

# We Believe in God

Lesson 1

What We Know About God

Manuscript



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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>REVELATION &amp; MYSTERIES.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Divine Revelation .....	1
Basic Concept .....	2
Types.....	4
Divine Mysteries.....	8
Basic Concept .....	9
Types.....	11
<b>ATTRIBUTES &amp; WORKS .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Divine Attributes .....	14
Basic Concept .....	14
Types.....	18
Divine Works.....	19
Basic Concept .....	20
Types.....	22
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>CONTRIBUTORS .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>26</b>

# **We Believe in God**

## **Lesson One**

### **What We Know About God**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

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“Knowing God” means different things to different people — everything from experiencing personal intimacy with God, to witnessing his mighty works, to understanding facts about him that the Holy Spirit has revealed. Most of us realize that it’s valuable to have a personal relationship with God and to see him at work in the world. But unfortunately, many of us do not sense that it’s equally important to learn as many facts about God as we can. And it’s no wonder. Studying what traditional systematic theologians often call “the doctrine of God,” or “theology proper,” is so complex that it requires a great deal of effort. But as difficult as it may be, the more we learn about God, the more our personal relationship with him grows. And the more facts we know about him, the more our awareness of his work in the world grows. In fact, learning as much as we can about God strengthens every dimension of our Christian faith.

This is the first lesson in our series, *We Believe in God*, a series devoted to theology proper, or the study of God himself. We’ve entitled this lesson, “What We Know about God.” In this lesson we’ll introduce how evangelical systematic theologians have approached some of the most basic issues related to understanding who God is and what he does.

This introductory lesson on what we know about God will focus on two pairs of foundational issues. First, we’ll explore the revelation and mysteries of God — what God has disclosed about himself and what he’s hidden about himself. And second, we’ll examine God’s attributes and works — two of the main topics in traditional treatments of the doctrine of God. Let’s look first at God’s revelation and mysteries.

#### **REVELATION & MYSTERIES**

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For the sake of simplicity, we’ll deal with the revelation and mysteries of God separately. We’ll begin with divine revelation, and then we’ll turn to divine mysteries. Let’s start with what Christians believe about God’s revelation, or his self-disclosure to the human race.

#### **DIVINE REVELATION**

It would be difficult to imagine a more fundamental issue as we study the doctrine of God than divine revelation. What has God disclosed about himself? How has he done this? Our answers to these questions set the course for every facet of theology proper.

We'll introduce the idea of divine revelation in two ways. First, we'll introduce the basic Christian concept of revelation. And second, we'll look into the two main types of revelation that we must keep in mind as we learn about God. So, what is the basic concept of divine revelation?

## Basic Concept

For our purposes, we can summarize the basic Christian idea of divine revelation in this way:

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

Two facets of this concept deserve to be highlighted, beginning with the fact that God has always revealed himself in human terms.

**One of the most amazing things about the God of the Bible is actually, I believe, unique to the God of the Bible, and that is that he maintains all of his incommunicable attributes, or these infinite attributes, like sovereignty and eternality and infinity, in the midst of relating to creatures who are time-bound and finite and in history. And the great I AM, we're told, enters into time, space and human history in relationship with creatures and relates to them in a way that is on their level. It doesn't mean he sacrifices any of his all-knowing, infinite, eternal nature, but he relates to them right on a level where they are — much like we would do for a little child — and speaks to them on that level. I walk into our kitchen and see flour all over the place and say, "Honey, did something happen with the flour?" It's not because I don't know something happened with the flour, but I'm relating to my children right on a level where they are. And that's what God does for us in his grace. Amazing condescension of God leads to relating to us in a way that at times seems like he must be compromising some of his eternal infinite characteristics. But that's never the case. God's simply relating to us on our level because he loves us that much.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

We all know that we can't study God like we do so many other things in daily life. We can't measure his height and weight, or put him in a test tube and examine him. On the contrary, God is so transcendent, so far beyond us, that he'd be entirely hidden except for one fact: the Holy Spirit has revealed himself in human terms. Systematic theologians have often spoken of this as the anthropomorphic character of revelation. In other words, God has disclosed himself in human form, or in ways that human beings can understand.

There are at least four kinds of anthropomorphic revelation in the Scriptures. In the narrowest sense, the Scriptures often compare the characteristics of God with human characteristics. Numerous biblical passages speak of God as having eyes, ears, nostrils, arms, hands, legs and feet. God also reasons, asks questions, consults others, feels emotions and ponders. He takes action and relents, much like you and I do. But the Scriptures, as a whole, make it clear that these kinds of anthropomorphisms are to be taken as metaphors — comparisons between God and human beings. God doesn't have physical eyes or hands like people do. But we know, nonetheless, that he sees and accomplishes things all the time.

In a slightly broader sense, the Scriptures also present God anthropomorphically in terms of human social structures. For instance, the Bible frequently depicts God as the supreme King of creation. He sits on his throne in heaven, holds counsel, hears reports, makes announcements, sends messengers, and receives worship, similar to the ways human emperors did in biblical times.

Along these same lines, Scripture portrays God as Israel's royal warrior, the lawgiver, the covenant maker and the covenant keeper. He's the royal shepherd and the royal husband and father of his people. Once again, these revelations of God tell us that God is like human beings in certain ways. He rules in ways that are similar to the ways human kings ruled in the ancient world.

Even more broadly, we can say that God's visible appearances in history are also anthropomorphic. The Bible reports a number of times when God appeared visibly in the world — what we often call "theophanies." The most dramatic theophanies associated God with physical smoke and fire, and with visions of his visible heavenly cloud of glory. Now, passages like Colossians 1:15 and 1 Timothy 1:17 tell us that God himself is invisible. So, these visible appearances of God are also anthropomorphic in the sense that they don't present God as he knows himself. Rather, they present God in ways that we human beings can experience him with our limited capacities.

Finally, in the broadest sense, the Scriptures also reveal God in human terms even when they refer to his abstract qualities. The Bible often speaks of God as being just, holy, powerful, and the like. But biblical authors explained these abstract descriptions of God in human terms, in ways that we can understand. So, it's fair to say that in one way or another, all divine revelation is anthropomorphic. God has revealed truths about himself to the human race, but always in ways that accommodate our human limitations.

Keeping in mind that the Holy Spirit has always revealed God to us in human terms, let's look at a second basic feature of divine revelation: God has revealed himself most fully in Christ.

Certainly, there's nothing more central to the Christian faith than Christ himself. He alone is our Savior and our Lord. And he is God's supreme revelation of himself to the human race. Now, as Christ's followers, we acknowledge that God has revealed himself in many ways throughout biblical history. But passages like Colossians 1:15 tell us that Jesus is God's ultimate disclosure of himself in human terms. Jesus is the incarnate, eternal Son of God, the perfect human image and representative of God. And for this reason, everything we believe about God must accord with God's supreme revelation in Jesus — in his teachings, as well as in the significance of his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorious return.

With this basic concept of divine revelation in mind, we should look further at God's self-disclosure by considering the different types of revelation that come from God.

## Types

As we've said, Jesus is God's supreme revelation. But in the New Testament record, Jesus made it clear that he is not God's only self-disclosure. Rather, he affirmed that God has revealed himself in a variety of ways.

**First of all, we can't come to know God unless he reveals himself to us, and he does so in a number of ways, simply through creation and the wonders of it as we look around it ourselves. He reveals himself to us in our relationships with other people who speak to us the things that they have learned about God. We are receiving this revelation from God on many different levels. Of course, for Christians, the most important is that, in his holy Word, God has revealed himself to us... So, we look around at ourselves and we see God revealed to us, we know he exists, and then he tells us about himself, through his disciples, to this day and through his holy Word.**

— Dr. Jeffery Moore

Systematic theology often identifies two types of God's revelation that Jesus himself acknowledged. The first type is often called general or natural revelation.

**General Revelation.** Simply put, the term general revelation refers to the biblical teaching that God has revealed himself to human beings through every experience of creation. In line with a number of Old Testament passages, like Psalm 19, Jesus himself frequently drew theological lessons from general revelation. He often used nature and common human activities, like farming and fishing, to teach about God. In fact, he repeatedly called on his disciples to look within and around themselves to discern what they could about God from their experiences of life.

We see something similar in places like Acts 14:17 and 17:28. In these verses, the apostle Paul followed Christ's example and appealed to general revelation. Here, he pointed Gentiles toward what they knew about God through reflection on nature and Greek poetry.

Romans 1 and 2 offer the most extensive explanation of general revelation in the Scriptures. These chapters draw attention to both positive and negative outlooks that we must keep in view as we explore theology proper. On the positive side, Romans 1 and 2 teaches that we can learn many things about God through our experiences of life in God's creation. Listen to what the apostle Paul said in Romans 1:20:

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

When we look closely at these chapters, we see that “what has been made” is more than just the natural order. Paul also had in mind what we learn about God from human culture, from human beings themselves, and even from our personal inner lives — our moral consciences, intuitions, premonitions and the like.

**I think general revelation is a really important theological concept, number one, because it’s the one thing that cannot be denied. We all live in this world; Christian or not, we’re all living in the world God created. Now whether or not a non-Christian acknowledges that is another story. But in creation, in what we say “general revelation,” what we see around us, we see a lot about who God is just by looking at the creation. We see that we have a powerful God in the fact that he has created planets and stars and the moon. We have a God that has an eye for beauty and that things that are of a beautiful nature matter to him. We see that in animals, in trees, in a sunset. We see the majesty of God in a lion. We see the character of who he is everywhere we look. Now, this can be very important, especially from an evangelistic point of view, because we need a starting point somewhere, and general revelation gives us that starting point. We know certain things about the world we live in and, therefore, the God who created that world by simply looking around us.**

— Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

Throughout the centuries, this positive perspective on general revelation has played a major role in the doctrine of God in the form of “natural theology.” Natural theology is the ongoing attempt to learn about God through general revelation. Followers of Christ have always recognized that we can learn a lot about God through natural theology. And with rare exceptions, formal theological reflections on the doctrine of God, in nearly every branch of the church, have included natural theology.

In fact, leading Scholastic theologians during the medieval period actually constructed a formal, threefold strategy for pursuing natural theology. First, they spoke of “the way of causation” — *via causalitatis* in Latin. By this they meant that we can learn truths about God by observing the good things that God has created or “caused to be” in his creation. For instance, we can see that God created beauty and order in the world. So, we may conclude that God himself must be beautiful and orderly.

Second, Scholastics also spoke of “the way of negation” — *via negationis* in Latin. By this they meant that we can infer truths about God by contrasting him with the limitations and imperfections of creation. For instance, creation is limited by time, but God is eternal. Creation is limited by space, but God is infinite.

And third, medieval Scholastics also spoke of “the way of eminence” — *via eminentiae* in Latin. By this they meant that we can infer truths about God from general revelation by noting how God is always greater than the good things he has created. For example, the power of nature leads us to believe in the supreme power of God. Human intellectual abilities point us toward the incomparable wisdom of God.

For the most part, evangelicals today don't follow such rigorous methods, but natural theology continues to play a major role in theology proper. Jesus taught his followers that God designed every dimension of our experience of creation to reveal things about himself. And, as Christ's faithful people, we should be eager to search out everything we can learn about God through general revelation.

These positive outlooks on general revelation and natural theology are important to any study of theology proper. But, we must also take into account how the first two chapters of Romans present some crucial negative outlooks as well. In Romans 1:18, Paul emphasized the more negative outlooks on general revelation when he wrote:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness (Romans 1:18).

In this verse, Paul explained that general revelation reveals "the wrath of God" rather than the way of his mercy and salvation. And this is true because, more often than not, sinful people "suppress the truth" of general revelation "by their wickedness." In fact, according to Romans 1:25:

[Sinners have] exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:25).

Jesus himself indicated time and again that sinful human beings frequently fail to learn what they should about God from their experiences of life. As Jesus and Paul both conveyed, sinful people have a propensity to lie to themselves and to others about what God has revealed through his creation.

**I would want to be very careful about what we can learn about God through the label or through the category of natural theology. I would want to hang my hat upon a statement like Romans 1:20 that does talk about his majesty, his power. I think those are things you can hang your hat on in terms of what you can learn. But I would want to say immediately that we are in desperate need of special revelation to have a proper perspective... Therefore, you're in need of special revelation to check human reasoning — autonomous or, I should say, independent human reasoning. Because the created realm yields some things that can also be read and understood problematically. Special revelation of the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ fills in accurately who God is. Consultation with his Word just to keep our reasoning in line — desperately needed.**

— Dr. Bruce L. Fields

**God's creation teaches us a number of things... Most basically, of course, it teaches us that he is the sovereign Creator. God is the one who brings all things into being out of nothing, therefore it teaches us**

also about his power. It also, according to Romans 1, teaches us about his righteousness. We hear in Romans 1 that all human beings know that there's a God, that he is to be worshiped, and all have a sense of the righteousness and holiness of God. What we do as sinful human beings is suppress that; we attempt to ignore it. So, creation teaches us God is Creator; he's powerful and he's righteous. We, as sinful human beings, attempt to deny and suppress those things. What creation does not teach us about God, therefore, is how to get right with him. Creation teaches us the things that I've outlined, but it doesn't teach us about God's grace and mercy in the Lord Jesus Christ. There has to be a supplemental revelation of that in his actions in the Lord Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Carl R. Trueman

These negative outlooks on general revelation raise a necessary word of caution about relying too heavily on natural theology. Natural theology is not infallible because sin has corrupted our ability to learn about God from our experiences of his creation. Despite the best efforts of sincere Christian theologians, natural theology has frequently misconstrued general revelation and introduced falsehoods into our concept of God.

For instance, during the patristic and medieval periods, pagan Hellenistic mysticism led many to deny that human beings can know anything about God himself. In the eighteenth century, misunderstandings of the order of nature led a number of theologians to endorse Enlightenment deism — the belief that God is uninvolved in the affairs of the world. In recent centuries, scientific studies in biology have led people to deny the biblical portrait of God as the Creator. At every turn, the corruption of the human heart has led theologians to miss the truth about God disclosed in general revelation.

Of course, these negative outlooks on natural theology lead to a fundamental question: If sin corrupts our awareness of general revelation, how can we know the truth about God?

To answer this question, we'll look at the second main type of divine revelation. In addition to general revelation, Jesus also taught that God has given us special or specific revelation.

***Special Revelation.*** Broadly speaking, special revelation is God's self-disclosure through supernatural means. The Holy Spirit has given revelation through dreams, visions, auditions, and through his great acts of salvation and judgment. God has also made himself known through inspired human representatives — his prophets and apostles who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. And of course, as we said earlier, God's greatest special revelation was in Christ.

The significance of special revelation for the doctrine of God hardly can be overstated. It's so essential to God's purposes that even before sin came into the world, God guided Adam and Eve through special verbal revelation. And, of course, special revelation has been critical after sin as well. It not only guides our attempts to understand general revelation, it also discloses the way of eternal salvation.

As wonderful as it is that God has granted supernatural revelation — both before and after sin came into the world — what we commonly call “special revelation from God” took place thousands of years ago. So, how do we learn about God through special revelation today?

Once again, we must turn to what Jesus, God’s supreme revelation, taught. In brief, Christ taught his followers to devote themselves to God’s special revelation in Scripture. Passages like Mark 12:28-34 clearly convey that Jesus, like other Palestinian rabbis in his day, affirmed the Old Testament as God’s special written revelation.

And we know that the New Testament is also God’s inspired revelation. In places like John 16:12-13, and Ephesians 2:20, we learn that, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to equip his first-century apostles and prophets to reveal God to his church. The New Testament is our representative collection of these first-century apostolic and prophetic special revelations. This is why evangelical Christians insist that we can rely on Scripture to discern God’s disclosures in both general revelation and special revelation throughout history.

In our study of God’s revelation and mysteries, we’ve explored divine revelation as the source of everything we know about God. Now, let’s turn to the other side of the equation. How should divine mysteries — the many things about God that remain hidden — impact our study of theology proper?

## DIVINE MYSTERIES

**One thing we have to get a handle on, that is not easy to get a handle on, and that is, who God really is. He is transcendent; he’s beyond the creation. All that we experience here in this world, he created, so we can’t really know him unless he reveals himself, unless he enters into creation somehow. He speaks to us; he reveals himself to us, which he has done fully in his Son Jesus. But that causes him to be mysterious to us. And in fact, the only way we can know the kingdom of God, his reign and his rule — because he allows us to live here, and he is an invisible God — so the only way we can know his kingdom is if he reveals that to us.**

— Dr. Rick Boyd

As we’ve seen, God has overcome the vast distance between himself and humanity. He’s made it possible for us to know about him through his general and special revelation. But at the same time, our knowledge of God is deeply affected by divine mysteries. There are many things that God has not revealed about himself.

Understanding divine mysteries is so crucial to theology proper that it will help to look at it in two steps. We’ll first explain the basic concept of divine mysteries. Then, we’ll touch on the types of mysteries we face as we study the doctrine of God. What is the basic concept of divine mysteries?

## Basic Concept

The term “mystery” is used in a variety of ways in Scripture, but for our purposes, we may say that divine mysteries are:

**Innumerable, undisclosed truths about God that limit our understanding of God.**

We’ll highlight two facets of this definition. The first facet is the fact that divine mysteries are “innumerable, undisclosed truths about God.” In Romans 11:33, the apostle Paul pointed out that we should always be mindful of divine mysteries. He wrote:

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).

In the chapters leading up to this verse, Paul drew many firm beliefs about God from both general and special revelation. But, in this passage, Paul pointed out the “depth” of God’s wisdom and knowledge. And he accepted that God’s judgments are “unsearchable” and “his paths beyond tracing out.” Even though Paul grasped much about God through divine revelation, he still faced countless mysteries, things that the Spirit of God had not revealed.

**God is mysterious because he surpasses any comprehension or knowledge that we may have. He acts at times without consulting us. He always acts without consulting us, but sometimes the way he acts is difficult for us to discern. He’s also incomprehensible in the sense that no one can totally exhaust the knowledge of God. There is bound to be mystery because he is God and not a creature... There’s nothing about God’s mysteriousness that is a problem for us in any ultimate way. The mystery of God does not mean he can’t be accessed. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t love us and that we can’t feel his love. It doesn’t mean any of those things. In fact, if he weren’t mysterious, we could safely say he wouldn’t be God; why would we want a God who isn’t mysterious... We know him, not exhaustively, but we know him truly. We don’t comprehend him, but we know him surely enough to say that we know God and not just some vague philosophical principle.**

— Dr. William Edgar

Charles Hodge, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, who lived from 1797-1878, summed up divine mysteries in a remarkable way. In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Part I, chapter 4, he wrote this:

**There is infinitely more in God than we have any idea of; and what we do know, we know imperfectly.**

Hodge made two striking observations here. First, he insisted that what is true of God is “infinitely more ... than we have any idea of.” There are not just a handful of mysteries, nor even a lot of mysteries. Rather, because God himself is infinite, there are infinitely more mysteries than we can even imagine. Hodge also explained that divine mysteries so permeate our understanding that even “what we do know [about God], we know imperfectly.” In other words, there’s not a single thing about God that we understand fully.

**Sometimes when we hear someone say that God is incomprehensible, we sort of react negatively to that — well, can’t I know him? Can’t I come to know him? And of course, the Bible is God’s self-revelation. He has revealed himself so that we can come to know him in a personal way and that we can come to know something about him. But if you stop and think about it, if God is truly the infinite God, then my poor little mind, and even the best theological minds that have ever lived, will not be able to comprehend him in his fullness. By definition, if I could comprehend him, I would be as great as he is. And so this is a very important part of... Our God is not a little God. He is not small enough that I can get all of him into my mind or into a book. We are grateful that he has revealed enough of himself and that he has provided for our salvation that we can come to have some understanding of him, and can come into fellowship with him, to live rightly in fellowship with him, and to think rightly about him, though not exhaustively.**

— Dr. Gareth Cockerill

In addition to recognizing that divine mysteries are innumerable, we should also note a second important facet of divine mysteries. Divine mysteries severely limit our understanding as we study theology proper.

There are many different ways that divine mysteries limit what we know about God, but for this lesson, we’ll consider just two ways. On the one side, we have severely limited information about God. Although God has made clear what is essential for salvation and life in Christ, in reality, none of us understands much about God. First Corinthians 13:12 tells us that we see only a “poor reflection” of the truth of God, as if we’re looking “in a mirror.”

So, in discussions of the doctrine of God, countless questions come up that simply can’t be answered fully. For instance, why does God allow evil? How can we discern God’s purposes in current events? Many theologians, especially those surrounded by skeptics, stray into speculation because they can’t admit that we don’t have every answer to these kinds of questions. But divine mysteries often lead Christ’s faithful followers to admit, “I don’t know.” When it comes to the doctrine of God, if God hasn’t revealed it, we can’t know it. It’s as simple as that.

As faithful followers of Christ, we should never run from the fact that we have limited information about God. In fact, it’s a blessing to be reminded moment by moment of this limitation. Divine mysteries compel us to trust God. We must depend on the

Father and on Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, rather than placing our faith in our own limited abilities to possess knowledge of God.

On the other side, divine mysteries also mean that human beings are only able to offer limited explanations of God's revelations. We're right to insist that the revelation of the God of truth doesn't contradict itself. And that there are many logical connections we can see among the revelations of God. But whether we admit it or not, divine mysteries not only limit how much information we have about God. They also limit our ability to explain the logical coherence of much of what God has revealed about himself.

For instance, we can't give a thoroughly logical explanation of the Trinity — the fact that God is one and three. We can't logically explain every dimension of the reality that Jesus is both truly God and truly man. We can't fully clarify how God can be entirely sovereign over human affairs and still hold us responsible for what we do. The best Christian minds have tried to answer these and many similar questions. But, they've been unable to provide anything close to complete and logical explanations.

In the end, it can be valuable to attempt to explain the logical coherence of what God has revealed about himself. But this isn't how we determine whether something is true or false. The truth of any theological claim depends only on whether or not God has disclosed it in general or special revelation.

**When theologians state that God is incomprehensible, what they are intimating or meaning is that his full essence and being cannot be grasped and understood by us who are a finite being. God, being an infinite being in that regard there, it is very unlikely that we can grasp and know him in his fullness. I think back to what Paul says in Romans 11:33-34 when he is talking about the unsearchable knowledge and wisdom of God in that respect there. But yet and still, though he has provided us with enough self-revelation, that it is adequate for us, you know, to come to faith.**

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

To understand the significance of divine mysteries more fully, we've explored the basic concept. Now, it will also help to consider the types of divine mysteries that come into play as we study the doctrine of God.

## Types

We can distinguish between two different types of mysteries. The first type we'll call "temporary mysteries." Let's look at what we mean by this.

**Temporary.** Temporary mysteries are truths about God that are hidden from human beings for a period of time, but then are revealed at some later point in history. God often discloses what was once mysterious through general revelation. He uses the physical world, human cultures, other people, or even changes within ourselves to reveal temporary mysteries.

Something similar is true with special revelation. A careful reading of Scripture shows that God's later special revelations have never contradicted his earlier special revelations. But it's also clear that God has disclosed more and more about himself over time. This unfolding of special revelation occurred at every period of biblical history. Of course, the most dramatic unveiling of divine mysteries took place in the special revelation of Christ. Paul had this in mind when he wrote Ephesians 1:9, 3:3, and 6:19. In these verses, Paul referred to the mystery of God's eternal purpose in Christ. He explained that this mystery had been kept hidden until the time of the New Testament apostles and prophets.

For this reason, whenever we seek to learn about God, we must always search out special revelation in the New Testament to clarify temporary mysteries found in the Old Testament.

**Sometimes we use the term “mysterious” to speak about God because we don't understand exactly what he's doing. The New Testament, on the other hand, generally uses the term “mysterious,” which comes from the Greek word *mysterion* — it's virtually the same word — it means that God's unfolding gracious plan of salvation is something that we would never have figured out on our own. That is, it's a mystery in the sense that we would never have understood it had it not been for the fact that God revealed it to us. And so, God reveals his plan to us in his special revelation. And that's the reason that you see that word *mysterion* used in Ephesians and used in 1 Corinthians. It's that God is slowly ... unfolding his revelation and showing us how salvation is both for the Jew and the Gentile, and it is for anyone who will accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah.**

— Dr. Samuel Lamerson

But we must also remember that, even as New Testament Christians, God hasn't revealed every temporary mystery to us just yet. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul put it this way:

Now I know in part; then I shall know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Only when Christ returns in glory will he disclose every temporary mystery. And we will understand God and his ways far more fully than we do today.

As we've seen, when we study the doctrine of God we face many temporary mysteries. But the Bible makes it clear that we also have to deal with permanent mysteries as we study theology proper.

***Permanent.*** Permanent mysteries are truths about God that human beings will never grasp because these truths are beyond our comprehension. In traditional theology, this reality is deemed the incomprehensibility of God. We can understand some things about God as he reveals them in human terms, but we'll never understand everything about

anything about God. We find this idea expressed clearly in Isaiah 55:8-9, where the prophet Isaiah wrote this:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

In these verses, Isaiah reminded Israel of God’s permanent mysteries due to God’s incomprehensibility.

When the Scriptures refer to God as mysterious, we have to make sure that we don’t misunderstand the word “mystery.” When I think of things in this world as mysterious I think that they have some dark secret that they’re going to surprise me with at some point. That’s not the case here. By “mysterious” we mean that God is incomprehensible. We mean that he has a life that is beyond our imagining. It means that there is something about him that we cannot grasp entirely. And I quite like that. That means that he is beyond my creaturely life. He’s greater than I could ever think. The technical theological word we use for this is “transcendence.” God is transcendent. He is beyond our scope of thinking. And that is why he is worthy of worship. That is why he is great. That is why he is someone we adore.

— Dr. Gary M. Burge

Mystery in God is partly due to the nature of who he is and his infinitude versus our finitude, our limitation, and his unlimited power and understanding. But also, it’s related specifically to his purposes and plans in creation. Why does God work out his ways in this way and not that? And oftentimes, I think, as arrogant human beings, we would like to think that we know better how to work things out than God does. But in the mystery of God... It talks about it in Scripture, for example, that the hidden things are God's alone, in Deuteronomy 29:29, but the things that he’s revealed, those are the things that we can rejoice and celebrate in, and there’s a sense in which we can accept that God hasn’t told us everything, hasn’t told us everything about himself — how could he? And how could we comprehend it? But also, he hasn’t told us everything about how he’s working out his purposes and plans. And nobody knows that better than Job in the Old Testament who wanted an answer to his questions about why did God allow these things, and God basically didn’t give him the answer he wanted. The answer God gave was, “I know what I’m doing, and in

**a sense, there is a mystery to my plan that only I can fully explain, and ultimately you will see at the end of time when everything will suddenly and completely make sense.”**

**— Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

As we begin this series on what we know about God, we must always remember that, while God has revealed himself in both general and special revelation, he has kept both temporary and permanent mysteries hidden from us. We simply cannot escape the reality that we are but creatures whose understanding of God is always severely limited.

So far in this lesson on what we know about God we've looked at some of the ways divine revelation and mysteries shape the study of theology proper. Now, we're ready to introduce our second main topic: God's attributes and works. These subjects represent two of the primary ways traditional theologians have summarized what we can know about God.

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## ATTRIBUTES & WORKS

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In addition to God's attributes and works, systematic theologians have usually given a lot of attention to the doctrine of the Trinity in theology proper. We deal with the Holy Trinity in some detail in our series on The Apostles' Creed. So, in this series we'll focus just on these other two main topics.

In later lessons, we'll explore many features of the attributes and works of God, but at this point we'll just introduce each concept. First, we'll consider divine attributes, or who God is. And second, we'll turn to divine works, or what God does. Let's begin with God's divine attributes.

### DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

It will help to introduce the topic of divine attributes in two steps. We'll begin with the basic concept of God's attributes. Then we'll examine the types of divine attributes that are often distinguished in systematic theology. So, what is the basic concept of divine attributes?

#### Basic Concept

If we were to ask most Christians, “What are the attributes of God?” they would probably say that God's attributes are all the qualities or characteristics that the Scriptures attribute to God. Well, this outlook is fine as far as it goes. But in traditional systematic theology the phrase “attributes of God” signifies something more specific.

In systematic theology, divine attributes are:

**The perfections of God’s essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.**

This definition highlights two primary factors that characterize formal discussions of God’s attributes. In the first place, God’s attributes are “the perfections of God’s essence.” Modern evangelicals don’t often refer to God’s essence. So, it will help to explore this concept a bit.

To begin with, the word “essence” translates the Latin term *essentia*, meaning “essence” or “being.” In Latin theology, God’s essence was also closely associated with the term *substantia* or “substance.” Patristic and medieval theologians adopted these terms from neo-Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. Now, Plato and Aristotle approached the idea of essence in different ways. And there are a number of important complexities about the concept of essence that have been raised in modern philosophy. But the basic idea isn’t difficult to grasp.

In simple terms, the “essence,” “being,” or “substance” of something is the unchanging reality that underlies all of its outward, changing manifestations. Christian theologians have drawn upon this idea of essence as they’ve discussed the attributes or perfections of God.

In general, God’s essence involves four important distinctions: 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; and God’s short-term historical manifestations, his disclosures of himself in relatively short periods of time.

To clarify what we mean here, let’s think about these distinctions using the example of a person. We’ll say that this particular person is a soloist in church on Sundays. He’s a farmer who milks cows twice a day on his farm. He’s also a husband and a grandfather. And of course, as Christians, we know that he’s the image of God, ordained as God’s representative and God’s servant.

Some facts we know about this man refer to short-term historical manifestations of who he is. These things are true of him only now and then. He’s a soloist in church, but only on Sundays. He milks cows, but only twice a day. While these descriptions are true of him, they don’t refer to his essence. Rather, he remains the same man when he involves himself in these activities and when he doesn’t.

Some of these descriptions refer to relatively long-term historical manifestations of who this man is. He’s a husband and a grandfather. These descriptions apply for longer periods of time, but they are not essential to who the man is. He wasn’t always a husband or a grandfather. But he was always the same man.

When we speak of this man as the image of God, ordained to be God’s representative and God’s servant, we are speaking of permanent attributes of his essence, qualities of his humanity. No matter what happens in his life, these descriptions are true of him.

But if we were to add up all that we know about him, including his permanent attributes, we realize that we only have glimpses into his essence. The essence of who this man is remains somewhat elusive, always beyond our full grasp.

In many ways, systematic theologians make similar distinctions in theology proper. Now, as we all know, the Scriptures forbid making images of God. So, we won't attempt to portray God himself here. But to help us understand God's essence we'll use an analogy. Try to imagine a mysterious, nebula in outer space as representing the essence of God. Surrounding this nebula are stained-glass windows that represent the attributes or perfections of God's essence. Beyond this, imagine systems of stars and planets extending from this centerpiece that represent the long-term manifestations of God. And finally, imagine more distant systems of stars and planets that represent God's short-term manifestations. These distinctions between God's essence, his attributes and his long and short-term manifestations in history are crucial in discussions of the doctrine of God in traditional systematic theology.

Listen to the first Article of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*, written in 1530 that resembles discussions of God's essence in the Anglican *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* and the Methodist *Twenty-Five Articles of Religion*:

**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.**

As we see here, the Confession explicitly refers to the "one Divine Essence." In effect, the essence of God is the unchanging reality that underlies the variety of ways God has manifested himself in the course of history.

Unfortunately, before the Reformation, many theologians that were inclined toward Christian mysticism followed Hellenistic philosophies and concluded that God's essence is shrouded in mystery. In this view, God's revelations tell us little, if anything, about his eternal essence. They only tell us about his secondary, changing, historical manifestations. Now, evangelicals agree that there is infinitely more to God's essence than we can know. But, despite this, evangelicals still insist that God has actually revealed some of the attributes, or the qualities, of his divine essence. This belief clearly follows the teachings of Scripture.

Look again at the first article of the *Augsburg Confession*. Immediately after mentioning the "one Divine Essence," the Confession turns to a number of qualities or properties of God's essence. God is "eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness." These attributes of God — these eternal, unchanging qualities — characterize God's essence.

On occasion, biblical authors referred explicitly to God's eternal, essential perfections. For instance, Psalm 34:8 declares that "the Lord is good." Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:17 that God is "eternal." When we study all of Scripture, it's clear that no matter what God says or does in any situation, no matter what variety he displays, he is always good and he is always eternal. The same kind of thing can be said regarding what the Scriptures teach about God's infinity, his holiness, his justice, his wisdom, his incomprehensibility, his omnipotence and a number of other divine attributes. They are all permanent qualities of his divine essence that the Scriptures refer to explicitly.

**An attribute of God is that which is innate to God himself. It is that which makes God, God. You call it his nature, his substance. It is that**

**reality in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit all completely share. And so, it's that which distinguishes God, in many respects, from what we are as finite creatures. And so, yeah, it is what defines the "Godness" of God.**

— Dr. J. Scott Horrell

But now let's take another look at our definition of divine attributes. In addition to being the perfections of God's essence, divine attributes are also revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.

As we've just said, the Scriptures occasionally refer rather directly to God's eternal attributes. But, for the most part, they display God's attributes indirectly through descriptions, names and titles, metaphors and similes, and reports of his actions in history. None of these manifestations are contrary to his essence — God always manifests himself in ways that are true to who he is — but, in systematic theology, the attributes of God are not the same as his manifestations. Instead, we determine the attributes of God by asking: "What must always have been true of God, and what must always be true of God that explains all the ways he has manifested himself in history?"

Now, we have to be careful here. It usually isn't difficult to maintain this distinction between God's attributes and his manifestations when we deal with things that were true of God for relatively short periods of time. For instance, in Ezekiel 8:18, God said that he would not listen to the prayers of his people. But clearly, we shouldn't say that it's God's essence to refuse to listen to prayers. In many other places, the Scriptures tell us that God does listen to prayers. Both of these descriptions of God are true historical manifestations of who he is at particular times. But neither is a quality of his essence. Instead, God's attributes are the eternal perfections of his essence that are true of him both when he listens and when he does not listen to prayers.

Now, by contrast, it's often more difficult to distinguish between God's attributes and his historical manifestations when they last for relatively long periods of time. For example, we may be tempted to think that patience is an attribute of God because he has shown patience toward sinners generation after generation. But, as we know from the Bible, God's patience ends with different people at different times in history. And it will end for all sinners at the final judgment when Christ returns in glory. So, in the technical sense of systematic theology, even something as long-lasting as divine patience is not an eternal attribute of God's essence.

We'll explore this distinction in more detail in later lessons. But at this point, the basic idea should be clear. God manifests himself short-term and long-term in certain ways in history. But, the attributes of God are those qualities of God that have been true of him forever, and that will always be true of him forever.

Keeping divine attributes and this basic concept in mind, we should turn to a second issue: the different types of God's attributes. How have theologians identified and classified the perfections of God's essence?

## Types

Because the Bible doesn't explicitly identify all of God's attributes, and because it doesn't classify them for us, theologians have grouped God's perfections in different ways. Many scholars have classified God's attributes along the lines we mentioned earlier in this lesson: "the way of causation," "the way of negation," and "the way of eminence." Another common way of classifying God's attributes is based on current understandings of human beings as the image of God. In this approach, it's common to speak of God's perfections as his "being," his "intellect," his "will" and his "moral character." Now, neither of these systems of classification have been the most prominent. But we need to keep them in mind because they appear time and again, either explicitly or implicitly, as theologians discuss the attributes of God.

For the most part, evangelicals have favored dividing God's perfections into two main types of attributes. The first type is called God's incommunicable attributes. And the second type is referred to as his communicable attributes. Let's unpack what we mean by both of these categories, beginning with the incommunicable attributes of God.

***Incommunicable.*** Well-known theologians have often pointed out the limitations of this twofold classification, and we'll look into some of these issues in lessons that follow. But this distinction continues to be a common way of speaking of the perfections of God's essence.

The term "incommunicable" means "unable to be shared." So, God's incommunicable attributes are those perfections of his essence that creation — including human beings as the image of God — cannot share with him. As such, incommunicable attributes roughly correspond to the perfections of God that we determine through the "way of negation." These attributes focus on how God is different from his creation.

As we saw a moment ago, the first article of the *Augsburg Confession* refers to six attributes of God. He is eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. Although it's something of an oversimplification, it's common for the incommunicable attributes of God to be associated with the terms eternal, without body, without parts, and infinite. God is eternal; we are temporal. He is without body; we are bodies. He is without parts; we are divided into parts. He is infinite; we are finite.

Now, for God to communicate with us in human terms, the Scriptures occasionally draw upon faint, positive comparisons between these attributes and creation. Yet, without a doubt, the primary way the Bible explains these attributes of God is through contrast between what God is and what his creation is. As a result, the Scriptures don't call on human beings to imitate God in these ways. We aren't instructed to try to be eternal, without bodies, without parts, or infinite. On the contrary, the Scriptures call on us to acknowledge these attributes of God in humble worship and praise for how he is so different from us.

With this idea of the incommunicable attributes of God in mind, let's consider the second type of God's attributes: God's communicable attributes.

***Communicable.*** Of the attributes listed in the first article of the *Augsburg Confession*, the communicable attributes are usually associated with power, wisdom, and goodness.

The term “communicable” signifies that something is able to be shared. In this case, we refer to the fact that some of God’s eternal perfections are shared with his creation, especially with human beings as the image of God. Human beings have power, wisdom and goodness — imperfectly and on a human scale — but we possess these qualities nonetheless.

The primary way that we understand God’s communicable attributes is by comparison. In this sense, the communicable attributes roughly correspond to those that medieval scholastic theologians identified through “the way of causation” and “the way of eminence.” Throughout Scripture, we’re often commanded not simply to admire these divine attributes, but also to imitate them. We’re to be more and more like God in our exercise of power. And we’re to imitate him by developing and displaying wisdom and goodness in our lives.

There are many things that need to be said about both of these classes of God’s perfections. And we’ll explore more about their significance in later lessons of this series. But at this point, we should simply keep in mind that one of the most common ways to distinguish God’s perfections from each other is to speak of them as his incommunicable and communicable attributes.

**It’s important for students who are trying to study systematic theology to kind of understand the difference between the communicable and incommunicable attributes of God, because we’ve got to understand what makes us different. Right? God is wholly other, distinct from his creation, yet we are created in the image of God. So, it’s important for us to understand what things we are like God being his imagers, and what things that we are not. And so it’s important to always keep in mind that God is infinite and eternal and unchangeable in all that he is, and although we are finite and changeable and mutable in all those different ways, and the failures, we still have certain aspects of our being that are like God when it comes to things like we can have knowledge, we can love, we can seek justice and mercy. Those are things that God does perfectly — we do in a finite level — but it’s important for us to understand who we are as his imagers and who he is as our Creator.**

— Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

So far, we’ve introduced the concept of the attributes and works of God by looking at his divine attributes. Now, let’s turn to the other side of this pair, God’s divine works.

## **DIVINE WORKS**

We’ll only touch briefly on divine works in this lesson because we’ll explore this idea more thoroughly toward the end of this series. But as an overview, we’ll explain first

the basic concept of divine works; and second, we'll introduce the types of God's works. Consider first the basic concept of divine works.

## Basic Concept

If we were to ask most evangelicals, "What are the works of God?" most of us would simply point to those places where the Scriptures say that God did this or that. And that would be right, as far as it goes. But systematic theologians approach divine works much like they approach divine attributes. Instead of focusing on specific historical events, they seek to understand what lies behind these events. They ask, "What can we know that is always true of what God has done, is doing, and will do?"

We can summarize this basic approach to divine works by saying that, in systematic theology, the topic of divine works refers to:

**How God works all things according to his eternal purposes.**

We'll highlight two facets of this topic, beginning with the fact that divine works entail all things. The idea that divine works include every event often seems a bit theoretical and speculative for new students of theology. So, we should say a few words about this dimension of the works of God. In Ephesians 1:11, Paul praised God as:

**Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).**

Here we see that Paul mentioned the fact that God "works out everything." He didn't say that God is involved with some events, or even with many events. He had in mind that, in some sense, God works out every single event that ever has occurred and ever will occur.

It's unusual for modern evangelicals to think about God's works on such a large scale. For many of us, we read the Scriptures and conclude that God only does some things, while other parts of creation do other things.

Now, these kinds of differentiations do appear in Scripture. The Bible speaks of God acting directly in the world at times. For example, he delivered Israel at the sea. And the Scriptures also refer to preternatural creatures causing events to occur, such as when Satan tempted Job to curse God. Beyond this, we read about human beings causing things to happen. For instance, David worked hard preparing for Solomon's temple. We read of animals and plants having effects on the world. And the Bible also talks of inanimate objects, like the sun, influencing life on the earth.

But the question in traditional Christian theology is this: Should we limit what we call "God's works" simply to those events that Scripture attributes exclusively to God? Following the Scriptures, the mainstream of traditional Christian theology has responded to this question with a resounding, "No." Drawing terminology from Aristotle, Christian theologians have described God as the "First Cause" of all things. In evangelical theology, this means that God, as the First Cause, did not simply begin history. Rather, God is the ultimate cause behind every event that occurs at every moment in history.

But in addition to designating God as the First Cause, evangelical systematic theologians have also spoken of second causes. Second causes are created beings or objects that perform real, but secondary roles in causing events to occur.

This distinction between the First Cause and second causes is based on the fact that the Scriptures treat more than just a handful of spectacular, miraculous events — like the deliverance of Israel at the sea — as divine works. The first chapter of Job makes it clear that God commissioned Satan to test Job. In 1 Chronicles 29:16 David himself gave God the glory for his success in preparing for Solomon’s temple. Passages like Psalm 147:7-9 indicate that God is in control of what animals and plants do. And the effects of inanimate objects, like the sun, are attributed to God in passages like Isaiah 45:6-7.

Later in this series, we’ll explore how God, the First Cause, employs creation, or second causes, in a variety of ways. And we’ll see especially how this helps us understand that God is not the author of evil. But for now, we simply want to point out that, in one way or another, God’s works include everything that occurs in history, whether he does them directly or indirectly. If we look again at our summary of the basic concept of divine works, we can see that divine works are also “according to [God’s] eternal purposes.”

As we saw earlier in this lesson, theologians have given a lot of attention to God’s eternal, unchanging attributes in theology proper. In a similar way, they’ve also concentrated on how God’s works are according to his eternal, unchanging plan or purposes. Now, it’s fair to say that many modern evangelicals are unfamiliar with this concept. And those who speak of such matters have different ways of understanding them. So, we should take a moment to explain the basic idea that we have in mind. You’ll recall that, in Ephesians 1:11, Paul praised God as:

Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will  
(Ephesians 1:11).

Notice here that Paul not only spoke of “everything” as the work of God, but also that every work of God is “in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Here Paul referred to the Old Testament concept that God has an eternal plan for history, a plan that he is sure to fulfill. Listen, for instance, to Isaiah 46:10 where God said this:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still  
to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please  
(Isaiah 46:10).

Now, this facet of God’s works is so mysterious that faithful Christians have understood it in many different ways. But on the whole, mainstream Christian theology has always affirmed that God has an eternal plan. And his works — that include every dimension of history — always fulfill his eternal purposes. God is not ignorant of what will happen in history. He is never surprised by history. His purposes are not frustrated. As mysterious as it is, nothing is beyond God’s all-encompassing plan for history in Christ.

Whenever something happens in the world, people wonder, “Is this something that God really had in mind or not?” and particularly when things go wrong in the world we wonder, “Where is God in this, and what is his purpose?” And I think it’s helpful for us to understand the fullness of the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God, because it’s clear that there is nothing that happens that is outside the ultimate will and purpose of God. And there are lots of places we can point to in Scripture. Ephesians 1 is certainly, is one of those places, which, it says that God works out everything according to the purpose of his will. And so, everything that has ever happened in history is ultimately part of the purposes of God... And God has — and this is a great mystery for us with our limited minds — God has a purpose that he’s working out through human history.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

If God is omniscient, if God’s knowledge is comprehensive of the past, present and future, all things possible and all things actual, then all historical events are part of his plan.

— Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

Having touched on the basic concept of divine works, we should also mention how formal discussions of the doctrine of God have distinguished different types, or kinds of divine works.

## Types

As just one example, listen once again to the first article of the *Augsburg Confession*:

**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.**

As we see here, after listing a number of God’s attributes, the Confession draws attention to two types of divine works. On the one side, it mentions that God is “the Maker ... of all things, visible and invisible.” And on the other side, it mentions that God is the “Preserver of all things, visible and invisible.”

These affirmations in the Augsburg Confession represent a prominent, traditional distinction between two types of divine works. The first is God’s work of creation. We all know that, in Genesis 1:1, the Bible begins in this way:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

In many respects, the Scriptures begin with this teaching because it forms the basis of everything we believe about the works of God.

There are many ways to summarize traditional treatments of God's work of creation in theology proper. And we'll explore these matters in later lessons. But, in this lesson, it will suffice simply to mention three main emphases. First, the fact of creation: how God created everything that exists. Second, the variety of creation: how God created variety both in the physical and spiritual realms. And third, the purpose of creation: how God first established the creation to fulfill his eternal purposes.

In addition to the work of creation, the second type of divine works is God's work of providence, or as it is often put, the fact that God preserves his creation.

Unfortunately, all too often, evangelical Christians today don't grasp how profound God's work of providence is. They imagine that when God created the world, he gave it a measure of independence so that it can hold together without his attention. But in traditional systematic theology, the term "providence" — from the Latin term "*providentia*" — has connotations of "attending to something, or taking care of something." And this terminology reflects the Christian belief that creation is just as dependent on God now as it was at the very first moment of creation. Listen to Colossians 1:16-17 where the apostle Paul said these words:

For in [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

As this passage indicates, not only is it true that in Christ all things were created, it's equally true that in him all things hold together. By drawing this parallel, the apostle made it clear that creation would simply fall apart if it weren't for God's providence — his preserving and sustaining care — constantly at work in creation.

Simply put, much like the work of creation, the work of providence can be summarized in three main ways: the fact of God's providential care for creation, how he preserves and sustains the world and everything he has made; the variety of God's providential care, how he interacts with different facets of creation in different ways; and the purpose of God's providential care, how God ensures that creation will fulfill his eternal purposes. We won't explore these details in this lesson. But, as we continue to study the doctrine of God, we'll see more clearly how crucial it is to understand the works of God, both his work of creation and his work of providence.

**Well, when we're talking about the providence of God, what we're talking about is God's ongoing care for his creation and all his creatures. We don't just believe that God created the world and kind of wandered off to do something else. No, God continues to sustain the world by his word of power. Through his word, through his Spirit, God continues to sustain the world. So, we think about God providing what we need: food, water, air, all those things we take for granted, God's providing them. It's why it's important we say our thanks to**

God. We say grace at meals and offer him praise and thanksgiving. Every good gift we got from the Father above. So, we need to remember he gives us everything we need. He is the governor. He's actually overseeing all events, even historical events sometimes that seem wild out of control, but God is omnipotent above all these things, guiding them, allowing things to happen that we may be mystified by, but we believe God is still in charge and guiding them to his own outcome. But also, particularly providing for us and for our salvation, helping us to realize our need for his gracious restorative work, our rebuilding work, and that he will one day take us to that new heavens and the new earth if we put our faith in him... We follow him to this new kingdom. What we're going to see there is the fullness of God's providential care when he does, as the great heavenly Father who loves us so much, provides us every good gift that we need to sustain us in the work he's given us to do.

— Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've introduced our study of the doctrine of God, or theology proper, by focusing on how we can grow in what we know about God. We've seen how our knowledge of God is shaped by both divine revelation and mysteries, including special and general revelation and temporary and permanent mysteries. And we've learned that our knowledge of God entails an awareness of both his attributes and his works, both his incommunicable and communicable attributes, and his works of creation and providence.

All followers of Christ should be eager to grow in their personal knowledge of God and in their experience of his actions in the world. But to do this, we must also devote ourselves to learning as much as we possibly can about God. In this lesson, we've only touched on a few of the main issues that come to the foreground in theology proper. But as we continue in the lessons that follow, we'll learn more and more about the doctrine of God as we explore more about who God is and what he does. And as we do, we'll see every step of the way, how increasing our knowledge of God is essential to every dimension of Christian theology, and to every dimension of faithful service to God.

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## GLOSSARY

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**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; the fundamental nature or substance of which God 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” or “essence”; used by Tertullian to refer to the oneness of God’s being

**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