

Systematic Theology Study
Session 2
How do we know anything about God?

In this session we are going to ask and seek to answer the question, “How do we know anything about God?” Since God is a spirit and is infinite and man is flesh and blood and finite, if man is going to come to know anything about God, it must come from God’s revelation of Himself to man. Revelation is a one-way street in that God must do all the revealing of Himself as we cannot come to know God through our five human senses. By answering the question of how we know things about God, other questions arise and we’ll attempt to briefly cover them as well.

When God chooses to reveal Himself, He does it one of two ways. The first is called “general revelation” and the other is called “special revelation”. What is important is that they are both ways in which God seeks to tell us something, some truth, about Himself for our benefit and His glory. During this study, the word “revelation” does not deal with the last book in the Bible called Revelation. What revelation means is to uncover something that was covered up. It’s like when an artist makes a big sculpture and has it covered with a large sheet and then at the right time, when everyone is watching, the artist takes the cover off the statue so everyone can see the work of art for themselves. This is a good picture of what God does for us in the process of revelation. He uncovers something about Himself, His ways, or His will that He wants us to know but was hidden from us prior to the revelation or unveiling.

1. General Revelation

This sort of revelation is called “general” because it is God’s communication of Himself to all people at all times and at all places. Anyone can receive or come to know what God is saying through general revelation. As we’ll see general revelation is perpetually being given by these ways in which it shows itself. There are three areas where we see general revelation: nature, history, and the inner being of humans.

A. Nature or the Creation

[Psalm 19:1-6]

Q: What are the heavens telling us about? *(v.1- the glory of God)*

Q: What is glory, as it pertains to God? *(It is the visible manifestation or way that the invisible God makes Himself visible. When this happens it reveals God as awesome, holy, majestic, loving, just and good (just to name a few). This is what the created heavens - the clouds and stars above them show us about God.)*

Q: What does the expanse (the expanse is the visible arch of the sky and everything in the sky) tell us? *(v.1 - it shows us the works of God’s hands)*

Q: What comes out of every day and night? *(v.2 - speech from the days and knowledge from the*

nights)

Notice (v.3) that the psalmist tells us that this isn't typical speech, the speech of one human to another. In fact, audibly, it's silent upon our ears but we recognize that nature is telling us about God when we study it and pay attention to it. The line mentioned in v.4 is a measuring line. V.5 tells us that one of the measuring line measures charts of the course run by the sun each day. When the sun is shining and "moving" across the sky, it's heralding the revelation of God and what He has created and the order that exists in nature by His design. At the end of v.6 it says that there is nothing hidden from the sun's heat, thus no one misses out on the revelation that nature brings. If you can see the sun and experience it's warmth, you can know that there is a God who created it all. It's important to remember that there are many such measuring lines. The illustration given of the sun is but one of the things we'd term general revelation in nature.

Q: Are there some things in nature where you have seen the awesomeness of God or things in nature that have shown you something about God? If so, what are they?

[Romans 1:18-20]

Q: Who is the wrath of God revealed against? (v.18 - *ungodly and unrighteous men*)

Q: How do the ungodly suppress the truth? (v. 18 - *in unrighteousness*)

Q: The things that God has made evident to mankind about is evident where? (v.19 - *within all people*)

Q: V.20 explains how God made certain things evident to all people. What did God make evident to everyone? (v.20 - *His invisible attributes, His eternal power, and divine nature*)

Q: What did God use to make these things about Himself evident to all people? (v.20 - *creation*)

Q: According v.20, what is the implication for this knowledge which is available to all mankind through the creation? (*There are no excuses for not believing in God and knowing at least some basic things about Him.*)

Q: What does this mean about the general revelation that creation provides when it comes to the fate of men? (*It is sufficiently clear to condemn mankind before God*)

While creation is a good way to come to know that there is a God and even know some things about Him, it has it's limits. This is because the witness of nature has been marred by sin in two ways. The introduction of sin prevents man from seeing the fulness and clarity of God in nature as it was originally intended to do.

1) Creation was cursed.

[Genesis 3:17-19] - Instead of good things only, the ground will now produce worthless and

counter-productive things such as thorns and weeds. These will actually hinder man's work. The pain of childbirth will now be greatly multiplied. (This is not to say that God did not cease from showing Himself faithful, loving and merciful to Adam and Eve and their descendants. He did but sin had marred creation and was cursed as a result of the fall.)

[Romans 8:18-25]

Q: According to this passage, what was the creation subjected to? (v. 20 - *futility - this word means unusable or vanity*)

Q: What is creation hoping or longing for in this passage? (vv. 19 & 21 - *to be set free from this vanity by the revelation of the sons of God so that it will be free from the corruption brought upon it by sin*)

So, creation itself is not what it was originally due to man's sin. Thus, the general revelation of God has been marred in some ways. The world is a spoiled creation.

2) Man was effected by sin, too. The effects of sin upon man was far worse than it was upon nature. Instead of knowing God instinctively and by seeing all God created as pointing to Him, man now lives in darkness and is blind to God by default.

[II Corinthians 4:3-4]

Q: What has the god of this world blinded in those who are perishing? (v.4 - *their minds*)

As a result mankind now does not perceive the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ unless by some supernatural work. His default setting is separation from God and thus darkness. This blindness or darkness makes it very difficult to see the glory and majesty and beauty that creation reflects of God's nature. Nature still provides witness of God and some of His attributes, due to sin, it's not as clear as it once was - or will be in the future when we are revealed as the sons of God.

B. History

History is like a river in that it continuously flows from one its source to its destination. God does not live "in time" and is not subject to history as we are. Time is God's creation and mankind is locked up in time. We cannot travel backwards or forward in time but have each been placed in this specific time in human history by God for His purposes. God is working towards certain goals and ends in history. As we study history, we can begin to detect these trends and handiwork of God in historical events.

[Galatians 4:3-5]

Q: When did God send His Son to earth? (v.4 - *when the fullness of time came*)

The word for time here is “chronos” which means the clicking of a watch - the measuring of time. So when the right number, established by God, of time clicks happened in history, the Father sent His Son into the world. This verse lets us know that while God is not subject to time, He has things that He wants to happen at exact times along human history.

[Revelation 1:3]

The word of time here is “kairos” which means a “set or proper time” for something to happen, the opportunity or event in specific time. Where “chronos” measures time, “kairsos” speaks of what fills the time. What’s important for us is that both of them point to God using human history to reveal things about Himself and His plans for mankind. One often quoted example is the survival of the Jewish people. Several times throughout their history, others have attempted to exterminate them, as a whole race. It happened in the times of Queen Esther and it happened under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanies IV, the Roman Empire in 70 A.D. and then again under Hitler and Stalin in WWII.

C. Inner being of man

The mind, will, and emotional makeup of man as well as his ability to comprehend time, eternity, morality, and his religious nature point to God being the creator of man as he is in essence, different from the other animals of the created world. Man reflects the nature of God in certain ways.

[Genesis 1: 26]

In this next passage, Paul and Barnabas were sharing the gospel in Lystra and Paul performed a divine healing on a man who was lame in his feet. When the crowds saw this miracle, they began to worship Paul and Barnabas as Hermes and Zeus and wanted to sacrifice to them. Listen to Paul’s response to the crowd.

[Acts 14: 14-17]

Q: What did Paul say about his and Barnabas’s nature? (*v. 15 - they were men, of the same nature as the Lystrans*)

Q: What was the witness of God that He left to mankind even before He revealed the gospel to them? (*v. 17 - He did good, gave them rains from heaven, gave them fruitful seasons and satisfied their hearts with food and gladness.*)

This lets us know that God not only created the world and those who live in it, but He also gave witness to those He created by being good to them in various ways. God allowed them to experience satisfaction through His creation and goodness.

In this next passage, Paul had been left alone in Athens waiting for his companions to arrive. While there he noticed there were temples to every imaginable god under heaven,

including one to an “unknown god”. Just in case the Athenians overlooked some god, they wanted to make sure there was temple to him, not to offend anyone. Paul used this temple to the “unknown god” to speak to the great thinkers of Athens to present the gospel to them.

[Acts 17: 23-28]

Q: What does this passage teach us about the workings of God in human history? (*v. 26 - He has determined the time and place of where the various people groups will live and for how long.*)

Q: According to this passage, what does God want mankind to do? (*v.27 - for mankind to find Him - this real God wants to be known by man*)

Q: How far is this God from man? (*v.27 - not very far at all*)

The Athenians show us a picture of a very religious society. They were seeking God even though they were looking for Him in ways that did not yield any real results. Paul was explaining to them that the “unknown god” that they paid homage to by building him a temple was actually the One True Living God who created the world and gave life to all who live. Humans are like this God in some ways, as he calls them God’s children in that we share some aspects of His nature. This is not to be confused with the way Paul normally uses the term “child of God”. This term use in Acts 17 does not imply any sort of personal relationship with God through redemption through Jesus Christ. It simply means we were created in His image and share in some of His nature - such as understanding the passage of time, eternity, morality and a relationship with a divine being (religion).

Think about general revelation for a second. Even if you never read a page of the Bible or never heard of Jesus Christ, what God has revealed through nature is sufficient to condemn each and every person before God but on the flip side, it is also sufficient for the one who seeks God to lead that person in the right direction to find Him. Many people find it difficult to swallow that a person could become guilty by general revelation alone. Yet, as we saw in the Romans 1 passage, it is not only possible but certain.

Q: What are some uses for general revelation for Christians today? Why might we need to understand this doctrine? (*It is important to understand God’s desire for man to know Him. It is also important when we are witnessing to people who are from a non-Christian background. We need to use points of commonality with them and everyone lives in the world and lives in nature, the creation. It makes a good common point of contact between the lost and saved. Thus, it appeals to everyone’s sense of wanting to know God or religion in some way.*)

Some other implications for general revelation and its use are: It gives us the possibility of some knowledge of God outside special revelation, we know that God is just in condemning those who have never heard the gospel, it explains the universal belief in religion, and gaining of genuine knowledge and morality in man (believing or unbelieving) are not his own accomplishments - they are God’s work in a person’s life.

Next, we will look at special revelation. We will examine what it is and what harmony there is between it and general revelation.

2. Special revelation

This sort of revelation is called “special” because God gave it to a specific person at a specific place and time. The definition of special revelation is that it is God’s manifestation of Himself to particular people at a particular time and place enabling those people to enter into a redemptive relationship with Him. In other words, it’s God’s way to show something about Himself to people so that they can come to know specifically what it takes to be saved and then live in a love relationship with God. Special revelation is relational. Special revelation pre-dates the fall and later builds upon general revelation. When we put all the special revelations together, we have the Bible. The Scriptures represent the sum total of all special revelations or divinely inspired words to mankind.

A distinction must be made between the special revelation that is divinely inspired and is in Scripture and the times when God speaks to an individual or group after the time when the Bible was closed. (Remember from our study as to how the Bible came into being that for a book or letter to be considered as inspired, it had to pass several tests. One of those tests (for the New Testament) was that it was authored by an eyewitness of Jesus Christ. There are no eyewitnesses of Jesus today nor have there been for 20 centuries, thus, a direct communication from God cannot be called inspired or put on the same level as Scripture, even though God spoke it to a person for a specific reason.) God still speaks to people, even to today. The special revelation which makes up the Bible and fills it is authoritative for all people. However, when God chooses to speak to a person or group now, that is not authoritative for all people but rather just those to whom the message was addressed. It still comes from God but it is better seen as illumination from the Holy Spirit than it is revelation in the sense that revelation is something that is authoritative to all people.

Q: Just based on what we’ve discussed thus far, why do you think special revelation is necessary? *(Man lost his relationship and favor with God which he had before the fall. It was essential for God to act on man’s behalf to offer man a new and more full revelation of Himself so that he could be saved from sin and its wages.)*

There are two main attributes of special revelation. The first is that it is personal and the second is that it shows us a God who is both transcendent (in that He is outside and beyond our sensory experience, wholly different from us) and close at the same time.

[Exodus 3:14]

Q: What did God reveal to Moses at the burning bush in this verse? *(His personal name)*

God is personal. He entered into personal covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David and then the entire nation of Israel. Scripture is not legalistic or a set of rules but rather it is God who wants to show His love to His highest creation and then have that creation (man) freely return

that love.

God also revealed in through special revelation that He was transcendent (or outside our ability or experiences to fully grasp). He is unlimited and we are not. He is not subject to the confines of space and time and so He is everywhere all at once and we are fully subject to both time and space and limited to one place at a time. He knows all things while we don't know all things. Man cannot reach up to God to investigate for himself about God and even if he could, he wouldn't understand what he investigated. However, at the same time, God is close to all mankind. He loves each person and knows the number of hairs on each person's head as well as the number of breaths they will take in their lives. Because of who God is, He had to reveal Himself to us in this special way for us to be able to grasp Him more fully and understand who He is and what His will is. He had to choose ways to reveal Himself that were understandable to humans, such as using our language, our customs, our conventions, our lives. The highest of all special revelation came in the person of Jesus Christ as it was God coming to earth as man.

Four types of special revelation

A. Historical events

[Deuteronomy 26:1-9]

1. In this passage, Moses is setting up a memorial arrangement for the generations that come after him to remember the Lord and how He acted to bring the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt gave them the Promised Land. This was to be a memorial for God acting in the history of the Israelites (and the Egyptians and Canaanites, too). God showed who He was through His actions in history.

Q: What are some of the attributes God showed the Israelites through His deliverance from Egypt?

Sometimes the history is the revelation of God. The entire incarnation story, from Jesus' birth to His death and resurrection and return are all a living revelation of God. Every step, every word, every action were the direct revelation of God to us as Jesus walked the earth.

[John 14:8-10]

B. Divine speech

As this one implies, it is God dictating His words to a human so that the human can act or speak or write down what was said for the edification of others. When we think of how the Bible came into being, this method of special revelation is the one that comes to mind quickly. It is a message straight from God to man.

[Jeremiah 18:1-2]

Q: Who was doing to talking in this passage? (*v.1 - the Lord*)

Q: Who did the message of the Lord come to? (*v.1 - Jeremiah*)

[Revelation 1:10-20]

Q: Who did the talking in this passage? (*the entire passage - Jesus*)

Q: How do we know this is Jesus doing the talking? (*the description given is that of Jesus*)

Q: Who is Jesus talking to in this passage? (*v.10 - the apostle John*)

Notice that these and the multitudes of other passages with the same format, clearly show special revelation. It was God speaking to a certain person, at a certain place, at a certain time in history. Then the person wrote down or related in some way the message from God and then made sure it was copied or transcribed in some way to preserve the revelation from God.

C. The Incarnation

[Hebrews 1:1-2] - We looked at this one in the last session but it applies to this one as well. It shows us that Jesus Christ reveals God to us in a way that is more precise and perfect than any of the other two methods. He was the walking incarnation of God Himself.

[Matthew 5:21-22]

Q: What was the teaching of God that the ancients passed down to Jesus' audience in this passage? (*v.21 - You shall not commit murder*)

Q: How did Jesus interpret that teaching for the ancients? (*v.22 - He took the prohibition from a purely external action to the actual heart attitude that leads to the external action of murder. Jesus told the audience to hate a person is the same as murdering them in God's eyes because one's heart is set on murder - whether or not the action actually happens or not.*)

Notice the formula Jesus used throughout all of Matthew 5. "You have heard it said"... "BUT I say to you." He was putting His words and teachings alongside and equal to those words which were already in Scripture - those that were already seen as inspired. Thus, Jesus was claiming to say the words of God. He wasn't just receiving the revelation of God, He was the revelation of God. Jesus' life and speech were the most complete revelation of God possible. Since God is spirit and lacks human form, Christ's humanity shows us a new type of divine revelation. Jesus gave the revelation of God to mankind through every aspect of His life. Jesus' life and speech just didn't mirror God's attributes but rather showed people God living among them. In Isaiah 7:14, one prophecy concerning Jesus' birth was that His name would be called "Immanuel" or "God with us".

[Luke 5:5-10]

Q: What does Peter come to realize about Jesus in this passage? (*v.8 - that Jesus is holy, like*

God, and he was not)

D. Scripture

The book we call the Bible is not the revelation. What is the real revelation is all the stories, the teachings, the sayings and actions of those who are in the pages of Scripture. With this we see the revelation builds upon itself in that the Old Testament is shadow but then in the New Testament we see Jesus and we have substance and clarity. What we know is that the Holy Spirit came upon certain men in history so that their writings, under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit, was an accurate record of the revelation of God which then resulted in the Word of God being written. The Bible is a summation of the other three types of special revelation as the first three were the original revelation events but the Bible, which was organized and edited by God, puts them together for us so that they are all preserved for our benefit.

[II Peter 1:19-21]

The meaning of special revelation has been debated for the centuries. Is the special revelation what is called “propositional” meaning that it is commandments, rules, definitions and teachings. Or, is special revelation primarily “relational” meaning that it emphasizes God’s desire to have a personal relationship with His people. The truth is this. It is both. The main thrust of special revelation (the Bible) is that people would enter into a saving, loving relationship with the Lord Jesus but in order to do this one must know something about who God is and what He wants for this to be real. It’s impossible to put your wholehearted faith into a being that you don’t know or understand to some degree.

Since the Bible is the expression of God and His will, it alone possesses the right to supremely define what we are to believe and how we are to conduct our lives. God has taken the initiative in engineering the events found in the Bible for our benefit so that we have them and we live under them. We do not make them up or alter them in any way but seek to interpret them accurately so that we come to know God to the fullest extent possible in this life, by faith.

[I Corinthians 10:1-6]

Q: According to this passage, why did the events of the Old Testament happen? (*v.6 - to provide examples for us so we don’t learn to crave evil as they did*)

God is the highest being so He is the highest authority of all matters concerning faith and life. He is the only being who has the power to exist within Himself. Thus, what He tells us in His Word is truthful, loving and for our benefit so that we will come to know and love Him.

One of the other truths about God’s Word is that it is supremely powerful. Through it, God’s power can change the hearts and minds of people for all eternity. Since it comes straight from God, it carries His power and authority.

[Romans 1:16-17]

[Hebrews 4:12-16]

Q: According to this passage, what is the Word of God able to judge? (*v.12 - the thoughts and intentions of the heart*)

Q: What is hidden from God's Word? (*v.13 - nothing*)

One might think that this is a frightening situation where God sees our sins and weaknesses and then smites us with judgment.

Q: Despite all our fears and weaknesses, what does God invite His people to do? (*v. 16 - draw near to Him.*)

This is the invitation God desires each person to accept. Let His Word impact your heart and learn of who God is and then come to Him, fears and weaknesses and all, and then enjoy Him eternally. Through general and special revelation we come to know God and He is a God worth getting to know.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?