if we're looking "in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

If God hasn't revealed it, we can't know it.

- Limited explanations

Divine mysteries limit our ability to explain the logical coherence of much of what God has revealed about himself.

The truth of any theological claim depends only on whether or not God has disclosed it in general or special revelation.

2. Types (36:24)

Two types of divine mysteries:

- **Temporary** – truths about God hidden from human beings for a time, then revealed at some later point in history.

God has disclosed more and more about himself over time.

The most dramatic unveiling of divine mysteries took place in the special revelation of Christ (Ephesians 1:9; 3:3; 6:19).

Only when Christ returns in glory will he disclose every temporary mystery (1 Corinthians 13:12).

- **Permanent** – truths about God that are beyond our comprehension (the incomprehensibility of God).

We will never understand everything about anything about God (Isaiah 55:8-9).

III. Attributes & Works (43:59)

A. Divine Attributes (44:45)

The study of divine attributes looks at who God is.

1. Basic Concept (45:07)

Divine attributes: The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.

"Essence" (*essentia*) refers to God's "being" or "substance" (*substantia*).

The "essence" of something is the unchanging reality that underlies all of its outward, changing manifestations.

Four important distinctions of God's essence:

- God's essence – what God is in himself.
- God's perfections or attributes – the qualities of God's essence.
- God's long-term historical manifestations – his disclosures of himself over long periods of time.
- God's short-term historical manifestations – his disclosures of himself in relatively short periods of time.

"There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible" (*Augsburg Confession*, Article 1).

Evangelicals insist that God has revealed some of the attributes of his divine essence.

On occasion, biblical authors referred explicitly to God's eternal, essential perfections (Psalm 34:8; 1 Timothy 1:17).

For the most part, the Scriptures portray God's attributes indirectly through:

- descriptions
- names and titles
- metaphors and similes
- actions

God always manifests himself in ways that are true to who he is, but his attributes are not the same as his manifestations.

We must be careful to maintain the distinctions between God's attributes and his long- and short-term historical manifestations.

It's often difficult to distinguish between God's attributes and his long-term historical manifestations.

God manifests himself in various ways in history, but his attributes have been true of him forever and will always be true of him forever.

2. Types (56:57)

Evangelicals typically refer to two types of God's attributes:

- **Incommunicable** –perfections of God's essence that creation cannot share with him.

It common for God's incommunicable attributes to be associated with the terms:

- eternal
- without body
- without parts
- infinite

The Scriptures don't call humans to imitate these attributes, but to worship and praise God for how different he is from us.

- **Communicable** – God's eternal perfections that are shared with his creation.

Human beings have power, wisdom and goodness on a human scale.

Scripture commands us not simply to admire these divine attributes, but also to imitate them.

B. Divine Works (1:03:33)

1. Basic Concept (1:03:47)

Divine works: How God works all things according to his eternal purposes.

God works out every single event that ever has occurred and ever will occur (Ephesians 1:11).

We should not limit God's works simply to those events that Scripture attributes exclusively to God.

- First Cause – God is the ultimate cause behind every event that occurs at every moment in history.
- Second causes – created beings or objects that perform real, but secondary roles in causing events to occur.

In one way or another, God's works include everything that occurs in history, whether he does them directly or indirectly.

Divine works are according to God's eternal purposes (Ephesians 1:11; Isaiah 46:10).

God's works always fulfill his eternal purposes.

2. Types (1:12:09)

Two types of divine works:

- Creation – God is "the Maker ... of all things, visible and invisible" (*Augsburg Confession*, Article 1).

Traditional treatments of God's work of creation emphasize:

- Fact – God created everything that exists.
- Variety – God created variety both in the physical and spiritual realms.
- Purpose – God first established the creation to fulfill his eternal purposes.

- Providence – God is the "Preserver of all things, visible and invisible" (*Augsburg Confession*, Article 1).

“Providence” (*providentia*) – attending to something, or taking care of something.

Creation is just as dependent on God now as it was at the very first moment of creation (Colossians 1:16-17).

God's work of providence can be summarized in three main ways:

- Fact – God preserves and sustains everything he has made.
- Variety – God interacts with different facets of creation in different ways.
- Purpose – God ensures that creation will fulfill his eternal purposes.

IV. Conclusion (1:18:05)

Application Questions

1. What attributes of God shown in the person of Jesus Christ most amaze you about your Creator? How does the person of Jesus Christ prevent you from fashioning God into your image?
2. What kinds of things have you learned about the world around you from what God has revealed in nature apart from Scripture? Has God's revelation through creation made a difference in your daily life? Explain your answer.
3. We cannot be saved through the knowledge gained from general revelation alone. How did God use his special revelation to bring you to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? How does this impact the way you minister to those around you?
4. Think of someone you know who refuses to believe that God exists. What are some possible reasons why someone might deny God's existence? How might general revelation refute this disbelief?
5. How does the doctrine of God's transcendence comfort and reassure you in your Christian life? What is it about God's complete "otherness" that challenges you most and why?
6. In Isaiah 55:8-9, God reminds us that his ways are far beyond ours. Name a few of God's actions that are difficult for you to understand. What do you most look forward to understanding when Christ returns in glory?
7. As we learned in this lesson, "God works all things according to his eternal purposes." How does this reassure and strengthen you when you are suffering through trials and facing temptations? How can you use this truth to reassure and strengthen others?
8. The doctrine of God's providence tells us that he is always at work in our lives. When have you been most tempted to think that God is not at work in your life? What Scripture verses call you back to a right understanding of his constant care and provision for you?
9. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?

Glossary

anthropomorphism – Term referring to how God sometimes speaks or behaves in ways that seem almost human

Aristotle – (ca. 384-322 B.C.) Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist who studied under Plato and founded the Lyceum in Athens

Augsburg Confession – The foremost confession of faith of the Lutheran church written by German Reformer Philipp Melancthon; first presented on June 25, 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg

communicable attributes – Characteristics of God that can be communicated to his creation in some measure (e.g., wisdom, power, goodness)

Deism – Philosophy popular in the 17th and 18th centuries that teaches that after God created the universe, he left it to function on its own

divine attributes – The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations; attributes that only God can possess.

divine mysteries – Innumerable, undisclosed truths about God that limit our understanding of God

divine revelation – God's self-disclosure, always given in human terms and most fully given in Christ

Enlightenment, the – A philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized human reason over religious, social, and political traditions

essence of God – The unchanging reality that underlies all of God's outward, changing manifestations; God's fundamental nature or substance of which he consists

essentia – Latin term meaning "essence" or "being"

general revelation – God's use of the natural world and its workings to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to all humanity

Hellenistic – Of or relating to Greek civilization, culture, or language, after the time of Alexander the Great

Hodge, Charles – (1797-1878) Well-known theologian from Princeton Theological Seminary who wrote numerous commentaries, articles, and books, including his three-volume Systematic Theology

incommunicable attributes – Characteristics of God that cannot be communicated to man (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity)

mysticism – Belief system that emphasizes the need to go beyond reason to receive revelation through transcendent spiritual enlightenment

natural theology – The ongoing attempt to learn about God through general revelation

patristic theology – Theology from approximately A.D. 150-600 that described, explained and defended Christianity in ways that were relevant for Hellenistic cultures

Plato – (ca. 427-347 B.C.) Ancient Greek philosopher who studied under Socrates and founded the Academy at Athens

providence – God's active involvement in history as he works out his eternal plan for creation and the welfare of his people

providentia – Latin term meaning "attending to," "sustaining," "taking care of"

scholasticism – School of philosophy taught by the academics (or "Scholastics") during the medieval period that put great emphasis on the use of Aristotelian logic and attempted to harmonize Christian theology with classical philosophy

special revelation – God's disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means

substantia – Latin term meaning "substance"

theophany – A visible appearance of God to a human being or beings

via causalitatis – Latin phrase for "way of causation," meaning to learn about God by observing the good things he has created; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

via eminentiae – Latin phrase for "the way of eminence," meaning to learn about God by noting how God is greater than his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

via negationis – Latin phrase for "the way of negation," meaning to learn about God by contrasting him with his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology