

Behold Your God: A Study of God's Attributes

Week Two: Can We Think God's Thoughts after Him?

Text to Consider: Psalm 145:3; Psalm 19:1-6; Rom. 1:19-20

Scripture: "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable" (Psalm 145:3).

Theme: God-talk: How the creature should (and should not) talk about the Creator.

Big Takeaway: We can talk about God in a meaningful way, because he has revealed himself to us and because we relate to him analogically.

Introduction

- Have you ever tried describing the Grand Canyon to someone who has never seen it. The distance between one side of the Grand Canyon and the other is but a small picture between the finite and the infinite, the creature and the Creator.
- We are bound by time, but God is eternal – outside of the time. We are constricted by space, but no space can contain incorporeal being. We are always changing, but he is always the same.
- Since God is infinite and incomprehensible, we need him to make himself known to us. We need him to accommodate himself to our finite understanding. And we need him to tell us how we should and should not talk about him.

Baby Talk

- God created man and made him for the distinct purpose of knowing, enjoying, and reflecting his image in the world.
- "**Accommodation**" – God "accommodates" himself to our weakness and limitations.
 - The early church father Origen compared God to a parent talking to his two-year-old.
 - The reformer John Calvin compared God to a nurse caring for an infant. The nurse speaks in a language the infant can understand.
- What does this baby talk look like?

Analogical Knowledge

- *Univocal knowledge* – sameness.
 - To have univocal knowledge of God would be to have the same knowledge as God (rationalism).
- *Equivocal knowledge* – difference.
 - To have equivocal knowledge would be to say God's knowledge and ours is completely different (agnosticism).
- *Analogical knowledge* – partly same, partly different.
 - To have analogical knowledge is to say that our knowledge is similar to but not identical with God's knowledge.
 - Since we were created in God's image, it makes sense for our knowledge to resemble his knowledge, though it is imperfect.
 - While we may not know God as he is in himself, in his essence, we may know him as he has made himself known to us by revelation.

The Dog Who Met God

- Is God good in the exact same way the dog is good? No. Why not? Answer: God is infinite, and the dog is finite. The dog is not good in the same way God is good. But there is a degree of continuity.
- "Because God is infinite and unified, the *modus significandi* of a term applied to God and creatures is different. We cannot possibly comprehend how God is good, and so although we do have an understanding of goodness, there is inevitably a vagueness and inadequacy when we use the term of the perfect being" (36).
- We feel this in worship

The Supereminent God

- If something is supereminent in God, then it must be more eminent than that which is in us. “In him [God] all that we are is possessed in a higher, fuller, purer, and limitless way” (36).
- For example, we may be wise, but we are not wise in the same way that God is wise. His wisdom is supereminent. The same is true of the communicable attributes of God.
 - **Communicable attributes** – beauty, goodness, love, wisdom, and holiness
 - **Incommunicable attributes** – self-existence, simplicity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, etc.
- History of “God-talk”
 - **Cataphatic theology** – describes what God is (God is good, holy, love)
 - **Apophatic theology** – describes what God is not (God is not finite, does not change, exist in time)
 - Via negativa “way of negation” – asserting something true about God by denying something false about him.
- All of this gets back to the importance of affirming analogical knowledge of God.

Anthropomorphic Expressions – Does God have eyes, ears, wings?

- If knowledge of God is analogical, **then language used of God is analogical as well**. Language cannot grasp the essence of God, so metaphors, similes, and figures of speech are appropriate.
 - Lewis: “All language about things other than physical objects is necessarily metaphorical.”
- Biblical authors use anthropomorphic language – ascribing human qualities to God. Yet, we know that is a spirit, and does not have a physical body (John 4:24; Deut. 4:12, 15-16)
 - “eyes” – God knows all things, sees all things
 - “wings” – protection
 - “ears” – God hears all things
 - “sitting” – immutable authority
 - “standing” – God’s power, rule and reign
 - “remember” – God is about to act
 - “changing his mind” – human perspective

Conclusion

- “We expect the Bible to read like an automotive textbook. Yet the metaphorical communicates truth just as much as the literal, sometimes more so. The point is, we ascribe to God in an absolute sense all the perfections we observe in creatures. As we do so, however, we must keep in mind that there can be no perfection in the creature in the exact same way that is in God” (40).

Key People:

- *Aquinas*: “Whatever is said of God and creatures is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, in whom all perfections preexist excellently. Hence all names applied to God and creatures are said analogically.”
- *James Henley Thornwell*: “God’s infinite perfections are veiled under finite symbols. It is only the shadow of them that falls upon the human understanding.”
- *Stephen Charnock*: If we think about God, we should say to ourselves, “This is not God; God is more than this: if I could conceive him, he were not God; for God is incomprehensibly above whatsoever I can say, whatsoever I can think and conceive of him.”