

Week 3: The Existence and Attributes of God - Part 1

Class Introduction: In the midst of life's challenges, pain, and frustration - where do you go for comfort? Christians are those who can confidently and happily turn to God, not just because he exists, but because of what he is like.

I. INTRODUCTION

Last week we noted that marks God out from among all the other false gods is that he *speaks*. He has graciously revealed himself through the written word - the Bible, and the word made flesh - Jesus Christ. And this revelation is true (inerrant), trustworthy (infallible), sufficient and necessary. It does not, it cannot lead us astray. It is our final authority, the final arbiter in all matters of faith and practice - not the church, or reason, or our subjective impressions or experiences.

As we begin this third class, there are two questions that lie at the foundation of not only of religious knowledge, but also of every possible form of knowledge:

- 1) Is there a God? (Related to this, how can we know?)
- 2) What is God like? (What are his attributes?)

These are the questions that we will begin to answer during our time together today.

II. GOD'S EXISTENCE

A. Biblical Presupposition

[Job 11:7; 26:14; 30:26; Is 40:18]

We begin this morning by thinking about the existence of God. In response to our first question, "Is there a God?" we must note at the outset that the Bible doesn't spend time arguing for God's existence. It simply presumes that He does. It's a biblical given, in the same way the pre-existence of matter is a given for the materialist. The Bible treats God's existence like gravity. We can deny it, ignore it, or pretend it doesn't exist, but to our own peril. Every worldview

begins somewhere. As we discussed in week 1, the Christian worldview begins with these two premises - *He is There (existence) And He Is Not Silent (speaks)*.

But if someone were to ask you how you know God exists, what would you say?

If we are Christians, we can say that we believe God is “really there” because He has revealed himself:

- 1.) *generally* to all men by creation and providence;
- 2.) *propositionally* in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments;
- 3.) *personally* in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ; and
- 4.) *savingly* through the work of His Word and Spirit. (*repeat*)

Scripture testifies to this:

“³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3, ESV)

“²⁰ And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”
(1 John 5:20, ESV)

So in the first chapter of Romans, Paul tells us that God has made the fact of his existence plain to all humanity (**READ 1.19**) “*because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to/within them*”. In verse twenty, he says that “*since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen (not veiled, not hidden, but clearly seen), being understood from what has been made, so that (result of this revelation, as a result) men/people are without excuse.*” Creation cries out that there is a creator.

Who is it that sends the rain and sun? Who is it that blankets the earth in darkness, and then unleashes the morning sun? Who is it that separates the land from the sea? From the order of the seasons to the intricacies of a flower to the innumerable stars at night - we see God’s hand as the intelligent Creator.

Who has seen BBC’s *Planet Earth*? It’s been a favorite in our home for years. In a visually arresting and stunning way, that production powerfully captures the grandeur, majesty, wonderful diversity and remarkable complexity of God’s creation. Yet the producers say nothing about God. Why?

Because despite this revelation in *creation*, Paul goes on to say in Romans that man willfully suppresses the truth and exchanges it for a lie. And so fallen man worships the natural world instead of the one that made it.

But there's not just creation. There is also *conscience*. Because we are made in God's image (Gen 1.26-27), something of his moral character remains in us. Though our consciences aren't a perfect guide because they've been corrupted by the fall, our concerns for morality, justice, knowledge, truth - they too point us back to our creator.

While creation and conscience ought to be reason alone to convince us that God exists, the fact that we suppress the truth in our fallen state has led Christians to formulate "theistic proofs" (arguments) for the existence of God. These "proofs" are simply attempts to demonstrate that it's *rational* to believe in God's existence. God's not our imaginary friend, and thus relegated to the realm of myth and superstition.

I mention these proofs because they often are included in systematic theology, but since they are also covered in the Apologetics core seminar, I will leave you with just a mention of them. These proofs don't lead us to the sovereign, personal God of Scripture. They can help show how it's not irrational to believe in God, but none of these proofs tell you much of what God is like. None of them get you to the God of Scripture and saving faith in Christ.

Comments or Questions?

C. General and Special Revelation

All knowledge of God rests on revelation. Through we can never know God in the full richness of his being, he is known to all people through his revelation in creation, the theater of his glory. The world is never godless. In the end there is no atheists; there is only arguments about the nature of God.

This distinction between what is known about God to all generally, and what is only known about him specially is often referred to as the "general" versus "special" revelation.

General revelation is that unveiling of God, the knowledge of God's being and will which is given to all people everywhere, at all times, through the ordinary experience of being alive in God's world. [Ps. 19:1, 2; Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:14, 15]

Special revelation is how God has made himself known by particular *acts* and *words*, especially the Word of the Lord (=Scripture), and the Lord of the Word (=Jesus Christ).

1. What Does General Revelation Teach Us?

Ps 19 and other texts, but I'm going to pick just two. Rom 1.18-32; Acts 17.22-31. As I read, what do these texts say general revelation teaches everyone who lives? READ.

What do these texts reveal to all mankind generally?

- God is one. (Acts 17.26; Rom 1.20)
- God is the creator (Ps 19; Acts 17.25)
- God is eternal and independent (Rom 1.20; Acts 17.25)
- God is invisible and powerful (Rom 1.20)
- God, though distinct from the universe, is active in it. (Acts 17.24; 26-27)
- God sustains all things (Acts 17.24-28; 14:15-16)
- God is moral, the ultimate source of our values (Rom 1.32)

The Bible says all these things we ought to know naturally, simply by fact that we are all made in God's image and are live in this world he's made.

{Some would argue, such as a Thomas Aquinas and many in the RC and Enlightenment tradition, that with the aid of reason and general revelation we can come to know who God is, and what he's like. So *Natural Theology* is the attempt to attain understanding of God and his relationship with the universe by means of natural reflection, without appealing to special revelation.}

And yet Paul stresses in Rom 1-2 that one of the effects of the fall is that we've rejected this knowledge of God and exchanged it for a lie. Thus the Reformers and men like Martin Luther in *The Bondage of the Will* stressed the *noetic* (*nous* - mind in Latin) effects of sin. Our minds are too warped as a result of the fall to get to God merely through reason applied to general revelation. Though conscience and nature point to God, in our fallenness we need the spectacles of

Scripture and the regenerating work of the Spirit in order to see properly what is there.

One clear implication of this is that general revelation renders human beings guilty. We cannot escape God. *Outside of us* the created order screams at us like the lead singer of a metal band. Do you not see? Do you not understand? There is a God who created you, and you're accountable to him. We can close our eyes and plug our ears, but that won't change reality. And *inside our own heads* our consciences won't give us any rest.

[I remember before I became a Christian, non-Christian friends would encourage me to do this and that - cheat on a test, randomly hook-up with someone at a party - yet I couldn't escape the sense that there was something inherently wrong with such things. And it's not like I grew up in a religious family or ever heard the gospel. Life becomes a constant attempt to explain away our conscience because we know what we ought to do, yet don't do. To varying degrees we all reject the knowledge God has generally provided, and this alone is sufficient to condemn us. So in this sense general revelation is fully authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous (=clear), but it is not salvific. It alone can't save.]

Comments, questions?

III. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Because sin blinds and distorts our perceptions of God, if we are to know what God is really like, we must turn to His revelation of Himself in the Bible.

But I want to ask a question when you think of describing God from Scripture, what are some words that first come to mind? (*e.g., love, sovereign, good*) These words make up God's attributes.

SIDE NOTE: The incomprehensible God has made himself known by speaking to us and showing us who he is. You will see in the sheet I gave you a segment filled with Scripture about how God himself uses human language to describe his actions and who he is. This is the only way we could understand who he is and how he works. Use this as a guide for prayer and for praising God.

When theologians speak of the attributes of God, they're referring to those qualities that are essential to the nature of God, who he is, and what he's like.

Most systematic theologians elect to classify God's attributes by dividing them up into various classes: incommunicable attributes (those attributes God alone possess - omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) and communicable attributes (those attributes we share, albeit in a fallen and finite way, with God - love, justice, etc.).

Incommunicable Attributes

1. The Independence or Self-Existence of God [Aseity]

(Ex 3:14; Ps 50:8-15; See Also Ps. 33:11; 115:3; Isa. 40:18 ff.; Dan. 4:35; John 5:26; Rom. 11:33-36; Acts 17:25; Rev. 4:11.)

God's existence and character are determined by Himself alone and are not dependent on anyone or anything else. This is sometimes referred to as aseity (*a se* = having life from oneself). He owns all things, he has no needs outside himself. God didn't create us because he was lonely and needed some company, or he needed us to complete him.

In the trinity God is self-existent, self-sufficient, and self-contained. "*I am who I am*" (Ex 3:14) ["I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE"] He needs nothing. We need hours and hours of sleep in order to keep our eyes open, water to keep us alive, food for energy, shelters for protection, doctors for our health, teachers to teach us all the things we don't know and then promptly forget... and I could go on and on. [Pagan gods needing things...]

God? He needs... nothing! [2 Sam 7:14] Life, strength, protection, health, knowledge - he has it completely in himself! ... which is *exactly* why we can go to him and depend upon him at all times. He is the king. His word, rules. Literally. But he's not the kind of king who's constrained by budget deficits, a divided congress, NATO, or the weakness of age. He is entirely free of all such constraints. Because he's dependent on nothing and no one, he is always able to be there *for* his people. His independence and self-existence ought to be a huge encouragement to us.

Any comments or questions?

2. The Immutability of God

Secondly, God is *immutable*. Namely, God in his nature, character, and purposes, does not change. We have to change our plans all the time, either because we lack the necessary foresight and knowledge to anticipate all contingencies, or because we lack the power and ability to effect what we plan.

But not so with God. God has all power and knowledge. Floods, snow, fire, government shutdowns - nothing like this thwarts his purposes. Nothing ever catches God by surprise. God never has to resort to Plan B, or C. He needs no contingency plan, no fallback option, no emergency escape route.

Practically, this means we can always trust him and rely on his word. He will always act in conformity with what he has promised. And so we have confidence in him. We live as if on the surface of a restless ocean, everything shifting and changing about us. We're always trying to catch our balance in this world. But God... is a *rock* amidst those fluctuating waters. And so with unshakeable confidence we can stand firmly upon him.

Some reject this teaching. They'll say God cannot know our future decision in order for those decisions to be fully free. For if he knows them in advance, that means they will necessarily happen, which means that decision can't be truly free for we only could have done what God already foreknew, and nothing else (eg. what have for lunch). So they'll say God is a great guesser, but since he doesn't finally know, we can't say he's immutable. Like us, he'll have to change his mind.

Now related to this is the notion of *impassibility* (literally means without emotion). If God cannot be ruled by another and is dependent on no one, is there any way in which God legitimately has feelings, emotions? It's a natural question, for how can emotions be appropriate to one who is utterly independent and self-sufficient?

Biblically, God has emotions. He's not the unmoved mover of Greek thought. It's just that they're not like ours. We're surprised, caught off guard, confused, hurt, thus we cry. In our anger we lash out. God too may grieve, but not in the same way. When he suffers, he chooses to. His passions are real, but he's not ruled by them. Anger rules us, but God rules over anger. That's the fundamental difference.

[So when the WSC says that God is “without parts or passions,” it is not denying God’s responsiveness to creaturely action, rather it is denying (a) that God is “made up” of various faculties or emotions and (b) that God is taken captive by anything other than his own nature. The constituent biblical testimony is that while God may be opposed and provoked, God cannot be overcome by surprise or distress, anger, compassion, or opposition. Good news for those who deserve God’s wrath [Hosea 11:9].

There’s a lot we could say, but Scripture is clear. Num. 23.19 “*God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?* Or 1 Sam 15.29 “*And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.*” (1Sam 15.29)

God is perfectly immutable, and thus perfectly dependable.

Any questions?

3. God is Infinite

Thirdly, the Bible also teaches God is infinite. This means that there is no limitation to God’s perfections. His infinity is expressed in a number of ways, such as in space, in power, and in time.

First, God is **infinite in space or omnipresent**. This means that God transcends spatial limitations, is without size, and is present at every point of space with his whole being. When people refer to God as being “a big God”, they are referring to his greatness rather than a quantitative measurement. Psalm 139 conveys this clearly when it says, “*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will hold me fast.*”

A corollary to this is that God is spirit (Jn 4.24). He’s incorporeal. He’s not made of matter, he has no parts or dimensions.

Though God is wholly present throughout all things, he is yet distinct from all things. Pantheism asserts that God minus the world = 0. They are perfectly identified. The Bible asserts that God minus the world = God. He is distinct from all he is created. So for God to move into my house doesn’t mean I have

to move out. We think of presence in terms of physicality, not so with God. So when we read that the Spirit is “indwelling” or “abiding” in a Christian, or we read that God is “in heaven,” it’s not referring so much to *location* as to *relationship*. The Spirit indwells in that he’s is present with us in a saving way. We can “enter into his presence” not that we’ve spatially become closer to God, but that we access through Christ to a new relationship with God where we can bring everything before the throne of his grace. So hell is not the absence of God, but the absence of God in a saving way. Hell is the presence of God in the fullness of his wrath.

Practically speaking, God’s omnipresence means we can always be certain of God’s undivided attention. We don’t need to stand in line, or make an appointment, or take a religious pilgrimage. We are in his presence! But it’s also a *warning*. We have no place to hide. There is no corner of the universe where God is not. He sees it all. Jean Paul Sartre calls God the “cosmic voyeur” because he hates this idea that God is everywhere. It means we’re accountable. Hide and seek is not a game we can play with God in our sins. We shouldn’t deceive ourselves. So if you’re trying to hide, just come out and confess it. You’re not fooling God. So be reconciled to him.

But God’s not just omnipresent, he’s also infinite in **power, or omnipotent**. God is able to do all that He decides to do. Jesus tells us in Matt 19:26 that “*with God all things are possible.*” Jeremiah in Jer 32.17 declares that there is nothing too hard for the Sovereign Lord. Did you hear that? *Nothing* is too hard for God.

So does this mean that God can do everything? Classic freshman year of college question, “can God make a rock so big that he cannot move it?” You’re trapped. But that question presents a false dilemma based off a false assumption, that God can do anything. It’s better to say “God can do everything” by saying that “God can do everything that He wills to do and is consistent with his character.” For example, according to Hebrews, God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). In II Timothy 2:13, we find that God cannot disown Himself. God cannot cease to be God or act in a way inconsistent with any of his other attributes.

This too is great encouragement. A god who can feel but not help is of little use. It’s a comfort in our persecution. “*The Lord is my light and salvation - whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?*” (Ps 27.1) It’s a comfort in our prayers. “*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we seek or imagine...*” (Eph 3.20) It gives us

confidence in the future. *“To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”* (Jude 24-25) So if God does not answer our prayers, or respond a particular way, we trust his wisdom, which we’ll think about next week.

But God is also infinite in **time - eternal**. Psalm 90:2 reads, *“Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”* In Revelations the Lord God says, *“I am the Alpha and Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come....”* This doesn’t mean God is everywhere in time, but that he transcends the very limitations of time. He has no beginning or end. Some have likened time to a long parade. We’re in the parade, marching alone, experiencing only one section of it. Whereas God stands on top of a mountain, sees it all at once. It’s not passing him by, so to speak.

Practically, this means God will always be there for us. He won’t be that friend who ever moves away, or worse yet, dies on us. He always was and will be, and thus he always is there for us. We can make all our plans around him, trust him, know he’ll be there, for he’s eternal.

Comments or Questions?

Brothers and sisters, God’s not like us. He’s majestic, glorious. Perfectly self-sufficient, with perfect plans, perfect power, covering everything, all the time. Before you leave, ask yourself this one question. In light of all this, why would you be tempted to place your affections, your security, your well-being in anybody else?

PRAYER

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.

To Him be the glory forever! Amen.

- Romans 11:33-36