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The Mystery of God

by Jeremy Cagle

Two of the most confusing definitions that I have ever read regarding Who God is or what He does have come from the study of philosophy. One is from the fifth century B. C. The other is from the nineteenth century A. D.

Empedocles, a Greek philosopher living from 490 – 430 B. C.,¹ once wrote that “God is a circle whose center is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere.”² Joseph Joubert, a French moralist/philosopher living from 1754 – 1824,³ wrote, “We know God easily, if we do not constrain ourselves to define him.”⁴

Neither of these definitions makes much sense. Empedocles gives a wonderful illustration of the fact that God has no boundaries but his definition sheds little to no light on Who God is or *how* He is boundless. Is He boundless only in His physical dimensions or in His spiritual dimensions, too? Is He present in Heaven *and* Hell, or just in Heaven?

Joubert’s definition is not helpful either. In all honesty, it does not even make sense. To say that one cannot or should not define God is to offer some sort of definition – albeit an inadequate one – of Who He is.

The purpose of this illustration is not to critique these philosophers, but simply to demonstrate that God is mysterious. There is much about Him that cannot be known by human beings. [This has been the teaching of man through the ages – from the fifth century B. C. to the last hundred or so years.]

Yet the Bible makes it very clear that there is much about God that *can* be known.⁵ It is the purpose of this article to discuss how the Bible deals with the mysterious nature of God.

I. WHAT GOD HAS REVEALED

In the Scriptures. That God has revealed Himself in the Bible is the universal testimony of the Christian church.

Deuteronomy 29:29 says,

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

Romans 15:4 states,

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

God has revealed Himself so that people will obey His laws, receive encouragement, and know Him. While Christianity teaches that God is above and beyond man’s meager knowledge (as will be shown below), it also teaches that God can be known in the Bible.

But the incomprehensibility of the divine nature is no reason why we should desist from reverent inquiry and prayerful striving to apprehend what He has so graciously revealed of Himself in His Word. Because we are unable to acquire perfect knowledge, it would be folly to say we will therefore make no efforts to attain to any degree of it.⁶

It is not the purpose of this article to explore all the ways in which God reveals Himself in Scripture; it is enough to say here that He reveals Himself in His attributes,⁷ His law,⁸ His salvation,⁹ and His plans for the future.¹⁰

In history. Not only has God revealed Himself in the Bible, but He has also revealed Himself in the history of mankind. While He has revealed Himself to numerous men and women throughout the history of the earth (such as Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), He

has specifically revealed Himself through one person and to two groups of people.

Chronologically, the first of these groups of people is the nation of Israel. Genesis 12:1–3 records God’s promise to Abraham, the father of the Israelites:

Now the Lord said to Abram,
“Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;

And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;

And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

God chose to reveal Himself through a *nation* – through Israel. Exodus 19:5–6 describes the national/religious mixture that was to represent the Hebrews,

“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.

Yet, due to Israel’s idolatry and rejection of the Messiah, God hardened their hearts until the complete number of Gentile¹¹ believers has received salvation. Romans 11:25–26 explains this,

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery – so that you will not be wise in your own estimation – that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Lewis Sperry Chafer gives a thorough description of the purpose of God’s relationship with Israel:

In a manner and to an extent quite impossible of comprehension by the finite mind, Israel is appointed to glorify God. This truth must not be slighted. God speaks of the elect nation as “Israel my glory” (Isa. 46:13), and indeed He has chosen that nation

above all nations for His glory (Gen. 12:1–13). He loves them with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3).¹²

God revealed Himself through Israel for His own glory.

The second way, chronologically speaking, in which God revealed Himself in history was through His Son, Jesus Christ. Colossians 2:9 describes Jesus further saying, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” In John 14:7, Jesus says this about Himself: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.” Hebrews 1:3 gives a further description of Jesus:

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.¹³

Jesus Christ was and is fully God and fully man. As the second person of the Trinity, He showed man Who God is and how God wants man to live.

Jesus came to reveal God to mankind and also to die for the sins of those who would believe in Him. Colossians 1:19–20, speaking of Jesus’ Deity and His sacrificial death, states, “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross.” God not only came to earth in the form of Jesus Christ, but He also died in man’s place to offer forgiveness of sins (Heb 9:27–28). As a result of this revelation and this sacrifice, one author writes,

No one can now accuse God of condoning evil and so of moral indifference or injustice. The cross demonstrates with equal vividness both his justice in judging sin and his mercy in justifying the sinner. For now, as a result of the propitiatory death of his Son, God can be “just and the justifier” of those who believe in him. He is able to bestow a righteous status on the unrighteous, without compromising his own righteousness.¹⁴

The third way in which God has revealed Himself in history is through the church. Writing about the distinction between the church and all other religious bodies, Robert Saucy says,

How different is the church from all which preceded it. Whereas all nations had priests to perform the functions, the church has none. It is a priesthood. While all others brought sacrifices that they might approach God, the church brings none, but approaches boldly through the finished sacrifices of Christ, its great High Priest.¹⁵

In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself through the government/race of the Jews. In the New Testament and in the present age, God reveals Himself through the church – neither a government nor a race. As the Apostle Paul writes,

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27–28).

The church was not built on the blood of animal sacrifices but on the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:18–19). And while the nation of Israel was to be careful of its interaction with other nations,¹⁶ the church is to be evangelistic and tell the entire world of the salvation offered through the sacrifice of the Son of God (Matt 28:18–20).

The time of the church will continue until its rapture¹⁷ and removal from this earth. First Thessalonians 4:15–17 describe this event,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

II. WHAT GOD HAS NOT REVEALED

That God has not revealed Himself completely in the Bible is also the universal testimony of the Christian Church. There is a mystery to the person of God. A. W. Tozer writes,

The child, the philosopher, and the religionist have all one question: “What is God like?” This book is an attempt to answer that question. Yet at the outset I must acknowledge that it cannot be answered except to say that God is not like anything; that is, He is not *exactly* like anything or anybody.¹⁸

It is a shame that some of this mystery has been neglected in recent Christian scholarship.

A high sense of the mystery of the faith was maintained by the great divines of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But in the last century a change came. Apart from certain more privileged ideas – especially those favored by religious revivals – the tendency in the past hundred years in the West for Christians is to lose a sense of the mystery of the faith.¹⁹

Psalm 145:3 says, “Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.” The following is a brief list of God’s greatness – of the things He has not revealed to man.

All of His Plans. While some of God’s plans for the present and future are revealed in Scripture, there is much that is not revealed. Isaiah 55:8–9 says,

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Ecclesiastes 7:14 says,

In the day of prosperity be happy,
But in the day of adversity consider –
God has made the one as well as the other
So that man will not discover anything that will be after him.

God knows the future, though He has not revealed all of His plans regarding it. Ecclesiastes 8:6–7 illustrates this truth:

For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight,
though a man’s trouble is heavy upon him. If no one knows
what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?

Several Scriptures give the proper response to this mystery. Proverbs 27:1 says, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.” James 4:14–15 states,

Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”

In Luke 12:16–20, Jesus gave this parable:

And He told them a parable saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my good. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared.’”

Aside from what He has revealed, God’s ways and plans are higher than man’s. They are incomprehensible to a finite mind. It is impossible to know what God is doing with any degree of completeness. As Jesus’ parable illustrates, man does not know what the future holds.

This mystery often leads Christians and non-Christians alike into despair:

On a larger scale we read in our daily newspapers or see on the evening news instances of grief, heartache, and pain on a massive scale. There is war, terrorism, earthquakes, famine, racial injustice, murder, and exploitation occurring daily in various parts of the world. The threat of a nuclear holocaust hanging over our heads has caused this period of history to be called the age of anxiety.

In such days when massive crises appear on our television screens almost daily, even the Christian is tempted to ask, “Where is God? Doesn’t He care about the thousands who are starving in Africa or the innocent civilians who are being brutally murdered in many war ravished countries around the world?”²⁰

Yet God never said He would reveal to mankind all of His plans for the future of the earth. In fact, it is only by His grace that God has revealed *anything* about Himself. As Louis Berkhof writes, “The position must be maintained, however, that theology would be utterly impossible without a self-revelation of God.”²¹

Such mysteries as those concerning His plans for the present and future should not lead men to doubt whether God is in control. Such mysteries, rather, should lead men to acknowledge that God’s ways are higher than our ways, and what He does, whether we understand it or not, is right. As Hosea 14:9 says,

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
Whoever is discerning, let him know them.
For the ways of the Lord are right,
And the righteous will walk in them,
But transgressors will stumble in them.

All of His Purposes. For this present article, God’s “purposes” refer to His “reasons” – His “motivations.” In the words of Millard J. Erickson, *purpose* is “The aim or goal that governs life.”²² God’s purpose is His “aim or goal.”

Several of God’s purposes are revealed in Scripture. Romans 8:28 states that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Isaiah 43:7 says that everyone whom God has created has been created for His glory.

Yet many of God’s purposes are not revealed in Scripture. Why God does what He does is often absent from the pages of the Bible.

The Book of Job gives many insights into this. After having his possessions, his family, and his health dramatically taken from him (Job 1–2), Job begins to wonder why such calamity has come upon him. Here are some of his statements:

Why did I not die at birth,
Come forth from the womb and expire (3:11)?

Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
And whom God has hedged in (3:23)?

What is man that You magnify him,
And that You are concerned about him,
That you examine him every morning
And try him every moment?
Will You never turn Your gaze away from me,
Nor let me alone until I swallow my spittle?
Have I sinned? What have I done to You,
O watcher of men?
Why have You set me as a Your target,
So that I am a burden to myself (7:17–20)?

In seeking an answer for all his trouble, Job even goes so far as to say,

Only two things do not do to me,
Then I will not hide from Your face:
Remove your hand from me,
And let not the dread of You terrify me.
Then call, and I will answer;
Or let me speak, then reply to me.
How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make known to me my rebellion and my sin (13:20–23).

Oh that I had one to hear me!
Behold, there is my signature;
Let the Almighty answer me!
And the indictment which my adversary has written,
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder,
I would bind it to myself like a crown.
I would declare to Him the number of my steps;
Like a prince I would approach Him (31:35–37).

Yet, despite all Job has been through, God does not tell him why any of it has occurred. All he tells Job is that Job has no right to question Him.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,
“Who is this that darkens counsel
by words without knowledge (38:1)?

Then the Lord said to Job,
“Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
Let him who reproves God answer it” (40:1).

Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm and said,
“Now gird up your loins like a man;
I will ask you, and you instruct Me.
Will you really annul My judgment?
Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?
Or do you have an arm like God,
And can you thunder with a voice like His” (40:6–9)?

God answers Job’s questions by telling him that he cannot “contend with the Almighty.” God does what He does, and Job has no right to accuse Him of doing any wrong.²³ As Paul writes in Romans 9:20–21,

Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

God does not have to explain his purposes to mankind. He has chosen to reveal some of them, but He *owes* man no explanation for His actions.

Yet, while God’s purpose is not always revealed, it should comfort believers to know that God *does have a purpose for what He does*. He does not control the universe in a capricious fashion. Matthew 10:29–31 says,

Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

God has a purpose for things as insignificant as the lives of sparrows and the numbers of hair on people’s heads. If He has a purpose for the little things, He definitely has a purpose for the larger ones.

Not only does He have a purpose, but He also has the power to *carry it out*. Psalm 138:8 says, “The Lord will accomplish what concerns me.” To quote Jerry Bridges,

God does have a purpose and a plan for you, and God *has the power to carry out that plan*. It is one thing to know that no person or circumstance can touch us outside of God’s sovereign control; it is still another to realize that no person or circumstances can frustrate God’s purpose for our lives . . . Because we know God is directing our lives to an ultimate end and because we know He is sovereignly able to orchestrate the events of our lives toward that end, we can trust Him.²⁴

Nothing can frustrate what God desires to do.

All of His Thoughts. Just as God has not revealed all of His plans and purposes in the Scriptures, He also has refrained from revealing all of His thoughts. It seems superfluous to say that man does not and cannot know all that God is thinking, yet it is important to understand this in a study of God. Again, as Isaiah 55:8–9 says,

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

First Corinthians 2:11 expresses the same thought:

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

Charles Hodge describes Gods' thoughts and knowledge by saying,

This knowledge of God is not only all-comprehending, but it is intuitive and immutable. He knows all things as they are, being as being, phenomena as phenomena, the possible as possible, the actual as actual, the necessary as necessary, the free as free, the past as past, the present as present, the future as future. Although all things are ever present in his view, yet He sees them as successive in time. The vast procession of events, thoughts, feelings, and acts, stands open to his view.²⁵

Human beings do not know what God knows and, as a result, do not think as God thinks. As the Lord said through Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts."

Stephen Charnock, describing the difference between the thoughts of man and the thoughts of God, writes,

As I see the sun this day, I know it was up yesterday, I know it will be up tomorrow; my knowledge of the sun is the same; if there be any change, it is in the sun, not in my knowledge; only I apply my knowledge to such particular circumstances. How much more must the knowledge of those things in God be unchangeable, who knows all those states, conditions, and circumstances, most perfectly from eternity; wherein there is no succession, no past or future, and therefore will know them forever!²⁶

To express this thought further, here is what the Scriptures teach of what God knows:

Job 23:10 – But He knows the way I take.

Psalms 44:21 – For He knows the secrets of the heart.

Psalms 94:11 – The Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are a mere breath.

Matthew 6:8 – Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Here is what the Scriptures teach of what man knows:

Ecclesiastes 9:12 – Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.

Matthew 11:27 – All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

In other words, if it were not for the sovereign grace of God, no man would know God at all. Man does not even know when the Lord Jesus is returning to rapture His church.

Matthew 24:36 – But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

The Apostle Paul describes man's knowledge in Romans 1:18–29. While all men know something of the God of the Bible, they choose to suppress that knowledge to pursue their own wickedness.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them (Rom 1:18).

In his book *The Thought of God*, Maurice Roberts explains that this gap between God's thoughts and man's should not be ignored.

The consequence of [ignoring this gap] has been inevitably been that the gospel has been brought down to man's level. Its profundities have not been appreciated. Its sublimities have not been scaled by the modern Christian mind. Its fullness has not been appreciated by our busy age. And therefore our character, as Christians, has reflected less and less of that 'other-worldliness' which was once the hall-mark of the believer and which former generations always expected to find in men professing to be converted.

It is to be feared that a future generation, when it looks back on our age of Christianity, will have to make the dreadful assessment of us that we were an age of shallowness in the things of God. That is not to deny that we have attained to a fair degree of soundness in the letter of doctrinal understanding as evangelical believers. But our age has been sadly deficient in what may be termed spiritual greatness. At the root of this is the modern disease of shallowness. We are all too impatient to meditate on the faith we profess. We cannot say, 'O the depth!'²⁷

End Notes

¹ *The New Dictionary of Thoughts: A Cyclopedia of Quotations*, comp. by Tryon Edwards (Standard Book Company, 1959) 773.

² *Ibid.*, 235.

³ *Ibid.*, 779.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵ For an example of this, see “The Knowability of God” in this edition of /jtst/.

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *The Nature of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999) 103.

⁷ See “The Attributes of God” and “The Trinity of God” in this edition of /jtst/.

⁸ Israel’s law is revealed in Exodus – Deuteronomy. While New Testament Christians are saved “apart from the Law” (Rom 3:21), this does not nullify God’s law for them. Galatians 3:24 says, “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.” The law does not save, but rather, “through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20).

God reveals His law to men to show them what they are going to be held accountable to on Judgment Day (Rom 14:11–12). It is this accountability, this “tutor,” that leads to saving faith in the work of Jesus on the cross. The law (revealed in Exodus – Deuteronomy) does not save; rather, it shows the need of salvation and leads to Christ.

⁹ Expressed in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This way of salvation is also demonstrated in the letters of the Apostle Paul. Here are some helpful quotations from these books:

Romans 6:23 – “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

2 Corinthians 5:21 – “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Ephesians 2:8–9 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

¹⁰ For the future of Israel, see Ezekiel 36–37 and Jeremiah 31–33; the future of the church, see 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; and for the future of the heavens and the earth, see the Book of Revelation 4–22.

¹¹ Gentile means “non-Jew.”

¹² *Systematic Theology*, Vols. 7 & 8 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976) 206.

¹³ In John 10:30, Jesus goes so far as to say, “I and the Father are one.”

¹⁴ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006 ed.) 207.

¹⁵ *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972) 39–40.

¹⁶ For example, see Deuteronomy 9; Ezekiel 9–10.

¹⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, & Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999). Rapture is defined as, “the belief that the church will be united with Christ at His second coming” (99).

¹⁸ *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1961) 6.

¹⁹ Maurice Roberts, *The Thought of God* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001) 10.

²⁰ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress, 1988) 14–15.

²¹ *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003 ed) 34.

²² *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001) 164.

²³ Let the reader understand that God does allow man to ask questions of Him. This is seen all throughout the Bible. What God does not allow is for man to accuse Him of doing wrong – to *question* Him.

²⁴ Bridges, 46.

²⁵ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003 ed.) 397.

²⁶ *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005 ed.) i., 324.

²⁷ Roberts, 10-11.