

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 6: The Revelation and Knowability of God

In our introduction to Lesson 5 we asked three questions: Does God exist, and if so is it possible to know him, and if we can know him, what is he like? We explored the first question last week having to do with God's existence and gave various arguments for the existence of God. This week we will look at the revelation and knowability of God. Revelation of God deals with the topic of how God reveals himself to humanity and the knowability of God that deals with the degree to which God can be known by mankind.

Historically, the church has not only believed in the existence of God, but also that God can be known. This knowledge is not and cannot be exhaustive, for God is incomprehensible; thus, human beings can never know all there is to know about God or about any particular aspect of God. But God is knowable to the degree and in the way that is sufficient for human beings to have a personal relationship with him during their earthly lives. Indeed, one characteristic that distinguishes believers from unbelievers is that Christians know God relationally and non-Christians do not.

The Nature of Revelation

Because humans are finite and God is infinite, if they are to know God, that knowledge must come about by God's taking the initiative to make himself known. This is referred to as 'revelation'.

Revelation refers to the divine disclosure or unveiling of truth by God to humanity. It encompasses the idea that God makes Himself known to His creation in various ways, allowing humans to gain insight into His nature, will, and purposes.

The first thing we need to understand is the revelation is progressive. **Progressive Revelation** signifies God's increasing disclosure of truth to people. God does not reveal all truths to people at once. Instead, God gradually reveals aspects of God's divine nature as well as God's covenant relationships with people.

The progressive nature of revelation especially pertains to Scripture and how later revelation is built on earlier revelation. The revelation of God and salvation through Jesus, for example, is described in Scripture as a new covenant, which reveals more fully the character of God and the ways in which God wants to relate with people.

General and Special Revelation

Over the centuries, Christians developed a theological distinction between two primary types of revelation. The first type is called **General Revelation**, which signifies knowledge available to all people at all times and places. General revelation has been a topic of great debate because knowledge of God determined by rational means alone is considered insufficient. Our human thinking and understanding are subject to a number of finite variables that give a limited knowledge of God and of things pertaining to God.

For this reason, **Special Revelation** from God is needed in order to supplement our finite human understanding. This type of revelation is more specific and particular, involving God's direct communication to individuals or groups in distinct ways.

General Revelation: This refers to the ways in which God reveals Himself universally to all people, at all times, and in all places, regardless of their religious beliefs or background. General revelation is typically understood to occur through nature (creation) and human conscience. Through the beauty, complexity, and order of the natural world, as well as the moral intuitions and sense of right and wrong inherent in human beings, God's existence and attributes are made known to humanity.

1. Natural Revelation:

- **Creation:** The natural world serves as a primary means through which God reveals Himself. The beauty, complexity, and order of the universe reflect God's attributes such as power, wisdom, and creativity.
 - Psalm 19:1-4 - "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."
 - Romans 1:20 - "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."
- **Order and Design:** The intricate design and order found in the universe, from the laws of physics to the structure of living organisms, point towards an intelligent Creator.
 - Job 12:7-10 - "But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind."

2. Moral Revelation:

- **Conscience:** The innate sense of right and wrong within human beings, often referred to as the conscience, reflects a moral law written on the hearts of individuals.
 - Romans 2:14-15 - "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them."
- **Human Experience:** Human experiences of love, justice, compassion, and other moral realities also point to the existence of a moral lawgiver and source of moral values.
 - Micah 6:8 - "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

3. Providential Care:

- **Sustaining Creation:** Scripture affirms God's providential care over creation, emphasizing His role as the sustainer and provider for all living beings.
 - Colossians 1:17 - "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."
 - Hebrews 1:3 - "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."
- **Human Provision and Protection:** God's providential care extends to the provision, guidance and protection of individuals and communities. These experiences are seen as evidence of God's active involvement in human affairs, demonstrating His care and concern for His creatures.
 - Matthew 5:45 - "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."
 - James 1:17 - "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

Special Revelation: This type of revelation is more specific and particular, involving God's direct communication to individuals or groups in distinct ways. Special revelation is typically understood to include divine actions such as miraculous interventions, the inspiration of scripture, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Special revelation is often considered necessary for a deeper understanding of God's plan for salvation and His specific instructions for humanity.

1. Scripture:

- **Divinely Inspired Writings:** God's communication to humanity is preserved in the sacred texts of scriptures, with the Bible being the primary source of special revelation for Christians.
 - 2 Timothy 3:16 - "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."
 - 2 Peter 1:20-21 - "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."
- **Revealing God's Will:** Scripture provides insight into God's character, His will for humanity, and His plan for salvation. It serves as a guide for faith and practice.
 - Psalm 119:105 - "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."
 - Hebrews 4:12 - "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

2. Personal/Direct Communication:

- **God Speaks to Individuals:** Throughout the Bible, God speaks directly to individuals, conveying specific messages, guidance, and instructions. This also includes visible manifestations.
 - Exodus 3:1-15 - God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, commissioning him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.
 - 1 Samuel 3:1-18 - God speaks to the young Samuel, calling him to be a prophet and delivering messages to him concerning the future of Israel.

3. Miraculous Interventions:

- **Supernatural Acts:** Throughout history, God has intervened in miraculous ways to communicate His message, demonstrate His power, and accomplish His purposes.
 - Exodus 14:21-22 - The parting of the Red Sea
 - Acts 2:1-4 - The Day of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit
- **Prophetic Revelation:** God has spoken through prophets and messengers, delivering specific messages, warnings, and instructions to His people.
 - Jeremiah 1:4-9 - The call of Jeremiah as a prophet
 - Amos 3:7 - "Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets."

4. Jesus Christ:

- **The Incarnation:** In Jesus Christ, God became fully human, living among humanity and revealing Himself in a tangible, personal way.
 - John 1:14 - "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."
 - Colossians 1:15 - "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

- **Revelation of God's Nature:** Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection provide the clearest revelation of God's character, love, and redemptive plan for humanity.
 - John 14:9 - "Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?"'"

The Knowability of God

We've seen that God can and has revealed himself to us in various ways, now the question remains, how fully can we actually know God? When it comes to the knowability of God, we must consider two truths:

1. **God is fully incomprehensible (Psalm 145:3).** Incomprehensibility does not mean that God is completely unintelligible but that he can never be completely and fully grasped and known. Not only can we never fully understand God; it is also true that we can never fully understand any single thing about God. His greatness, understanding, knowledge, riches, wisdom, judgments, and ways are all beyond our ability to understand fully. (Ps. 147:5, 139:6, 145:3, Rom. 11:33)
2. **God is truly knowable (Jeremiah 9:23-24).** Even though we cannot know God exhaustively, we can know true things about God. This knowability is real and sufficient, fitted to human capacity. We can know God to the extent that he reveals himself and our minds can comprehend. All that Scripture tells us about God is true. It is true to say that God is love (1 John 4:8), that God is light (1 John 1:5), that God is spirit (John 4:24), that God is righteous (Rom. 3:26), and so forth. To say this does not imply or require that we know everything about God or about his love or his righteousness or any other attribute.

The most amazing thing about the knowability of God is that our knowledge of God is not limited to fact, reason, or actions, but God is a personal God who allows us to know him personally through means of inner experience in the depths of the human spirit and psyche. God has always wanted to have a special, close relationship with his people: from Adam, to the tabernacle of his presence, to Jesus (God with us), to the indwelling nature of the Holy Spirit. God has wanted his creation to know him.

This kind of knowability is to impart an experience of union with God that comes through means on Spiritual oneness, 1 Cor. 6:17 *"But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him"*. This is the essence of 'eternal life' – John 17:3 *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*

It is through the Spirit and this Spiritual life that we can now have understanding of the things of God. 2 Cor. 2:9-10 *But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God."*

Ways that we can Know God in our lives

- **We can know God Providentially:** we can look at our lives and see how God has provided for us, protected us, cared for us, and guided us throughout all of our lives.
- **We can know God Powerfully:** we can experience the power of God through salvation, through encounters with his manifest presence, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and miraculous encounters such as healings and miracles.
- **We can know God Personally:** we can experience God through means of an intimate relationship as we know him as our Heavenly Father. This includes personal times of prayer, worship, meditation, spending time in his presence, listening, and learning more about him.
- **We can know God Practically:** we can practically experience God by actively living in his presence and power. This includes allowing God to transform us to where we see change in our lives and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. We can receive and give his love to others, we can serve others, and we can use our gifts and callings to minister to others.