

Jason Upchurch - Systematic Theology - Theology Proper Intro

This morning we return to our semi-regular look at systematic theology. Or what the Bible calls “doctrine.” Doctrine is not naval gazing in any sense, doctrine is essential for our spiritual health individually as believers and collectively as the church. Overly simplistic doctrine is dangerous. It’s like shooting a gun that’s off by a few inches at 25ft, at that rate it’s off by 3 feet at 100 yards. Same with doctrine. It is vital for our spiritual health and we should be growing in our understanding.

If you look at your notes there are basically 7 main headings that most people categorize doctrine into.

Bibliology - Doctrine of the Bible
Theology Proper - Doctrine of God Himself
Anthropology - Doctrine of Man
Christology & Pneumatology - Doctrine of Christ and Spirit
Soteriology - Doctrine of Salvation
Ecclesiology - Doctrine of the Church
Eschatology - Doctrine of Last Things

This morning we begin our look at Theology Proper. That’s a really weird name. What does that mean? Well, a lot of times we use the word “theology” as a catchall for any doctrine. “I’m reading a theology book?” “Oh really? What’s it about?” “It’s a theology book about prayer.” “Or it’s a theology book about marriage.”

So usually when we say theology what we mean is just some kind of study about what God says in the Bible about some subject.

So what does Theology Proper mean? Theology proper means that we are actually studying God himself. We’re not focused on miracles or justification or sin or atonement, although God is involved in all those things.

But Theology Proper asks the specific question: What does the Bible say about God himself? Who is God? Or what is God?

Now, I know maybe it sounds silly, but how would you answer that? How would you answer that to a child? Someone who is 10 years old? How would you answer that to a self-proclaimed atheist? How would you answer a Mormon or Muslim or Jew or a new believer?

That’s what we’re talking about with theology proper. And this is going to be a huge subject. So here’s what I want to do this morning as we begin our look at God.

First, let’s actually answer the question of who is God.

Second, I want us to look at passages that encourage us to know God. We should want to know God and I also want us to see that God desires to be known. One of my biggest concerns as we look through theology is that our brains will get big, but we’ll not actually love God or his word any more than when we started. I want you brain to get bigger, but I want your love for God to increase as well.

I had hoped to get farther than that this morning, but I think that’s as far as we’ll go.

1) What is God?

I am going to use the Baptist Catechism and the Westminster Shorter Catechism to answer that question. The Baptist Catechism is the question and answer of the 1689 London Baptist Confession. It and the Westminster Shorter Catechism give the same answer and I think it’s a great start.

Q. What is God?

A: God is a Spirit; infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

It is not comprehensive, but it is a wonderful start to the discussion. Now, this is a great definition for a lot of reasons. But let me get all of you grammar nerds excited. Because the grammar matters here. This answer is basically 2 clauses.

First, God is a Spirit. When we're talking about God we're talking about a being that is Spirit.

John 4:24: God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.

God is not made up of stuff. He's not 6'2" 240 sitting on a literal physical throne somewhere. Jesus - the Son of God, who is fully God and fully man - is a literal physical person in his human nature. But as to his divine nature he is also spirit. The divine being - God and the attributes, the divine essence - is not physical.

That's the first part. That's hard to wrap our minds around because our whole world is physical - atoms and molecules and stuff that we can touch and see. And God is utterly not that.

And not only that, but the unseen God who is Spirit made everything that we do see:

Heb. 11:3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

This is called ex nihilo creation. God created all things out of nothing. The only thing that existed prior to Genesis 1 was God - who is himself not a physical being. You say what did it look like? There was nothing physical to look at. There were no atoms or molecules. It was empty of physical things and yet full of God who is Spirit.

The second part is a very brilliant formulation:

Q: What is God?

A: God is a Spirit; infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

So our God who is Spirit is Infinite meaning without any limit. To the maximum of possibility. When we get to these attributes specifically we'll look at Scriptures. Right now we're just defining.

Eternal meaning without any reference to time. God has always had all these attributes and will always have all these attributes to the maximum extent. Put another way, God has never gotten stronger. Or wiser or more just. From before the foundation of the world God had all these attributes in perfection and in fullness.

Side: I don't like saying that God is outside of time. That type of language is actually related to Plato and pagan philosophy. It's not Christian. Because what that implies is that God exists in all time events simultaneously. He's as much in 2023 as he is in 1987 or 1200BC and therefore time really means nothing to God. That's just not true.

Gen. 1:1: In the what? Beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

There is a beginning of time, God operates in time. Does God operate in 1987 just as much as right now? Maybe, but the Scripture doesn't state that or even imply that in any way. On the contrary, Scripture always portrays God operating within the bounds of time that God himself created.

Gal. 4:4: But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the Law.

God operates and plans and redeems within the constructs of time that he created. We never read the Bible and notice any time confusion. God never time warps in and out. If anything we see God referencing previous events in space/time - covenants, acts of deliverance, creation, sacrifices, so on.

Even in eternity future there are references to time where the tree of life gives forth its fruit in its season. There are seasons in the new earth which means time. The saints in heaven right now are told to rest a little while longer. And we are waiting for Jesus's return at just the right time.

We see God operating inside the space time domain that he has created. I think saying he is "outside of time" is a confusing statement. We just say God is eternal. He has no beginning or ending.

God is also unchangeable. God will never change. Ever. The divine being - God - has never changed anything about himself. And he can't. If he were to change it would mean he wasn't perfect to begin with or that he was perfect and now he's not.

This is really hard for us to comprehend because everything around us changes all the time. Seasons change, health changes, our knowledge changes, finances change, jobs, friends, information, our bodies change.

I shaved my beard off this week and my kids couldn't stop looking at me. "Is that the same guy?" He looks weird.

We get new phones, new houses, new cars, tvs. God never changes.

Mal. 3:6 For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

If God were to change we couldn't trust his covenants or promises or anything about him. Maybe he'd promise to save you today but tomorrow kick you out of the Kingdom. How can we trust God? Because he never changes.

One more thought on this definition. What kind of words are "infinite, eternal and unchangeable?" They are adjectives. They are words that describe things.

What kind of words are "wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth?" They are nouns.

So watch this: those 3 adjectives all apply to the 7 nouns.

God is infinite in his being. Infinite in his wisdom, infinite in his power, infinite in his holiness, infinite in his justice, infinite in his goodness. Infinite in truth.

God is also eternal in his being, eternal in his wisdom, eternal in his power. Eternal in his goodness. So on.

Really, what we could say is that God is infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being. God is infinite, eternal unchangeable in his wisdom. God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in holiness. Infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his truth. So on.

Just think about any one of those. God never becomes more holy. His holiness is infinite. It is beyond our comprehension. And because his holiness is eternal it's always been beyond our comprehension. And it will always be beyond our comprehension. And it will never change.

Same with God's goodness and justice and truth. God has all these qualities to the maximum extent, has always had them and will always have them and will never change. That's what God is. Or who God is.

2) We are called to know God. Read John 17:1-3

So I want to start here in what is often called the High Priestly prayer of Jesus. This is the night before Jesus is crucified for the sins of his people and he is praying for his disciples and praying for all who would believe in him.

And I think verse 3 is crucial for us to understand because we often forget that the big picture in everything we do, our whole lives, our coming to gather on Sunday mornings, our telling other people about the gospel, eternal life is for one end: that we would know God. **Read 3**

Know him personally and intimately and as our Father.

Not just know about God. Not just know facts about God as though he's a chemistry equation where we just have some information and plug it into a formula. We need to know facts and commands and information about about. But eternal life - salvation and all that Jesus did to accomplish it - is know God and **delight** in God. Rejoice in God.

You ever have a friend or family member or someone that you just love being around? And when you're around them you're your best self and you start even acting like this other person? Not in a weird way, but they bring out your best self?

That should be God for every believer.

1 John 4:7: Beloved, let us love one another for love is from God; everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love.

The knowledge that we are to have of God is something that changes us to be like him. Why do we love? Because we hang out with God and God is love. When we hang out with God he'll rub off on us. We'll love more, we'll be more just and kind and patient and faithful and holy.

If you don't have that it's probably because you don't know God. Maybe you know about him like you know about some guy in a biography from 300 years ago. But you don't know him. The longer we know God the more we are like him.

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have what? Eternal life.

Jesus says eternal life - salvation - is actually knowing God personally. And actually, that eternal life starts right now. Eternal life is not something that happens when you die. It's not primarily about living forever - though obviously that's part of it. Eternal life, fundamentally, is an intimate knowledge and love for the true God that starts now and lasts...eternally!

Now, that's not to say that morality and theology are unimportant. They are very important and essential. But eternal life is summed up here in knowing 2 people: God and Jesus Christ.

In fact, knowing God is what the New Covenant is all about. **Turn to Jer. 31:31-34.**

This is the famous biblical promise of the New Covenant. The covenant that Jesus would secure through his death and resurrection. **Read 31-34**

If you don't have this underlined in your Bible you really should. This promise of the New Covenant is basically what the book of Hebrews goes on about for several chapters because of the significance in our lives.

But the NC is defined by several things: God's law is on our hearts, God is our God, our sins are forgiven. And that we will know God.

That's what eternal life is all about. Knowing Jesus and knowing God.

Not everyone in the Mosaic covenant knew God. Millions of Israelites didn't know God even though they had a covenant with him. God always had a remnant of people who did know him. Sometimes it was small - just 7,000 people in Elijah's time.

But the glory of the New Covenant, the covenant that Jesus made through his death and resurrection, is that those who have faith in Jesus actually know God. I don't have to come alongside another Christian and say "Hey, you should really know God because he's made a covenant with you." I don't have to say that because the very definition of a Christian is that we know the true and living God!

And what an amazing privilege that is! Who's the most powerful person you know in the world? Maybe they're rich or political. I know a couple of local politicians by name. I know a few people who have a fair amount of money. But I don't know any really big deals out there. I don't know Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos or Vladimir Putin or Joe Biden.

But you know who I know? I know the God of the universe. And you know the God of the universe.

Actually, Paul says that it's not just that we know God but that God knows us in an intimate, saving, fatherly way.

Gal 4:8: Formerly when you did not know God you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God or rather, be known by God...

Knowing God is the most important thing we can do. How do we do that? **Turn to Psalm 19.**

There are basically two ways to know God, we talked about this briefly in bibliology. The first way is through general revelation, the second is through special revelation.

General revelation is how God reveals himself to all people but in a way that cannot save. Special revelation is how God reveals himself in the Word of God - the Bible - and has the ability to save.

Psalm 19 gives us a beautiful combination on both general revelation and special revelation. Now, it doesn't use those terms but we see them played out. David starts with General revelation. **Read 1-6**

How do we know God? Just by looking at the heavens. The heavens declare God's glory and the sky is the work of his hand. Have you ever been to a craft fair or something where people are selling art or cool creations? Those creations the work of the artist. They are just an expression of the creativity and greatness of the artist. Same with God. The heavens are not God, they are just a small expression of his greatness.

And day after day the heavens and creation proclaim the greatness of God to all people.

By the way, if you're a Christian, you should get out in creation. And specifically in creation that produces awe inside of you. A lot of times we have no awe of God and I think part of the reason is because we don't look up from our digital device long enough to be impressed by anything.

I remember being at Costco during the eclipse a few years ago. And being outside and just feeling the temperature change and the darkness and it was like wow: there's really these massive objects floating out in space and they're so big and powerful they change tides and weather and temperature and light. And you know all those things but then you realize: God made them in an instant.

But God's glory goes out to all the earth. This proclamation of the greatness of God is heard - really seen - by all creation. **Read 3-4**

Aside from man, it seems like the sun is sort of the crowning achievement of God's creation because it's so intense and massive and glorious what we realize is that whoever made it is infinitely more glorious than the most glorious thing we see. It's so glorious we can't even look at it without instant blindness - how much more glorious God?

So we can know God through creation - in a non-saving way. And God wants us to. We should feel and hear and see creation that is stunning because it should conjure up in us an awe of God.

There's a few sights I've seen that have done that. Grand Canyon was one. Glacier National Park, sunrise at the Dead Sea, sunsets in the Tri Cities, fall in the Kentucky countryside. It's just phenomenal - and our phenomenal God has done this all.

There is an emotional aspect of knowing God where we should respond in awe and amazement at him through simply looking at what he's made.

We also know God from special revelation. These are things that we can't know from creation but that God has to reveal to us. **Read 7-11**

These are all synonyms for the Word of God. The Law, testimony, precepts, commands, fear, rules. And they're all good and they all have to be revealed to us. God has to instruct us specifically in order for souls to be revived - or saved.

Put another way, there's a lot of people who look at the same sunsets you do, the same mountains that you do, the same ocean beach that you do and their souls are dead, their hearts don't rejoice, they are simple and unrighteous. Why? Because they don't have or love the Word of God to know who God really is.

In fact, without the Word of God what they'll do is look at those sunset and mountains and beaches and eagles and moose and worship them rather than the creator. That's what **Rom. 1** says.

So we have to have the Word of God to direct us.

What does that Word of God do? It revives the soul. It's actually the means by which people are saved, or we could say come to know God.

It matures us: it makes wise the simple. We're all start out simple. Not dumb, but simple minded, worldly minded. And the Word makes us wise because it comes from God. The more we know God the more we'll reflect the wisdom in his word.

It rejoices our heart. This is key in our discussion. If opening the Bible doesn't rejoice your heart then you might not actually know God. Now, there are times when God's Word feels heavy even for believers. Maybe we're going through a dry time spiritually, or feeling the weight of conviction, or maybe we're just bored with the Word. But if it's always a chore, always dread we need to ask if we've been born again and really know God.

When I go on trips my wife and kids will often fill my backpack and suitcase with notes. Little messages and pictures and I love them. That's what we have in the Bible, God's message about himself to us. It's not just data and stuff, it's God's very Word that he's speaking to us.

And our reaction to the Word of God is all in light of who God is. **Read 12-14**

How would God show us errors? How would he keep us innocent? It's through his Word. In order to know what sin is, we have to discover what sin is. And we want God himself to keep us back from presumptuous sins - intentional sins.

Because we want our whole lives to be acceptable in the sight of God. Now, in one sense our lives are acceptable in God's sight because of the work of Jesus, but nonetheless we want our character to please God.

Why? Because we know him.

Praise in the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God that we can know him and that he knows us.

Pray