

# We Believe in God

Lesson 3

How God is Like Us

Forum



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# We Believe in God

## Lesson Three: How God is Like Us

### Forum

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### Question 1:

**Can we learn everything we need to know about God through natural theology, or do we also need special revelation?**

#### **Rev. Vermon Pierre**

Natural theology really can tell us a lot about God, and we can know this from what the Bible tells us in Romans chapter 1, that God's invisible attributes, his eternal power, his divine nature have been clearly perceived from the creation. So that means something of who God is: his power, the fact that there is a God; the fact that — the type of God he is — that he's not a God of chaos, for example, he's a God of order, that he's a God of purpose. A lot of those things we can tell from the creation that's around us. It's important, though, to say, I mean, this is an area in which we can't say we can know everything about God from the creation, but it does speak to something of who God is by just looking at the creation around us.

#### **Rev. George Shamblin**

When we go outside and we see the trees, we see the stars, we see the moon and the sun; we know there's a God. We *know* there's a God. Many people, though, refuse to accept God. So, we know there's a God, but how can we come to know that God personally? There's two things that the New Testament talks about: we've got general revelation where God is revealed in all of creation. But to be saved, to come to know Christ, we have to have that special revelation, where we read in the Bible that the Word was God and the Word became flesh.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell**

When we think in terms of general revelation, all men can have the knowledge of the existence of the Lord, but in terms of coming to know Christ as personal Lord and Savior, that has to do with special revelation, and ultimately one has to be born again in order for that to happen. To think even more broadly on that, how does one get to that point? Well, that brings us to Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace are we saved through faith and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” So even the capacity to believe, to have faith to believe in Christ as Lord and Savior that has to be given us by God himself. And so, at the end of day, any capacity to know the Lord on a redemptive level, it has all to do with the triune God revealing that to us.

**Dr. Michael D. Williams**

In the early chapters of *The Institutes*, Book 1, primarily chapters 1 through 7, 8, Calvin is arguing — it’s a long argument that he gets to — but he’s arguing for the necessity of Scripture. By God’s general revelation, his revealing himself within the order of creation, within his providential guiding and directing of the affairs of men and nations, and of our own lives and the law written upon our hearts, we can come to a knowledge of his existence, that he is a benevolent power, that he is a sovereign Lord. Yet, in our rebellion, we are running away from that. We seek to reject that truth. And Calvin’s argument is that we need, as fallen creatures, we need, he calls it, a twofold knowledge; 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... God undertakes a series of redemptive acts, acts that are meant to restore relationship, restore his creatures, bring them back to him. But that bringing back includes both a knowledge of him as Creator, to be brought back into that first knowledge, and a knowledge of God as our Redeemer. We speak of these acts in Scripture as the history of redemption, the mighty acts of God, the mighty deeds of God, and they culminate in, they find their center in Jesus... Without God acting in space and time and that being recorded in Scripture as a necessary instrument to us, Christ would remain unknown to us — dressed in the robes. And what’s interesting, and it’s going to sound strange, but what’s interesting here is that was even true within the biblical world. Think of John seeing Jesus coming down the street there for the first time, and he says, “Behold! The Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin in the world... the sin of the world.” Every word he’s used there is fraught with Old Testament meaning. John is using the Old Testament to interpret Jesus as he’s coming toward him. We see the same thing in Jesus’ discussion with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They don’t recognize him. They don’t know who he is. And what’s he do? He opens the Word, he opens the Old Testament, he turns to the writings, and then as he’s reading the Word, then they recognize him. This record of God’s redemptive activity, his redemptive intent is absolutely necessary to a knowledge of God’s creation — because we rebelled against it, we need to be returned to it — of his redemptive ways, and of his sin-bearing Son.

**Question 2:**  
**How can figurative comparisons about God found in the Bible teach us about God's attributes?**

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

The Bible has lots of different ways in which it compares God to things in creation. I mean, God is light; God is a rock; God is my song, my strength, the horn of my salvation, a fortress. The Psalms have a lot of those, but they're also scattered here and there in other parts of the Bible as well. But one of the problems we have when we try to go from those comparisons, whether they're metaphors that don't use the word "like" or "as," or similes that use the word "like" or "as," or even analogies like "God is like a shepherd," and things like that, and you get into a lot of details, those kinds of comparisons create problems for us, because comparisons, whether you're dealing with God in creation, or you're dealing with people and other people, or anything even in the created world, when we make comparisons, they are not perfect. Aristotle said that all metaphors are inherently deceptive; they lie. And what he meant by that was that while things are like each other in some ways, they're also *not* like each other in other ways... So, when you find in the Bible that there are comparisons, like metaphors — God is a rock — or similes — God is like light — or when you look and find analogies and things like that in the Bible that describe how God is like this or like that, what you find is that you have to be careful to distinguish between the ways in which God is like those things and the ways God is *not* like those things. Knowing how he's *not* like them is just as important as knowing how he *is* like them. And that's the critical thing when it comes to these figures of comparison in the Bible. And so, when you're trying to derive the attributes of God from figures of comparison in the Bible — metaphors, similes, analogies, parables, whatever it may be — then you have to be very careful always to ask those two questions: "How does this comparison show us that God is like his creation?" But also, "How does this comparison also tell us that God is not like his creation?" And when we can begin to discern those ideas — that distinction between how he is and how he is not like creation — then we can begin to derive, or infer, what these analogies, metaphors, similes, what they say about the attributes of God. In fact, the way you do that is by looking at the whole of Scripture, everything in the Bible, to make sure that you are guided and you are led by the Scriptures in distinguishing between the ways he is like things and the ways he is not like things in the creation.

**Dr. Sanders L. Willson**

Eugene Peterson in his book *Reverse Thunder* — roughly a commentary about Revelation — he calls Revelation a literary video. And the beautiful thing about the Bible, and really, any good literature, is that it's vivid, it's illustrative; it helps us understand. And the biblical authors do similar things. And David would be a classic example when he calls God a rock, the immovable one, the one who is our fortress, our defense, the one who is strong, stronger than all others. That's very helpful for us to understand how powerful God really is. So we should give thanks that biblical

authors, and poets, and psalmists in particular, know how to use visual imagery through literary technique to help us understand the greatness of God.

### **Question 3:** **What does Psalm 8 teach us about our value and significance before God?**

#### **Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.**

One of the great things about Psalm 8 is it kind of echoes what goes on in Genesis 1:26-28. On the one hand, there's many things in the Bible that tell us about how great God is, about how vast the universe is, and even verses that tell us the universe is great, you are a small thing compared to the universe. But, both Genesis 1:26, 28; Psalm 8, they tell us about the distinction of humans being given a particular position in God's world, really in God's cosmos, as those who are created in his image. Now, the language "being created in his image" isn't specifically there in Psalm 8, but there's language about being created a little lower than the angels, but also crowned with glory, and then certainly restating the language about humans being given the dominion over creation, dominion, as in good stewardship of the creation, this is what is repeated in Psalm 8. So, Psalm 8 helps us to see, or reminds us, that when God created us, he created us with great significance and purpose.

#### **Dr. Dana M. Harris**

Psalm 8 is a wonderful Psalm. It's actually a theological reflection by David. I can imagine him sitting out on the rooftop in Jerusalem long before pollution, either smog or light pollution, and being able to see the vast array of God's goodness displayed in the heavens above him. We think about Psalm 19. It talks about, "The heavens declare the glory of God." And as David is contemplating this amazing display, he's struck by the seemingly insignificance of humanity. Now, this is actually very relevant for us today. I love astronomy, and I think about, in the last 25 years, the Hubble telescope has given us the most amazing pictures of outer space and deep space... For many people, when we look at these images, it communicates the very insignificance of humanity. So, I think it's important to also consider that when David is contemplating this, what he talks about is the amazing reality is that God has crowned humanity with glory and honor. Now, we fast forward. There's another person in the Bible who was doing theological reflection on Psalms 8, and that's the author of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews looks at Psalm 8 and also comes to that remarkable conclusion: How is it that the God who created everything would entrust that to humanity and crown humanity with glory and honor? But the author goes on to say, we don't yet see that as a reality... So the author then looks to Jesus, the perfect human being, the one who will bring about or restore the glory that was always intended for humanity.

#### **Dr. Matt Friedeman**

When you look at Scripture there's a lot of places that can make you feel very, very small. But there are some places where you can look at — like Psalm 8 — that can make you feel pretty good about your standing in the world. Psalm 8: “What is man that thou art mindful of him ... the son of man that you [created] him?” And there it goes. There's the questions, the law of interrogation in Scripture. And through that law of interrogation comes a great answer: “You made him a little lower than the *elohim*.” Now, it depends on your translation. Some translations state, they will call that the “heavenly beings” or the “angels.” But it's *elohim*, which could mean God — “You've made him a little lower than God, and you've crowned him, and you've given him authority.” Just a tremendous passage if you ever want to look at someone and say, “Your value in the Lord? Listen to Psalm 8.”

### Question 4:

#### What does it mean that we are created in God's image?

##### Rev. Bill Burns

One of the things we learn in Genesis chapters 1–3 is that humanity, created in the image of God — Adam and Eve as representative of the entire human race — is that being the image of God is not something particular to one ethnicity or to one religious tradition, that God, the God of the Bible, Yahweh, created *all* people in his own image and likeness. And so, that's something that we all share in common, that we have all been created in God's image, and even though humanity, in rebellion against God, has corrupted that image, it's still the case — as we see in Genesis chapter 9 and in James chapter 3 — that even corrupted, even having the image of God, that we are being corrupted by sin, we all are still created in God's image, and therefore, there's a certain dignity to be afforded to all people, and there's a certain sense of unity in the world that all of us have in common, that God created us in his image. And, of course, what we long for is the restoration of what we were created for, which is found through faith in Jesus Christ, through being reunited and renewed in the image of God in Christ. We certainly long for that for all people, but there is still a sense that because we were all created in God's image, there is a certain unity and dignity about all people, of every race, every country, every time and place.

##### Dr. Bruce L. Fields

I do not see how anyone can establish a long-lasting assessment of human worth apart from what God has to say about us... The acknowledgement of human beings as made in the image of God is absolutely critical, and it should be maintained, otherwise the door swings wide open to all kinds of forms of dehumanization that could simply be legitimated by logic, by reason, and do all kinds of terrible things. But what does it mean? It's again one of those areas that much debate/discussion has taken place over centuries. I for one do work from a kind of two-plane understanding of the image. If I may use Louis Berkhof as a model of understanding, where the image of God itself is understood both in terms of a narrower sense and a broader

sense. With the narrower sense, you're talking about the capacities to relate to God properly, and with the broader sense, you have the network of human capacities that we have by which we function in the world, things such as mind, the sense of "oughtness" or morals, a sense of nobility, our own uniqueness, spirituality, these kinds of capacities... Berkhof's system allows me to say, yes, the Fall was utterly devastating to us as image bearers, but it did not obliterate it, it did not destroy the image. We do have capacities, we do have abilities that are part of our imaging, and though they themselves are affected by sin still, they still work. Thus we can say, yes, we have been severely damaged by the Fall, yet we remain image bearers of God, particularly when I think of passages like Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9, where we are referred to as "in the likeness of God." These are both passages that take place after Genesis 3, or the Fall, so, it's just a very, very critical area... And there's much in the world that says you're nothing... Well, there's a non-changing perspective alive in the universe, and that's God's assessment, and he says you are an image-bearer. I am an image-bearer. We are image-bearers, and that doesn't change.

#### **Dr. Daniel Treier**

Views of what it means to be created in the image of God have largely fallen into three categories. The first category that dominated classical theology for quite some time is often called "structural" or "substantial." It's a view of the image of God that emphasizes some essence shared between humanity and God. Often this is associated with the soul or spirit, and the activity that's most associated with this is reasoning. Humans are rational animals, and so the rational part is what establishes our essential connection to God and distinguishes us from animals. The second view, which has come to be dominant in modern biblical studies, is the functional view which suggests that the image of God is explained by the succeeding verses in Genesis that deal with stewardship and ruling in the created order, and ancient Near East studies which have suggested that rulers very frequently would place images of themselves in their temples, and so, by analogy God is functionally using human beings to represent him in his cosmic temple here on this earth. So the functional view, the activity that it most emphasizes is that of ruling or of representing God; that's our function by which we image him. And then the third view, which has been most dominant in modern systematic theology and perhaps modern practical theology or church life is a relational view which often owes a great deal to Karl Barth and his emphasis on the phrase "male and female he created them." And people have taken this and associated it with imaging of the Trinity in a social sense and have said that what's essential to a human imaging of God, is relationality. By relating to one another in love, we most reveal what God is like.

#### **Dr. Jay Haley**

The Scripture tells us that God created humanity after his own image. What does that mean? Well, the Lord created us obviously with a body and also with a soul, and just as God is spirit, so our soul that God created for us is also spirit. And so, we see in this respect that God created us to be in fellowship with him, and to be in fellowship with him forever. And so, he created us as a reflection of his own image so we may enjoy him in this particular way. And so, being made in God's image also points to

the fact that he made us as caretakers of this world to reflect who he is in his glory in all that we do on this earth.

### Question 5:

**Is it possible to really know ourselves without some knowledge of God, and is it possible to really know God without some knowledge of ourselves?**

#### **Dr. Josh Moody**

The relationship between self-knowledge and God-knowledge is an intriguing and an interesting one. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, starts with a discussion about how our knowledge of God is informed and in communication with our knowledge of self. In a way, with his background at that time historically, this whole idea of self-knowledge was coming more to the prominence and he was drawing that in from his intellectual background to his theology. So there's a sort of historical quotient to the question. There's also a psychological quotient, I suppose you could say, in that it's hard to conceive how it would be possible to truly know God and to be completely ignorant of who you are both as a sinner and as made in the image of God. Those two surely are in communication in some relation or other. There is also a biblical connection that enwraps all these conversation points, which would be, for instance, "The fool says in his heart there is no God." And that fool is having an internal conversation in his heart about the lack of the existence of God in any real biblical sense and so, therefore, is self-deceived and is unwilling to truly grasp the existence of God. We could also go to Romans chapter 1 where Paul talks about how God's invisible qualities have been plainly seen, and yet they're being repressed through unrighteousness. And so, there is the sense in which, as we get to know God better, we get to know ourselves better. And this journey to the self, that people sometimes talk about in New Age philosophy ... that is actually the wrong path to self-knowledge. In the same way, we really get to know ourselves in communication and relationship with another person — in marriage or in friendship — we really, truly get to know ourselves in worship of the Other who made us. And so, there's a conversation and dialogue between those two points, but ultimately it's not really possible to know who we are unless we worship God, for we are his creation.

#### **Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

All knowledge about God is tied to all of our knowledge about ourselves and the rest of creation. John Calvin, in the first chapters of *The Institutes* actually quoted from the inscription over the door at Aristotle's gymnasium which said "*gnothi seauton*" in Greek — "know yourself" — and he said that's true, you've got to know yourself because unless you know something about yourself, you can't know anything about anything else. And the reason for this is because you're always thinking about other things in terms of who you are. And so, these two go hand-in-hand. Knowledge of God and his attributes, knowledge of us and the rest of creation and the attributes of

creation, these go hand-in-hand. And another reason for this is because God reveals himself in creation. And this is Romans chapter 1, Psalm 19, those kinds of passages that we all know about natural or general revelation, teach that God has revealed himself in creation. So, the more we know about ourselves and the more we know about creation in general, the more we can know about God. But here's the point that Calvin makes in the opening of *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. He says that these two go hand-in-hand. You can't know God without knowing yourself, but you also can't know yourself without knowing God, because it's only in terms of what God says and who God is and what he has revealed about himself that we can even have knowledge of our sinfulness, our goodness, our dignity, our purpose, those kinds of things that are so essential to knowing who we are. So, the question that has perplexed theologians, of course, through the centuries is which comes first? Is it that we know God and then we know something about ourselves? Or is it that we know something about ourselves and then we can learn about God? And the answer is "yes," to both of those options. These two beliefs form reciprocities with each other, they feed back on each other, so that we can never just simply start with one and go to the other, because we always, even as we enter into this life, we have knowledge of God and we have knowledge of ourselves, and so all the time we're coming with a little bit of knowledge of both of these. And so, when we think about these two options of which do I start with, it's sort of a practical question. What am I focusing on today? Am I focusing on life around me and myself in the context of the world? Well, if that's what I'm focusing on at this moment, those things can teach me about God. But here's the other practical question: Today, am I reading the Bible and is it telling me something about God? Well, that's great. Let's start there. And it can tell me things about me and about the rest of creation around me. And so, these two go hand-in-hand, they cannot be separated. And all through life faithful Christians will bounce back and forth from focusing on one or focusing on the other, focus on learning about God so we can learn about ourselves, or learning about ourselves so we can learn about God.

### **Question 6:**

#### **Why is it sometimes difficult to infer theological propositions from Scripture, especially narrative and poetry?**

##### **Dr. Daniel Treier**

It is exceedingly difficult to infer theological propositions from biblical narratives and biblical poetry. It's so difficult that many evangelical textbooks on hermeneutics and doctrine simply prohibit the practice. They say you don't get doctrine out of narrative, you get it out of Paul's epistles, and as a result, many of our evangelical theological systems have reflected, if not exclusive, at least primary engagement with Pauline texts or with New Testament epistles. So, we need to acknowledge that the difficulty here is real. The problem if we simply acknowledge the difficulty and prohibit trying is that we then rule out engaging substantial portions of Scripture in our theological

formulations. It depends on what you count as narrative and poetry in terms of the exact percentages, but overwhelming amounts of Scripture come in narrative and/or poetic forms. So, if we were to prohibit doing theology and conversation with them, we would be walling off much of the Bible from systematic theological reflection.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

It's interesting as we read through Scripture, sometimes what we'd like it to do is to just give us very easy sets of propositions much like you'd read in an excellent systematic theology. But sometimes it surprises us by not stating things as directly as we might wish. Sometimes the issue there is, is that as the author is speaking to his audience, there's things he can already assume that the audience knows, and he writes really to re-invoke things that they already understand. Sometimes it's also that he's not wishing to develop a systematic theology, but he's interested especially in enjoining Christian praxis, to actually encourage them to do something with the theology that they're learning. And so, the praxis and theology will be intertwined in terms of the interests of the author. Another area that you can see that authors sometimes write things in ways that are not as straightforward as you might imagine is in works such as the Old Testament prophets. I was surprised a few years ago when I was teaching a whole year through the book of Isaiah at my church and I was cognizant as after a few weeks that basically, propositionally, we were covering the same things again and again. It occurred to me that you could probably put the number of propositions in the book of Isaiah into a paragraph or two, that God is holy, that his people should repent and worship him, and if they don't he's going to lead them into exile, but there'll be hope in exile and he'll send his servant. Those are the kinds of propositions you would have. And yet it takes Isaiah 66 chapters to get there. And I was forced to encounter the reason why. And I think a lot of it is, as we read through the prophets, we realize that they are speaking in almost poetic fashion; they're intending not to just give us intellectual content, but to really go straight for the heart, to speak to our *affections* the way that we are *affected* by the truth of Scripture. And so they're intending to engage our heart as well as our mind, so they'll use poetic imagery and bring us into the counsel of God and give us an image of what it looks like for God to be holy, give us a series of images about what exile will look like and how perilous that will be in order to invoke repentance, to give us a full description of who the servant is so that we know what the servant is going to accomplish and the servant ultimately being the Suffering Servant that is Christ. And that series of images speaks not just to our minds but also to our hearts.

**Question 7:**

**How can theologians infer theological propositions from the narratives and poetry of Scripture?**

**Dr. Dana M. Harris**

There's a lot of discussion about how we understand the basis of how to use Scripture

for deriving doctrine. We often think about propositional statements as being derived from Scripture directly. Now, a propositional statement is a statement that is either true or false, depending on whether it corresponds to reality. So, if I say today is Monday and it's not Monday, then that's a false statement. But if I say today is Monday, and it actually is Monday, then that's a true statement. So, there's a correspondence understanding between the statement and reality. When we move into narrative or poetry, it's a little bit more complicated. In narrative, often we have events that are being described, so the question always is, is the narrative prescriptive? In other words, is the narrative all by itself teaching us something, or is it describing something? A very good example of this is if we look at the life of David. If we look carefully at 2 Samuel and specifically if we look at 2 Samuel 1–9, we see David under favor. Everywhere he goes he's winning battles, having sons, doing amazing things. This is a man that is clearly experiencing the favor of God. But then if we look at the rest of 2 Samuel, beginning with 2 Samuel 12, we see David very clearly in a very different context. This is David under judgment. In fact, his sons are actually rising up to try to kill him. We have to then look very carefully and ask ourselves what happened, and clearly what happened is 2 Samuel 10 and 11 and the whole incident with Bathsheba. If we look at that example very carefully, we could probably make the case that David breaks all ten commandments in what he does. But if we look at the narrative, the narrative doesn't teach directly what we should or shouldn't do. Instead, the narrative illustrates the consequences. So, when we look at narrative, it's always tricky to try to figure out, is the narrative prescriptive or descriptive? Another example that we could look at is the book of Acts. Is the book of Acts given to us as a manual of how to do church, or is the book of Acts given to us to describe the consistent way that God acts with his people and the unstoppable spread of the gospel? Now, there are some parts of Acts that are clearly prescriptive. For example, the end of Acts 2 gives us a clear indication of a healthy church, a church that is involved in teaching the Scriptures, that has communion, that has prayer, that has real fellowship. But other parts of Acts make it much more difficult to try to derive doctrine. For example, the doctrine of baptism, we might look at one part of Acts and say that that's normative for all believers, but then we could look at another part of Acts and see a different understanding of baptism. In fact, baptism is described at least four different ways in Acts. So, I think the best way to understand narrative is narrative describes how God works, the consistent way that he works with his people, the consistent way that he reveals himself. Deriving doctrine from that takes a little bit more effort and a little bit of caution. Now, we can also ask ourselves, how can we derive doctrine from poetry? The real important thing to understand with poetry is that it's using symbolic or figurative language. The most important thing to keep in mind here is that symbolic language is describing reality. It's not talking about reality in terms of a correspondence theory of reality. So, for example, if we say that the sun rises and the sun sets, that's figurative language, because we know that actually the sun does not revolve around the earth. But everybody understands what's being said there. So, when we look at poetry we also have to also work hard to try to figure out what is being understood with the metaphoric language. Again, metaphoric or symbolic or figurative language is not talking about something that's not real, it's simply describing reality instead of defining it in a correspondence theory.

**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Systematic theologians, because of the way they do their discipline, have to work with propositions. Whether they realize it or not, basically that's what they're doing. And so, they have to derive propositions about God from the Bible. And many times, no matter what genre you're talking about, you can actually find direct, explicit propositional statements about God. I mean, even in the poetry of the Bible, like Psalm 34 verse 8 says that, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Well, that's very close to a propositional statement: the Lord is good. And so, when you come to this passage like that, and they appear throughout the Bible, it's not hard then to start pulling out a theological proposition out of a passage like that. But when it comes to things like narratives and poetry, you often find that you have to infer theological propositions, statements about God, true statements about God from stories that don't really address those matters directly. And so, as you do that, then you have to be very careful, much more careful than if you're just dealing with a straight-up proposition that you happen to find. I mean, if you just think about something like this, like take the story of when God called Abraham and said that he was going to bless Abraham. Okay, well, that's wonderful, and we can make a theological proposition out of Genesis 12:1-3, where God says "And I will bless you." We could say, well, God blessed Abraham. That would be a very particularized, a very specific proposition you could get out of that passage, and that would be fine and fairly easy to get because it's rather explicit in the text. But when you broaden the picture of what you're taking in, when you broaden out to other parts of the Bible, you can make even more general statements than "God blessed Abraham." You could also say this proposition: "God blessed many people many times." Okay? Why? Because when you find in the Bible it happens here, happens here, happens here, happens here, you can make the generalization that, well, God blesses people many times. And, in fact, when you look at the whole of the Bible, you can even get indications that what God did in the days of the Bible — blessing people — he continues to do today. So you can make an even broader theological proposition: God blesses people today. Okay, that would be fine. And those are the kinds of things that we do when we look at specific passages. We go from what it says explicitly then to considering other parts of the Bible which allow us to infer things that are implicit and then to broaden out even further and further and further into more generalized or more universal statements. Now, the problem is, though, sometimes when people do this, when they take one particular passage and start broadening it out and making more general or more universal statements out of it, they'll go too far and they'll say things like, rather than simply saying "God blessed Abraham," "God blessed many people in the Bible," "God blesses people even today," they'll go so far as to say from passages in the Bible, they'll infer falsely that God always blesses all people all of the time. Well, that just simply isn't true, that God always blesses all people all of the time. So, that goes way beyond what the Bible says. In fact, it goes against other parts of the Bible. So, all along the way, as we're drawing these inferences about God, we don't just need to look for things that broaden the concept and confirm the concept, but things that actually narrow the concept, narrow the proposition down, clarify it on the sort of negative way, saying, "Well, this is true here but it's not true there; it's true in this

way but it's not true in that way." And when we go through that process of taking a specific passage and going further and further and further, broader and broader into the Scriptures and also into general revelation beyond that, then we can begin to make appropriate and true theological propositions as we read even narratives and poetry in the Bible.

### Question 8:

#### How does God demonstrate his communicable attribute of love for us?

##### **Dr. Ramesh Richard**

Love is one of the most elastic words in any language, especially in the English language. We use it for all kinds of objects: I love pizza, I love cars, I love computers, I love music, I love technology. It's such a meaningless word if you start applying it to everything. The word love, while it can be defined in many ways, everything from erotic, sexual, physical love, which is a unique New Testament word for love, or in a generic brotherly love... We're talking about God's love for us which is conditioned in himself, which means it's unconditional toward us. It cannot be merited; it cannot be obligated; it cannot be manipulated. God, in terms of his antecedent decision to love the human race in spite of all we are — completely a blight to him because of the decisions that we have made — decides to love us unconditionally, only conditioned by himself. And once he decides to love us unconditionally, nothing is going to overwhelm and separate us from his love. So, we're going to call this "covenantal love," the love without conditions, the love with costs that he ultimately pays in human history in the one full, total demonstration that he loves the human race.

##### **Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

The concept of God's love is something that we often speak of, but very few times do we have a clear picture of what that really means. Unfortunately, we have often a distorted view of love. We hear notions of love in the media; we have notions of love from our own backgrounds and our own family of origin. And so, when we hear that God is love, sometimes the concept is run through a grid or lens of understanding that actually distorts it pretty badly... And so, the concept of love is not just a kind of an emotional good feeling or sense of desire. It is deeply rooted in the, not just the emotional side, but it is rooted in the active side of what God does to demonstrate his love toward us. And that's why we can talk about in terms of the Scriptures when it says, "God demonstrates His ... love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" — Romans chapter 5. So, the notion of love in Scripture, and God's love in particular, is not just a kind of general emotional feeling, it is an action that demonstrates his goodness, his care, his concern, and the extreme to which he would go to demonstrate that. So, we read in John chapter 3 verse 16 that, "God so loved the world ... that he gave his only — his one and only — Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." And we often see that verse and think, "Oh, I've heard that, you know, I memorized it at a very young age,"

but when you begin to really look at that, there's a reason why that verse is used so often, because it is such a great illustration that God, in his love, he has a concern, but he also does something about it to demonstrate what it means to really be good, what it really means to be benevolent, and to really work toward our salvation in the sense that he sent Christ, and he demonstrates that love for us... So, when it says that God is a God of love, it is not just some sort of emotional kind of nonspecific idea. It is demonstrated in concrete acts that God performs every day, moment by moment, to demonstrate how much he cares for and loves his creation and ultimately in the redemption of Jesus Christ for those who are chosen.

### **Question 9:**

#### **How should God's communicable attribute of love affect our lives?**

##### **Dr. Matt Carter**

Jesus tells us that a new commandment he gives us, and that's to love one another as God has loved us. And the original commandment was we're supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves, but then Jesus takes it a step beyond that, and we're not just to love each other and our neighbor the way that we would love ourselves, but we're to love one another as he loved us. And that begs the question, how did he love us? Well, there's thousands of ways, countless ways that he loved us, but one of the ways that he loved us is to love us first. So, I believe what Christ is calling us to is pursuing, self-sacrificial love towards others. In other words, we don't wait and kind of hold back with our arms folded waiting for others to love us before we'll love them, but as believers we do what Christ did, which is to love first. The Scripture says that we're to love, we love because Christ first loved us. And so, whether it's with your wife, your children, your neighbors, folks that you work with, pursue them, pursue them with the love of Jesus, and do it first.

##### **Dr. Ramesh Richard**

Our response to God's love, to echo the apostle John, is we love him because he first loved us. Now, how that applies is very specific. And that's why I think the Lord Jesus repeated the first commandment of Deuteronomy 6 in the Synoptics when he said love him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength... Those four nouns that the Lord Jesus uses are not separate descriptions of the human system. It is all of you, your heart, soul, mind and strength, loving him for all he is. Bernard of Clairvaux, who was a French mystic, talked about four kinds of love. He said there is the love of self for self's sake: I love me for my sake. That would be narcissism. That would be the love of an unbeliever. The second is the love of God for self's sake, to see what I can get out of him, and a large number of people across the human race and the Christian church always fall into that trap: How can I love God for my sake, to get something out of him? A third level is the love of God for God's sake. Period. Full stop. The love of God for God's sake. You love God because he's God. He's not a principle; he's not an idea; he is not a force. You love him because he is God. And

then Clairvaux said there is a fourth level ... the love of self for God's sake, and he said that is going to be true of heaven where you see yourself rightly and love yourself rightly as God sees you, but there can be points in time when that could be your experience as well. The love of self is never commanded. It is assumed. Because when you love God rightly, you can love everything else rightly, but if you love God wrongly you will mess up on everything else, including loving yourself wrongly. So love him for who he is with everything you've got.

**Dr. Kenneth V. Botton**

One of the things that I've found in Scripture, in terms with our relationship with God is an invariable flow. And it never varies. A proper Christian life starts with God, flows through the believer, and then is showered on others. We were designed by God to be channels of his blessing. As a matter of fact, the Jews became the chosen people, and why were they chosen? They were chosen to be channels of blessing to the world. God was going to use the Jews as a conduit, and regrettably, along the way, they became the "Dead Sea." They became instead of rivers they became reservoirs. Christians, on the other hand, our responsibility is to maintain that conduit. God showers us with love. Example, Psalm 23: "My cup runs over." A well-lived Christian life is always a cup running over, and that means that a Christian is always operating from fullness, and guess what? We distribute the overflow of this full Christian life to others. God has chosen us. He loves us. Why? So that he can use us and we can take his love and we can broadcast it and distribute it to others: from God, through us, to others.

**Question 10:**  
**How does God manifest his wisdom in creation?**

**Dr. Dan Collett**

God's wisdom is evident in creation, according to the Old Testament witness of Scriptures, from the fact that there's what might be called an "architectural" beauty and wisdom present in the creation. Often when creation is described in Old Testament literature, these architectural images are used. Especially, you could see that in a text like Job 38–41 where God is pointing out his wisdom in creation to Job. And what we learn there is that this structured and ordered space that we call creation, which was once in a chaotic form, is now a cosmos, and ordered space, that's inhabitable. And so, the wisdom is evident in creation in the beauty of this architectural space that the wisdom tradition describes creation in terms of, but also in terms of the way in which this is not just a beautiful space, but it's an inhabitable space; the wisdom of God is evident in that he's created a house, as it were — another image wisdom uses to describe creation — in which to dwell with his people. The purpose of God's original wisdom in creation was that his creatures might commune with him in the house that his wisdom had built, that house being creation.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

God's wisdom means that he always has the best and perfect goals and the means to accomplish those goals. So when we look at his sovereign wisdom in creation, in human history, we realize that that includes everything he does; all that happens within his sovereign will is seen as his good, wise, perfect determination of what happens. And so, even when we have sin and human folly and sickness and disease and the effects of the Fall, we can affirm that God's wisdom is still at work because he alone has the overarching perspective on everything and knows how everything will turn out, which means he knows everything will turn out ultimately for his glory and our good.

**Dr. Richard Lints**

God's wisdom is manifest in a host of areas. Wisdom — maybe if we back up for a moment and think about the concept itself — is rather difficult to get our hands around. We know it mostly when we see it, rather than being able to describe it in the abstract. So, a ordinary farmer who has lived a life on the land may experience the seasons wisely in a way that most of us urban dwellers wouldn't understand the warp and the woof. We might say, he has gained wisdom by understanding the way God has "wired" those fields. So, to speak of God's wisdom manifest in creation is to speak about the way in which he has made all of creation coherently; it fits together, sometimes mysteriously, but the design, God's design capacity in creation is a wise design. Now, having said that, we must also back up and say, that design is not always evident to human eyes, that his wisdom is sometimes mysterious. So, ordinary human wisdom is sometimes mysterious to those whose eyes don't have manifest abilities. God's wisdom also affirms that in the end everything will work according to his designs.

**Question 11:**

**What does the Bible mean when it says that God is holy and that we are also to be holy?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

When the Bible describes God as holy, it's actually going after a concept that primarily means God is distinct and separate, so the holiness of God is emphasizing the fact that God is divine and that all the attributes and characteristics we associate with God as distinct from human beings, the creatures he has made. In an analogous way, therefore, when we talk about holiness of individuals, we're talking about people who become separate from sinfulness to become more like the God whom they wish to serve.

**Dr. Constantine Campbell**

The holiness of God is a confusing concept for some people, I think. But the key to

the idea is that God is other. That's really what holiness means. It means, "not mingled with other things." So God is not mingled with sin; God is not mingled with the corruption of the world. He is "other"; he is separate from all those things. And when, therefore, we are described as holy, when God makes us holy as believers, it means that he has set us apart to belong with him in his otherness, that we no longer belong to the realm of sin, we no longer belong to the corruption of the world and life in Adam, but we too are other.

**Rev. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.**

When we look at the holiness of God, that God is transcendent, God is above everything, God is righteous, God is holy, God is pure. Everything that is good is embodied within God. So, when we look at his holiness... In fact, in Leviticus 11:44-45, God says, "Man, you are to be holy, as I am holy. I brought you out of Egypt." So, each one of us at some point in time were in Egypt. We were separated from God. So, when God tells us to be holy, he is telling us that we are to be, to seek his attributes of spiritual maturity, of blamelessness. When we look at the book of Leviticus, sometimes we look at it as just a bunch of do's and don'ts, but in reality, what is he doing? He's telling us and giving us his standard for what we should be, that we should raise up. We can look at it as a bunch of laws, but actually God is telling us about his holiness and what he expects from man. So when we look at God's attribute of holiness, can we understand what that is? Can we understand truly what the absence of sin is? But that's who God is, that there is no sin, there is no defects. It is the ultimate, the epitome of perfection. And that's what God's holiness is. In God's holiness, sin cannot be. And so, the only thing that we can do as humans is again to trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and only through the blood of Jesus can a holy God look upon sinful man.

**Question 12:**

**How should God's attribute of holiness affect our lives on a daily basis?**

**Dr. Brandon D. Crowe**

God is described as holy in Scripture in many places, and perhaps this holiness can sound like an abstract characteristic of God that doesn't really affect how we live on a day-to-day basis. But, in fact, Peter tells us in his first epistle in chapter 1 that God's holiness should affect the way we live in all our manner of life on a day-to-day basis. Peter says, "As the one who calls you is holy, we also must be holy in all that we do, and he quotes from the book of Leviticus to illustrate that because God is holy, we must be holy in all of our actions. What this means, then, is that God's holiness has very practical ramifications for how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis as obedient children, who follow the teaching of Christ.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

You know, I'm an evangelical Christian, so I really appreciate and rest in the grace of God, the kindness of God, the benevolence of God, the mercy of God, but, you know, it's easy to either forget about or just minimize the holiness of God. That was a prominent theme in the Old Testament. Leviticus 11... Really, Leviticus 11 to 19 is a whole section devoted to God is holy, so you, his people Israel, you need to be holy, and there are whole sections of laws that talk about that you need to be holy, you need to be distinct, you need to be separate in the way you eat, in the way you dress, in the way you live. Now, some of those are heuristic object lessons for setting apart a people, and it'd be convenient to think, well, that was an Old Testament thing. The problem is at least one place in the New Testament — 1 Peter 1 — you have an apostle that quotes Leviticus and says this is still in play: "'You're to be holy as I am holy,' says the Lord." And Ephesians 1, as it's talking about the elective purposes and sovereignty of God, one of those purposes is to take from, yes, Gentile people, people of every tribe, tongue, nation that would have been considered out of bounds by Old Testament standards, one of those purposes of God in his sovereignty and power is to take such people and make them a holy people, blameless to him, blameless before his sight. For us, of course, we start as sinners and we die as sinners, but not just sinners. There's a sanctifying work that the Holy Spirit does in us that is all too frustratingly progressive, all too irritatingly incremental in its outworking, but the expectation, the ideal, the standard is still there, that we live our lives before a holy God who is gracious, kind, merciful, good, compassionate, but who's also holy, and because we are redeemed by a holy God, our calling is to be different, different in a positive way, not just a weird way, but in a positive way, that takes righteousness as seriously as God does, that is repulsed by sin as much as God is. Our calling is to be holy and to live holy day-by-day, moment-by-moment, because God is holy.

### **Dr. Amy L. Peeler**

We know from Scripture that God is holy. We know from Scripture and from our own lives that we are sinful. So how do you put those two things together, not just conceptually, but in the daily act of your life? There is a certain wing of the church, the Presbyterian, Calvinist, Reformed side that puts a lot of emphasis on our fallenness, that we are sinners, that we can do nothing in our own power. There's another wing of the church, the Wesleyan, Arminian, "free will" side that puts a lot of emphasis on sanctification that says if God calls us to be holy then it's possible that we can do so. I've had the experience of spending time with Christians in both sides and I've learned much from both of them. From the Presbyterian side, Reformed side, there is this important emphasis on the humility that we should all carry, that we are fallen, that we are sinful, that we are dead. Nothing good can come from us, but God has to call us and redeem us by his action. But if you edge too far in that direction you might find yourself waking up day after day saying, "Well, I'm a sinner; I'm going to mess up 900 times today; that's just how it is." The Wesleyans, on the other hand, have this belief that everyday should be a progress of sanctification, becoming more and more like Christ. Now, if you go too far in that direction, you can become a perfectionist or rely on your works to gain God's favor. But if you're able to keep a balance, you know that you're sinful, but you know the One who dwells within you, the Spirit that's been given to you, who can call you forth to good works that God has

prepared beforehand, as Paul says in Ephesians 2. So, having that realization of who you are with the realization of who God is can empower you to live into his holiness, not because you can, but because he can, and he will through you.

## Contributors

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