

## Behold Your God: A Study of the Attributes of God

### Week One: Can We Know the Essence of God?

**Text to Consider:** Exodus 33:12 - 34:9; Isaiah 40:12-23; 1 Tim. 6:15-16; Rom. 11:33-36

**Theme:** Incomprehensibility

**Focus:** God's is not a better version of humanity. Nor is he a projection of our best qualities. Rather, God is altogether unique in being, such that he is beyond the scope and comprehension of finite creatures. Therefore, no one can know or see the very essence of God.

#### Scripture:

- He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Tim. 6:15-16)
- Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11: 33-36)
- To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? (Isaiah 40:18)

#### Why should we study the attributes of God?

- **A.W. Tozer** said: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." Knowing God is at the center of our identity.
- Paul's desire in life was to **know Christ**: "*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death* (Phil 3:8-11)
- To **know God**. The God we are called to know is known through **his attributes** and **his works**.
- To **overcome our tendency to domesticate God**. When we study the attributes of God, we discover that God is infinitely greater than we ever imagined or conceived.
- To **overcome boredom** with God. As Christians, we can grow bored with God. When we do, it is often because we lose sight of how glorious and great he is.
- **A means of growth**. As Christians, we grow in sanctification (Christlikeness) by knowing God through the careful study of his Word. The goal is to conform our thoughts, actions, and lives to God himself.
- **To help us worship**. The ultimate goal is not mere head knowledge; it is worship. Good theology should lead to doxology. Paul Helm says, "The study of God's being or essence is but a prelude to worship."

#### Moses & Exodus 33:12-34:9

- God has delivered his people out of Egypt and brought them to Mt. Sinai. While Moses was on the mountain, the people, under Aaron's leadership, created a golden calf and worshipped it. God wanted to destroy the people and make a fresh start with Moses.
- Moses intercedes for Israel. God promises not to destroy Israel but says he will not go into the Promised Land with them but will send his Angel to go before them (33:3). Moses intercedes again, and God relents, and he promises to go with his people into the land (33:14).

- Moses wants to know more of God (33:13). He requests to see God's glory (33:18). God says he will make all his goodness pass before Moses and will proclaim his name, but Moses cannot see his face, "***for man shall not see me and live***" (33:20).
- God hides Moses in the cleft of the rock to protect him from seeing the fullness of his glory. Moses sees the "back" but not the "face" of God (33:23). In other words, Moses catches a glimpse of the reflected glory of God, but he cannot behold the very essence of God.
- "God's essence is beyond the reach for finite mortals like you and me. Not even Moses could see the divine essence and live. Dead men tell no tales, especially those who've seen the very essence of God. It is incomprehensible in all its glory, perfection, and brilliance" (Barrett 19).

### **God is not like us – Isaiah 40:18-25, 28**

- "Unsearchable" – "It is not only true that God is incomparable, but he is also incomprehensible. His power, his knowledge, his presence and his wisdom are inexhaustible and unfathomable" (Barrett 22).
- Fundamental distinction of theology: the **Creator-creature distinction**. The Creator is not just different than the creature but different in kind.
- The starting point is the conviction: ***God is someone than whom none greater can be conceived.***
- We should ask: ***What must be true of God if he is the most perfect being?***

### **What is an essence?**

- An essence is the "what" of a thing, its definable nature, it makes a thing what it is. For example, "humanity" or "horse-ness" or "chair-ness."
- What is God's essence? Can we know it? While God's words in scripture and his works reveal who he is, they do not reveal who he is exhaustively.
- Aquinas: "The infinite cannot be contained in the finite. God exists infinitely and nothing finite can grasp him infinitely."

### **Avoid Two Temptations**

- Agnosticism: the view that we cannot know God. While God is incomprehensible, he is surely knowable.
- Mysticism: the view that knowledge of God is irrational and based on intuition.

### **Big Takeaway:**

- God is not simply a greater version of being than us, as if he is projection of an ideal version of ourselves. Rather, God is unique in his being, and his essence is beyond the scope of finite minds to comprehend.

### **Key People:**

- St. Anselm of Canterbury  
"Truly, Lord, this is the inaccessible light in which You dwell. For truly there is nothing else which can penetrate through it so that it might discover You there. Truly, I do not see this light since it is too much for me; and yet whatever I see I see through it, just as an eye that is weak sees what it sees by the light of the sun which it cannot look at in the sun itself.... O supreme and inaccessible light" (Proslogion).
- St. Augustine  
"We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder if you do not comprehend? *For if you comprehend, it is not God you comprehend.* Let it be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a rash of profession of knowledge. To attain some slight knowledge of God is a great blessing; to comprehend him, however, is totally impossible."