

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 1: PROLEGOMENA — KNOWING THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Lesson 2

Can We Know God? — The Knowability of God

The Tension Between Divine Incomprehensibility and True Knowledge

Key Texts: Job 11:7; Jeremiah 9:23–24; 1 Corinthians 2:10–16

Knowing the God Who Cannot Be Fully Known

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Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In our first lesson, we established that the study of God, Theology Proper, is the highest and most exalted pursuit to which any creature made in the image of God can devote the powers of mind, heart, and will. We defined our discipline, surveyed its foundational importance for all of Christian doctrine, and established that its ultimate aim is not merely the accumulation of knowledge but the adoration of God Himself. We ended in doxology, as theology rightly pursued always does.

But now we must press into a question that lies, in a certain sense, before all others: Can we know God at all? This is not a question born of skepticism, though skeptics have raised it. It is a question born of awe, the awe of standing at the edge of the infinite and asking whether the finite mind can truly cross that vast and holy distance. And it is a question the Scripture itself presses upon us with an earnestness that will not be evaded. “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?” (Job 11:7–8, NASB 1995). These words were spoken by Zophar the Naamathite, a man whose theology was in many respects deficient, but whose instinct here was sound: the God of Scripture is not a manageable deity. He is not a concept to be grasped, a force to be harnessed, or a problem to be solved.

And yet, and this is the great and glorious paradox at the heart of Lesson 2, the God who cannot be fully known has fully and faithfully revealed Himself. The God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16) has, in sovereign grace and condescending love, stooped to make Himself known to creatures of dust. He has spoken in the language of creation. He has spoken through the voices of the prophets and apostles. He has spoken in His Son. And He has caused all of this self-disclosure to be permanently inscripturated in the pages of Holy Scripture, so that finite creatures might know the infinite God truly, reliably, and savingly. In this lesson, we take up the theology of divine knowability and explore both its magnificent possibility and its humbling limits.

I. The Incomprehensibility of God: The Majesty That Transcends All Knowing

We must begin where Scripture begins when it addresses this question, not with what we can know of God, but with what we cannot. The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is not a counsel of theological despair. It is a description of the infinite greatness of the God we worship. To say that God is incomprehensible is not to say that He is unknowable, but rather that He is inexhaustible, that no created mind, however gifted and however glorified, will ever arrive at a point where it has exhausted the depths of the divine being.

The Scripture speaks of divine incomprehensibility with a kind of reverent eloquence that is itself an act of worship. The great doxology of Romans 11:33, “How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”, is not a statement of frustration. It is a statement of praise. Paul has spent eleven chapters of the most

rigorous theological argument in the Bible, and at the end of it, he does not congratulate himself for having mastered the subject. He bows before the infinite remainder. The Hebrew poet of Psalm 145 declares: “Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable” (Psalm 145:3, NASB 1995). The word translated unsearchable (Hebrew: חֶקֶר, *cheqer*) carries the sense of a depth that cannot be sounded, a vastness that resists all human measurement.

Isaiah is perhaps the most eloquent witness to this truth. When the LORD challenges the idols of the nations and declares His own incomparable majesty, He grounds it precisely in the transcendence of His knowledge and ways over all creaturely comprehension:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For 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, NASB 1995

This is not merely a quantitative difference, as if God thinks the same kind of thoughts as we do, only more of them and better. It is a qualitative, ontological difference. God’s ways are higher than our ways as the heavens are higher than the earth, not by degree, but by kind. There is an infinite qualitative distance between the Creator and the creature, between the uncreated and the created, between the self-existent and the derived. And no amount of human learning, philosophical sophistication, or even theological education can span that distance from the human side.

The Reformed theological tradition has spoken of this truth under the doctrine of the divine incomprehensibility (*incomprehensibilitas Dei*), distinguishing it carefully from the related but distinct doctrine of divine ineffability. Incomprehensibility means that God cannot be fully comprehended by any finite mind, He always exceeds our grasp. Ineffability (in its strict classical sense) means that God cannot be adequately described in human language. Most classical theologians have affirmed the former while qualifying the latter: God’s being exceeds our comprehension, but God Himself has given us language that truly, if incompletely, describes Him. The distinction matters because it preserves both the majesty of God (He cannot be fully known) and the reliability of Scripture (what it reveals about God is genuinely true).

II. Archetypal and Ectypal Knowledge: The Classical Distinction

How, then, do we make sense of the paradox? If God is incomprehensible, how can theology be possible at all? If the heavens are higher than the earth, how does any earthly creature arrive at genuine knowledge of the heavenly God? The answer that the Reformed theological tradition has most helpfully articulated is the distinction between archetypal knowledge and ectypal knowledge, a distinction that, once grasped, illuminates the entire enterprise of Theology Proper.

Archetypal knowledge (*theologia archetypa*) is God’s own perfect, exhaustive, and immediate self-knowledge. This is the knowledge God has of Himself from all eternity, the knowledge of the Father for the Son, of the Son for the Father, and of the Spirit who searches the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:10). It is not knowledge that God acquired, for God has never learned anything. It is not knowledge that God possesses alongside

other knowledge, as if there were some realm of being outside of Himself that He has yet to explore. God's archetypal knowledge is identical with His being: He is the knowing Subject, the known Object, and the act of knowing all at once, in an eternal and perfectly simple divine act. This knowledge is incommunicable in its fullness to any creature.

Ectypal knowledge (*theologia ectypa*) is the finite, derivative, creaturely knowledge of God that is given to human beings through the gracious condescension of divine self-revelation. It is called ectypal because it is an ectype, a copy, an impression, a representation in creaturely form of the archetypal knowledge that God has of Himself. It is not a perfect reproduction of archetypal knowledge; it is a faithful and reliable but necessarily finite reflection of it. And it comes to us entirely as a gift: God initiates, God speaks, God illumines. We receive.

The practical implication of this distinction is profound: we can know God truly without knowing Him exhaustively. Our knowledge of God is not false merely because it is limited. When the Scripture declares that "THE LORD is righteous in all His ways" (Psalm 145:17, NASB 1995), that statement is true, not exhaustively true in the sense of capturing every nuance of divine righteousness, but genuinely and reliably true as an ectypal description of the archetypal reality. The student of Theology Proper must hold these two convictions together with equal firmness: God exceeds our grasp (incomprehensibility), and God has genuinely made Himself known (knowability). To let go of either conviction is to distort the whole.

III. The Necessity of Divine Self-Revelation: God Must Speak Before We Can Know

The distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge already implies the central theological conviction of this section: genuine knowledge of God is impossible apart from divine self-revelation. This is not merely a pious sentiment; it is a rigorous epistemological conclusion. If God's being is infinitely above the reach of creaturely investigation, and if the only knowledge of God that is available to creatures is ectypal, derived knowledge given through condescension, then it follows necessarily that knowledge of God waits upon God's initiative. God must speak before we can know. God must reveal before we can believe. God must descend before we can ascend.

This conviction stands in sharp and deliberate contrast to every form of natural theology that imagines the human mind ascending to God by its own unaided powers. The philosophers of ancient Greece reached for the divine through reason and intuition; they produced magnificent intellectual achievements, but they did not arrive at the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The mystics of various traditions have sought the divine through contemplation and experience; they have often produced moving accounts of encounter with the ineffable, but without the objective anchor of divine revelation, those encounters float free of any fixed truth. The rationalists of the Enlightenment attempted to build a theology on the foundations of reason alone; what they produced was, more often than not, a god in the image of eighteenth-century European man, reasonable, benevolent, and utterly incapable of saving anyone.

The God of Scripture is not discovered. He is disclosed. And the mode of His disclosure is revelation, the sovereign, free, gracious act of God whereby He makes Himself known to creatures who could not otherwise have known Him. The Westminster Confession of Faith opens with this conviction as its first and most foundational statement: “Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.” It is upon this bedrock that all legitimate Theology Proper must be built.

IV. General Revelation: What Creation and Conscience Reveal About God

Having established that knowledge of God is entirely dependent upon divine self-revelation, we must now distinguish between the two great modes by which God has chosen to disclose Himself. The first is general revelation, God’s self-disclosure through the created order, the human conscience, and the providential governance of history. It is called “general” because it is universally available: there is no human being, in any time or place, who has not been addressed by this form of revelation.

The apostle Paul is the primary New Testament witness to the content and scope of general revelation. In Romans 1:19–20, he writes:

“Because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”, Romans 1:19–20, NASB 1995

Three features of this passage deserve careful attention. First, the knowledge in view is genuine: Paul does not say that creation gives men confused impressions of God, or that it raises unanswerable questions about a possible deity. He says that God’s invisible attributes have been “clearly seen”, the Greek *kathoratai*, from the verb *kath-horaō*, is emphatic, carrying the sense of being fully, plainly, and unmistakably visible. Second, the content is specific: Paul identifies two particular divine attributes that are disclosed through creation, eternal power (*aidios dynamis*) and divine nature (*theiotes*). Creation does not simply suggest that something powerful made the universe; it testifies that the eternal God, the self-existent and omnipotent Creator, stands behind all that is. Third, the implication is moral: because this knowledge is genuine and available to all, all people are “without excuse” before God.

The Psalms celebrate general revelation with a lyrical exuberance that matches the grandeur of the subject. Psalm 19:1–4 is perhaps the most magnificent treatment of cosmic revelation in all of Scripture:

“The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world.”, Psalm 19:1–4, NASB 1995

Notice the paradox embedded in these verses: there is no speech, nor are there words, and yet the heavens are “telling” and “declaring.” Creation speaks a wordless language that every creature is equipped by God to receive. The sunrise over East Texas and the midnight sky over the Sahara are the same sermon, preached to different congregations in a tongue that needs no translation. What they preach is the glory of God, His power, His wisdom, His beauty, His transcendence over all that He has made. In Acts 14:15–17, Paul appeals to God’s providential provision of rain and seasons as a witness to the living God. In Acts 17:24–28, he declares that God “did not leave Himself without witness” (Acts 14:17, NASB 1995) among the nations.

Alongside the testimony of creation, the human conscience serves as a second instrument of general revelation. Paul describes this in Romans 2:14–15, where he observes that even Gentiles who do not possess the written law of God “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.” The conscience is an internal moral witness implanted by God in every human being, attesting to the reality of a moral Lawgiver and the existence of absolute moral obligation. It does not save; but it does speak, and it renders all people accountable.

The Limits of General Revelation

For all its genuine power, general revelation operates under a severe constraint. It is sufficient to render all people without excuse (Romans 1:20), but it is not sufficient to save. General revelation reveals that God exists, that He is powerful and wise, that He is to be worshipped, and that we have violated His moral law. But it does not, indeed it cannot, reveal the gospel. It cannot name the Savior. It cannot describe the atonement. It cannot announce the resurrection. It cannot tell a guilty sinner that there is a way of reconciliation with the holy God. For that, something more is required.

Furthermore, the Fall has not left the reception of general revelation intact. Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–32 is not that fallen humanity receives general revelation with gratitude and responds with worship. The opposite is true: “For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Romans 1:25, NASB 1995). The light shines in creation; fallen humanity suppresses it. The conscience accuses; fallen humanity silences it. General revelation does not lead fallen human beings to God, it leads them to God’s righteous judgment, because they have received it and refused it.

V. Special Revelation: What Scripture Reveals About God, His Character, Works, and Will

Because general revelation is both genuine and insufficient, God in His mercy has not left His creatures with only the witness of creation and conscience. He has given a second, higher, and saving form of self-disclosure: special revelation. Special revelation refers to God’s direct, verbal, and redemptive communication to specific people at specific times and places, for the purpose of making known His saving purposes in Jesus Christ. It is “special” not in the sense of being privileged by favoritism, but in the

sense of being particular: given to particular people, through particular instruments, at particular moments in redemptive history.

The author of Hebrews provides the most compressed and majestic account of special revelation in all of Scripture:

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 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.”, Hebrews 1:1–2, NASB 1995

This passage identifies the two great epochs and modes of special revelation: the partial and progressive revelation given through the prophets of the Old Testament, and the final and climactic revelation given in the Person of the Son. The word translated “in many portions and in many ways” (*polumerōs kai polutropōs*) captures the diversity of God’s revelatory activity across the centuries, through dreams, visions, direct speech, historical events, types, symbols, prophecies, and the written Word. But all of this was proleptic, pointing forward, reaching toward a fullness not yet arrived. That fullness is the Son, who is Himself “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3, NASB 1995).

Special revelation discloses what general revelation cannot. Where general revelation reveals that God is powerful, special revelation reveals that God is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Where general revelation reveals that we are morally accountable, special revelation reveals that we are guilty sinners who stand under God’s righteous wrath. Where general revelation can only testify that there ought to be a way of reconciliation, special revelation announces that there is: the Lord Jesus Christ, who “died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3, NASB 1995). Special revelation does not merely add new information to what creation already tells us; it provides the redemptive framework within which creation’s testimony finds its proper meaning and ultimate resolution.

All of God’s special revelation has been permanently committed to writing in the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments. This is what theologians call inscripturation, the act of God by which His spoken and enacted revelation was fixed in permanent, authoritative, written form for the benefit of all subsequent generations. The inscripturated Word is the Bible, and the Bible is the primary locus of all our knowledge of God in this present age. There is no authoritative special revelation beyond the canon, no supplemental word from prophets or apostles that stands alongside Scripture with equal authority. The canon is closed, the Word is complete, and the church has everything it needs, through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, to know God savingly and truly.

VI. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Illumination: Knowing God Is Not Merely Intellectual

We have spoken of general revelation and special revelation as the two instruments by which God makes Himself known. But there is a third element that must not be overlooked, one that is, in a certain sense, the capstone of the entire structure of theological epistemology: the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. For even special

revelation, even the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God lying open on the page, does not automatically produce genuine knowledge of God in the heart and mind of the reader. There is a further work required: the Spirit must open the eyes.

Paul addresses this with stark and sobering clarity in 1 Corinthians 2:10–16:

“For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 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. 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, 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. 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.”, 1 Corinthians 2:10–14, NASB 1995

This passage establishes several truths of the highest importance. First, the Holy Spirit has unique and exhaustive access to the thoughts of God: just as a man’s own spirit knows what is in him, so only the Spirit of God knows the depths of the divine being. The Spirit is not a reporter who passes along information received from the outside; He is the inner life of the Triune God, and His knowledge of God is itself divine and archetypal. Second, the Spirit has been given to believers precisely so that they might know “the things freely given to us by God”, that is, the salvific knowledge of grace, adoption, redemption, and eternal life that are the content of the gospel. Third, the natural man, the unregenerate person, however intellectually gifted, is constitutionally incapable of receiving this knowledge, not because he lacks intelligence, but because he lacks the Spirit. Spiritual truth is spiritually appraised (*pneumatikōs anakrinō*), and the appraisal requires a spiritual faculty that only regeneration imparts.

This doctrine of the Spirit’s illuminating work has several vital implications for the practice of Theology Proper. It means that theological education, however valuable, is never sufficient by itself to produce genuine knowledge of God. A man may complete a PhD in systematic theology and emerge knowing a great deal about God without knowing God. It means that prayer is not merely a pious preliminary to the real work of theological study but is itself an epistemological act, an acknowledgment of dependence upon the only One who can grant genuine insight into the things of God. And it means that the humility appropriate to the student of Theology Proper is not merely an intellectual posture but a spiritual one: we bring nothing to the table that God must use; we receive everything from the One who alone can give.

VII. Knowing About God vs. Knowing God Personally: The Decisive Distinction

We arrive now at what is perhaps the most searching and most pastorally urgent distinction in this entire lesson, the difference between knowing about God and knowing God personally. It is a distinction that the prophet Jeremiah presses with prophetic force, and that the Lord Jesus Christ elevates to the level of eternal life itself.

The word of the LORD through Jeremiah is pointed and searching:

“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; 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.”, Jeremiah 9:23–24, NASB 1995

Notice what Jeremiah places above wisdom, might, and riches, those three great sources of human confidence and boasting. Above them all stands one thing: understanding and knowing the LORD. And the knowledge in view here is not abstract or propositional; it is relational and experiential. The Hebrew word *yada* (to know), used here, carries connotations not merely of intellectual cognition but of personal acquaintance, intimate relationship, and covenantal communion. This is the knowledge that Adam had of Eve (Genesis 4:1), the knowledge that Moses had of God (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8), the knowledge that the covenant people are called to have of their covenant LORD.

The Lord Jesus carries this distinction to its eternal apex in His high-priestly prayer: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3, NASB 1995). Eternal life is not defined as believing correct propositions about God, as important as those propositions are. It is not defined as completing a theological curriculum, as valuable as that discipline is. It is defined as knowing God, the Father and the Son, in the fellowship of the Spirit, in the intimate, covenantal, person-to-person knowledge that is the very life of heaven begun on earth.

This distinction should fill the student of Theology Proper with both holy aspiration and serious self-examination. It is entirely possible to study the doctrine of God with precision and thoroughness while remaining a stranger to the God one studies. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were masters of the biblical text and profound students of theology; and yet the Lord Jesus declared to them: “You do not know Me or My Father” (John 8:19, NASB 1995). The purpose of this series is not to produce better-informed strangers to God. It is to bring students of the doctrine of God into a deeper, warmer, more transforming knowledge of God Himself. Every session should drive us to prayer. Every lesson should deepen our communion with the One we study. For, as Jeremiah declares, this, and this alone, is what is worthy of our boasting.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Job 11:7–8

“Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?”

Jeremiah 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; 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.”

1 Corinthians 2:10–14

“For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 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. 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... 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.”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Incomprehensibility of God	The theological doctrine that God, in the infinite fullness of His being, can never be exhaustively known by any finite mind. God always exceeds the full grasp of creaturely intellect. This is not a denial that God can be known truly, but an affirmation that He is inexhaustible, His greatness is unsearchable (Psalm 145:3).
Archetypal Knowledge (theologia archetypa)	God’s own perfect, exhaustive, and immediate self-knowledge, possessed from eternity. God knows Himself completely and without the mediation of any external source. The Spirit “searches all things, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). This knowledge belongs to God alone and cannot be fully communicated to any creature.

Ectypal Knowledge (theologia ectypa)	The finite, derivative, and creaturely knowledge of God given to human beings through the condescension of divine self-revelation. An ectype is an impression or copy of an original (the archetype). Our ectypal knowledge of God is genuine and reliable, but it is an accommodated and partial reflection, not an exhaustive reproduction, of God's self-knowledge.
General Revelation	God's self-disclosure through the created order (Romans 1:19–20), the human conscience (Romans 2:14–15), and the providential governance of history (Acts 14:15–17). It is universal in scope and sufficient to render all people without excuse, but it is insufficient to communicate the gospel or produce saving knowledge of God.
Special Revelation	God's direct, verbal, and redemptive communication to specific people at specific times, culminating in the Person of His Son (Hebrews 1:1–2) and permanently inscripturated in the sixty-six books of the Bible. Special revelation provides everything necessary for saving knowledge of God, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.
Inscripturation	The act of God by which His spoken and enacted special revelation was permanently committed to writing in the books of the Old and New Testaments. Inscripturation ensures that the content of special revelation is reliably preserved, transmitted, and authoritative for all subsequent generations of the church without the need for ongoing new revelation.
Illumination	The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit by which He opens the minds and hearts of believers to understand and receive the truths of God's Word. Distinguished from inspiration (the once-for-all work of the Spirit in giving Scripture) and from revelation (God's disclosure of Himself). Illumination does not add new content to Scripture; it enables the reception of Scripture's existing content.
Sensus Divinitatis	Latin for "sense of divinity" or "sense of God." The innate awareness of God implanted in every human being by God Himself (Romans 1:19). Associated with John Calvin, who taught that this sense is the foundation of the universal witness of general revelation. It is suppressed in sinful humanity but never fully extinguished.
Yada (יָדָע)	Hebrew verb meaning "to know," used in Jeremiah 9:23–24 to describe the knowing of God that surpasses all other human attainments. Yada carries connotations not merely of intellectual cognition but of personal acquaintance, relational intimacy, and covenantal communion. It is the word used of the deepest relational knowing possible between persons.
Natural Theology	The attempt to derive knowledge of God from the observation of the created order and the exercise of human reason, apart from (or prior to) special revelation. Reformed theology affirms the genuine but limited knowledge available through natural theology while insisting that saving knowledge of God is impossible apart from special revelation and the Spirit's illuminating work.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe two truths simultaneously, and we must resist the temptation to sacrifice either one on the altar of the other. First, we must believe that God is genuinely incomprehensible, that His greatness is unsearchable, that His ways are higher than ours as the heavens are higher than the earth, and that no amount of theological study will ever exhaust the depths of who He is. This conviction should produce in us a permanent epistemic humility: we never arrive at the point where we have mastered the subject of God. Second, we must believe that God has truly and reliably revealed Himself in His Word, that our knowledge of Him through Scripture is genuine and sufficient for salvation and godly living, and that the Holy Spirit who indwells every believer is the living guarantee of that knowledge. Both truths must be held firmly and together.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The study of divine knowability should produce a peculiar combination of emotions that, taken together, constitute the posture of a creature before its Creator. There should be awe, the awe of standing at the edge of an ocean too vast to be measured, knowing that the God who fills that ocean has nonetheless stooped to speak to you. There should be gratitude, the gratitude of one who knows that the knowledge of God he possesses is entirely a gift, given by grace, not earned by ingenuity. And there should be deep desire: the longing of the soul that, having tasted something of the goodness and glory of God, finds itself hungry for more. The psalmist said it best: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1–2, NASB 1995). This is the holy thirst that Theology Proper, rightly pursued, is designed to kindle and satisfy in ever-deepening measure.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Read the Word with expectancy.** Every time you open Scripture, you are opening the primary instrument of God’s special revelation. Come to it expecting to be addressed by God Himself, not merely to gather theological data. Ask the Spirit to illumine the text and to make you a knowing, not merely an informed, reader.
2. **Pray before you study.** Theological study without prayer is the most sophisticated form of self-reliance. The Spirit’s illumination is not a supplement to serious study; it is its indispensable foundation. “Oh LORD, open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law” (Psalm 119:18, NASB 1995) should be on our lips every time we open the Word.
3. **Distinguish information from transformation.** Ask yourself regularly: Is my study of God producing not merely a fuller head but a warmer heart, a more obedient will, and a more intimate walk with God? If theological study is not

making you more like Jesus, something is missing at the level of the Spirit's work in the soul.

4. **Witness to the knowable God.** In a world that insists that all religious knowledge is private, subjective, and relative, the doctrine of special revelation is a bold apologetic claim: God has objectively and publicly made Himself known. We do not merely share our personal experience of a God who may or may not exist; we proclaim the God who has spoken and acted in history, who has risen from the dead, and who can be known savingly by all who come to Him in faith.
5. **Cultivate relational knowledge of God alongside doctrinal knowledge.** Set aside time not merely for theological study but for communion, for the prayer, worship, and meditation that are the native environment in which personal knowledge of God grows. It is possible to know everything about God and not know God; let us pursue both the doctrine and the devotion that Jeremiah 9:23–24 holds before us as the one supreme boast of the human soul.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: Do not be overwhelmed by the depth of the subject before you. The God who is incomprehensible in His fullness has condescended to speak to you in language you can understand. Begin with the simplest truths of Scripture and trust the Holy Spirit, who indwells you, to be your guide into the knowledge of the God who saved you.

For the long-tenured saint: The incomprehensibility of God is your perpetual invitation and your eternal comfort. You will never exhaust Him. The God you have known for forty years in the walk of faith has depths of wisdom, love, and glory that you have not yet touched. Press on. The best is always yet to come.

For the intellectual doubter: The tension between divine incomprehensibility and genuine knowability is not a contradiction; it is a description of reality. You cannot know God exhaustively, but you can know Him truly. And the instrument He has given you for that knowing, His Word, His Son, His Spirit, is perfectly suited to the task. Come to the Scripture with honest questions and trust that the God who gave it is not afraid of your examination.

For the one who is suffering: The incomprehensibility of God means that you will not always understand His ways in your suffering. "How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" But the knowability of God through His Word means that you can know His character, His promises, His presence, and His purposes, and those truths are sufficient to sustain the soul through the darkest of valleys. What you cannot understand, you can trust.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying theology formally, how did you think about the question “Can we really know God?” Has your answer changed or deepened over time? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Job 11:7–8. What specific images does Zophar use to describe the limits of human knowledge of God? Though Zophar’s counsel to Job was flawed, what theological truth does this passage preserve?

3. Read Romans 1:19–20. What two attributes of God does Paul say are clearly revealed through creation? What is the moral consequence of this revelation for all humanity?

4. Read 1 Corinthians 2:10–16. Identify every statement Paul makes about the Holy Spirit’s role in the knowledge of God. What does this passage teach about the limits of unaided human reason in theological knowledge?

5. Read Jeremiah 9:23–24. What three sources of human boasting does God warn against? What does He set over against them? What does the word “knows” (yada) suggest about the kind of knowledge God is calling His people to pursue?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

6. Explain the distinction between divine incomprehensibility and divine knowability. Why is it important that we hold both truths simultaneously? What errors result from emphasizing one at the expense of the other?

7. What is the difference between archetypal knowledge and ectypal knowledge? How does this distinction help us understand how genuine knowledge of God is possible for finite creatures?

8. Why is general revelation insufficient for salvation, even though it is genuine and universal? What is the relationship between general revelation, the suppression of truth, and divine judgment according to Romans 1:18–32?

9. What is the difference between “knowing about God” and “knowing God” in the sense of John 17:3 and Jeremiah 9:23–24? Why does this distinction matter for how we approach the study of Theology Proper?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

10. Is your theological study producing not merely a fuller understanding of God but a deeper relationship with God? Are there specific habits, of prayer, worship, Scripture meditation, or Christian community, that you need to cultivate in order to move from knowing about God to knowing God?

11. How does the doctrine of the Holy Spirit's illuminating work change the way you approach Bible study and prayer? What would it look like to bring genuine dependence on the Spirit to every session of theological study?

12. Jeremiah 9:24 says that the LORD "delights" in lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness. How does knowing what God delights in shape your own values, priorities, and desires? In what ways might your life reflect or fail to reflect the things God delights in?

Prayer Focus

Spend time in prayer as a group, acknowledging before God both His incomprehensibility and His self-revelation. Thank Him that He is greater than our minds can contain, and that He has nonetheless stooped to make Himself known in language we can receive and a Person we can trust. Confess your dependence on the Holy Spirit for all genuine illumination of the Word. Ask God to grant you not merely the knowledge that comes from study, but the knowledge that comes from communion, the living, personal, growing knowledge of the LORD that Jeremiah declares is the one thing worthy of all our boasting.

Let the prayer of the psalmist be your own as you close: "One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple" (Psalm 27:4, NASB 1995). May the God who cannot be fully known make Himself truly known to you.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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