

UNIT 1: The Attributes of God

Section 2: Contemplating God

Assigned Reading:

*A. W. Pink – The Attributes of God
The Contemplation of God*

Introduction:

A.W. Tozer, “Lord, how great is our dilemma! In Thy Presence silence best becomes us, yet love inflames our hearts and constrains us to speak.”

There are two problems that confront us at the beginning of contemplating God. The first involves the problem of knowledge – What, if anything can be known about God? From this question, two sub-questions can be seen: What is the process by which we know and to what extent can we know? The second problem is that of language. What, if anything, can be said about God? This problem deals with the limits of language to express divine truths. These problems are somewhat related due to the way that thoughts connect themselves to words in the process of comprehension. This is not to say that thinking cannot occur without words (maybe a good example is a dog which cannot speak but demonstrates rationality), but that thinking does often find itself in connection to words...

Part of the knowledge problem in this regard involves the human side of the equation. We are finite. Our mind necessarily has limits in its ability to know all sorts of things. There is not one field of study/inquiry that man is utterly sovereign over. There is always more to be known and no one (no matter how expert) has every piece of information perfectly integrated in their mind about that particular subject area. Just because a man can show himself to be far superior to another man, does not qualify him as having absolute knowledge regarding the subject.

The other half of the knowledge problem arises from what is being contemplated. With a great many subjects we might feel ourselves to have a great handle, but when contemplating God, we must all utterly admit our inadequacies! If having a full grasp of mathematics or history or science is impossible for us, surely the contemplation of the One who brought all these into existence will be utterly beyond us! It is the nature of the knowledge being gained that makes this subject particularly difficult... How does one attain information about that which is “spiritual” in nature? The answers to some of these questions become quite “philosophical” and we’ll save that discussion for another time.

The problem of language is well known in theological circles. Many terms have been coined in an effort to communicate concepts/ideas fraught with nuances. There is a desire for linguistic precision, but meanwhile it seems almost impossible to attain. So, although, there are virtually no words that are completely adequate to describe any aspect of God, certain conventions have come to be regarded as appropriate for our understanding of language about God. More on this to follow...

→ Allow time for Class Questions and Discussion over chapter 17, The Contemplation of God.

Especially important to our present discussion today is the first half of the chapter... Point one.

Q1: Are we capable of knowing God fully? If so, when will we arrive at this knowledge?

Q2: If we aren’t capable of knowing God fully, then why should we even try to know Him?

Q3: What should we learn from God being “incomprehensible?”

I. Our Inability to Comprehend God

A. What is God like?

1. "Because God is infinite and humans are finite, human beings can never fully understand God" (Grudem, 149).
2. "God is a being who exists in eternity, free of all the limitations of time and space. In his being (or essence) he is different from us or from anything else in the created order, and is therefore fundamentally unknowable" (Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 110).
3. At the outset we must admit that God is NOT like anything else!
4. But meanwhile, thinking itself is dependent upon the familiar to bridge into the unknown.
5. Even the most "inventive" minds make use of that which is already known or contemplated in order to then draw conclusions and develop new thinking...
6. God is "**incomprehensible**" – Unable to be **fully** understood [exhaustive knowledge]
 - a. **Psalm 145:3** Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, And His greatness is unsearchable.
 - b. **Psalm 147:5** Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.
 - c. **Psalm 139:6** *Such* knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is *too* high, I cannot attain to it.
 - d. **Isaiah 55:9** "For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.
 - e. **Even in the age to come, we will never be able to fully understand and know God exhaustively.** This is due to the fact that God's incomprehensibility is not due to our sinfulness but to His infinite greatness! Throughout eternity we will go on increasing in our knowledge of God and delighting ourselves more and more in Him!

B. Man Created in God's Image

1. Man was created in God's image – **Gen 1:26-27** but this does not mean "exact image"
2. So while we are "like God" in some aspects, we most certainly are not God
3. There is and forever will be a distinction between the Creator and the Creature
4. **Calvin**, "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world" – idolatry!

C. Process of Learning

1. So the process by which we think about what God is like is really a process (by necessity) of using things which are not God as raw material to think upon what God is. Obviously whatever is being used as material for comparison is not God Himself for it is God's creation (other than Himself).
2. **Nicholas of Cusa**, "The intellect knoweth that it is ignorant of Thee because it knoweth Thou canst not be known, unless the unknowable could be known, and the invisible beheld, and the inaccessible attained."
3. **But how will we come to know God, if He is indeed incomprehensible and unapproachable? How can we be held accountable for that which is impossible?**
4. **Anselm**, "Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to this seeker. For I cannot seek you unless you teach me how, nor can I find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in desiring you, and desire you in seeking you. Let me find you in loving you and love you in finding you."

D. God's Self-Revelation

1. *Man is utterly dependent upon the Lord to reveal Himself to him!*
 - a. **1 Cor 1:21-31** – Explains that no one is saved by this world's wisdom... God has chosen the foolish things, the weak things to shame the wise and strong! Only by His doing can we be in Christ Jesus – who becomes to us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption...
 - b. **2 Cor 2:10-14** “For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, ¹³ which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. ¹⁴ But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”
2. *Knowing God is dependent upon God willing to reveal Himself to us...*
 - a. **Matthew 11:25-27** At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. ²⁶ "Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. ²⁷ "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*."
 - b. **Matthew 16:13-17** Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some *say* John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven."
 - c. **John 6:44** "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."
3. *Revelation has come to us in a variety of ways... most clearly in Jesus!*
 - a. **Rom 1:18-21**: God has made Himself evident within them (internal) and to them (external) – the issue is that sinful man “suppresses the truth in unrighteousness”
 - b. **Ps 19:1-6 General Revelation... Ps 19:7-14 Special Revelation**
 - c. **What is needed is a “clearing up” of what God is really like (special revelation)!**
 - d. **Hebrews 1:1-4** God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ² in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³ And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.
 - e. **Colossians 1:15** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

II. Our Inability to Express Things about God

A. Accommodation

1. While under no obligation to communicate with human beings, once having decided to communicate with us, a language of revelation was a condescension to the limited mental capacities of human beings (*“baby talk”*)...
2. Anthropomorphisms: representation of God in speech or writing in the form of a human
 - a. *Anthropopoiesis* – “man-action” – when God’s activity is described in analogy to humans’ activity – ex) “the Lord weighs the spirit” (Prov 16:12)
 - b. *Anthropopathism* – “man-passion” – when the “impassible God” whose Spirit cannot be disturbed by anything, responds to events in a manner comparable to human passion – glad, sad, angry, etc... ex) “the Lord was sorry...” (Gen 6:6)
 - c. *Anthropomorphism* – “man-form” – when God is represented as having bodily parts like ours – eyes, ears, nostrils, arms, hands, etc... ex) “Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short That it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear. ² But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden *His* face from you so that He does not hear.” (Is 59:1-2)

B. Types of Language

1. There is debate as to the nature of language we use when we speak about God.
2. This debate centers on the ability of human language to describe or relate to God. There are four general categories laid out: univocal, equivocal, emotive, and analogical.
 - a. Univocal—univocal language refers to using terms in exactly the same way with respect to two items/persons under consideration. The term has exactly the same meaning in both situations. To use a word in this sense you would use it to compare two different things and the meaning would remain fixed.
 - Illustration: This would mean that when we call God “Father” and we call our biological father “father” we would mean it in exactly the same sense—in this we would be trying to communicate that God is exactly like an earthly father.
 - b. Equivocal—equivocal language refers to terms being used in different ways with respect to two items/persons under consideration. The term is open to more than one meaning. There are some who say that since God is so transcendent and beyond us that any “human language” we use to describe Him can never adequately describe Him in anyway and is, in the final analysis, meaningless.
 - Illustration: In this understanding to call God “Father” would be meaningless because He is so unlike an earthly father that the comparison ultimately means nothing.

- c. **Emotive**—emotive language refers to terms being used merely to express our personal feelings rather than any actual objective descriptions or facts about God. Some would assert that when we do speak of God, all we are ultimately doing is expressing something about how we feel, not any concrete information.
 - **Illustration:** Calling God “Father” just means, I have feelings for God... By this principle, Thomas’ response, “My Lord and My God,” to Jesus’ request that he touch His wounds really only amounted to “Jesus yeah!!!” (**John 20:28**)
- d. **Analogical**—analogical language refers to terms being used in “similar, related, but still distinct” ways in considering two items/persons. There is a comparative similarity, but not an exact correlation.
 - **Illustration:** When the Bible calls God “Father” it is not communicating that God is exactly like an earthly father. Meanwhile, it also not communicating that He is so unlike an earthly father that the statement means nothing. It means that God is similar to an earthly father—He is a provider, an authority, a protector etc... When the Bible does this it is like “baby-talk” it is condescending (or getting down) to our level.

C. Use of Analogy and Metaphor

1. Knowledge about God is “Analogical”
 - a. All knowledge, thoughts, emotions, and character of other persons is analogical.
 - b. I have no ability of direct sensation of personality in others
 - c. For example, if someone else cries I have no direct sensation of the person’s feelings, but only understand what is being felt “analogically” by how I feel when something produces tears in me. This perceived knowledge, though, is not perfect. It can be distorted by distorted self-knowledge.
 - d. This element of distortion in ourselves could be that which is spoken of in **I John 3:2** – that “we shall see Him as He is” – upon glorification: absence of the presence of sin
 - e. **Anselm**, “I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that you have created in me this your image, so that I can remember you, think about you and love you. But it is so worn away by sins, so smudged over by the smoke of sins, that it cannot do what it was created to do unless you renew and reform it. I do not even try, Lord, to rise up to your heights, because my intellect does not measure up to that task; but I do want to understand in some small measure your truth, which my heart believes in and loved.”
2. Descriptions given of God in the Bible...
 - a. **Israel’s Experience: Exodus 24:17** And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top.
 - b. **Ezekiel’s Vision: Ezekiel 1:22-28, 8:2-4** (see the plethora of comparisons)
 - c. **John’s Vision: Rev 1:12-16** (again see use of “known” to describe the “unknown”)
 - d. **Think even of Jesus’ teachings regarding Himself - The “I AM” statements...**
3. **Look at Is 40:12-26**...
 - a. ¹⁸ To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
 - b. ²⁵ "To whom then will you liken Me That I would be *his* equal?" says the Holy One.

III. Our Goal

A. *The Desire to Know God is from God...*

1. **Tozer**, “The yearning to know What cannot be known, to comprehend the Incomprehensible, to touch and taste the Unapproachable, arises from the image of God in the nature of man.”
2. **Our Resolve:** When we investigate the question: “what is God like” we must admit that we cannot know this perfectly in regards to purely what He is like in Himself. But, if we change our investigation to a searching out that which God has revealed about Himself, then answers can be given full of reason. Here’s the great news, God has revealed Himself to us in the Scriptures – God’s wondrous condescension out of His grace to humans who otherwise would not understand these things about Him!
3. **While God IS *incomprehensible*, He is NOT *inapprehensible!***
 - a. When we explain God as incomprehensible, we are not saying that we cannot know anything! We are not saying we cannot know anything!
 - b. We can never fully understand any single thing about God. However we can know something about him, we can know God partially but truly.
 - c. While we don’t have “exhaustive knowledge” of God, we do have “true knowledge”
 - d. **Jer 9:23-24** “Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.”
 - e. **Eternal Lifelong pursuit: Jn 17:3** – knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent

B. *Take great care in what you say about God! Choose your words wisely!*

1. We are commanded to proclaim His excellencies, make disciples, and sing songs of praise unto the Lord...
2. Knowing that we are to “open our mouths and speak” we just need to make sure that what we say is Biblical! God has provided us the standard to evaluate our words.
3. We are not to take lightly the words we make in reference to God! Sobriety is to accompany our speech, especially in regards to discussion about God!
4. This is why using “biblical terminology” is important!
 - a. In recent days there has been an increasing trend away from biblical terminology in favor of a “more contemporary feel”
 - b. But, our pursuit should be a tendency towards increasingly biblical terminology!
 - c. God made no errors in the inspiration of His Word, you cannot err when quoting scripture and expressing biblical terminology contextually!
 - d. Why introduce the possibility of gross misrepresentations?
5. ***We are to Know God via the means He has provided us – His Word!***
AND We are to proclaim Biblical Truth in Biblical Garb!