

Series: God Reveals Himself #1631

Title: John 17.3

Can God Be Known?

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. It is good to have you with us, especially since today we begin a new series in the Word of God. And to kick this off, I have a question for you. Here it is: can God be known? Can God be known? You might be tempted to immediately respond, "Well, of course God can be known!" After all, you are listening to a radio broadcast and internet podcast bearing the title *God Is*. In order for me to definitively name the ministry *God Is*, that must mean at least I know God is and knowing that I know that means God can be known. Correct?

But before we too easily accept an answer to this question, let me ask this again: can God be known? Some will say "no." God cannot be known. Others, of course, will say God does not exist and therefore we don't need to even bother with knowing God because God is *not*. But most of you hearing me will say, "Yes. God can be known." Well then for you I have a second question, "*How* can God be known?" If we answer, "yes, God can be known," then the next question is *how*? How can God be known?

Pressing further, let's ask (in the words of theologian Charles Hodge): how does the mind proceed in forming its idea of God? And how do we know that God really is what we believe Him to be? Those are valuable questions. How does the mind proceed in forming its idea of God? And how do we know that God really is what we believe Him to be?

Similar questions are found in the Bible itself. Zophar, one of the friends of Job asks this. I am reading Job chapter 11 and verse 7, "**Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?**" And Isaiah says this as part of his prophecy in Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 18, "**To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?**" It certainly feels to me when I read these good...ah, *great* questions, that the answer is *no*. That is, how could I ever know God? Being a mere human, I do not have the capacity to discover the depths of God, to discover the limits of the Almighty. To whom am I going to liken *God*? Or how could my finite mind come up with a likeness to which I can compare with Him? What Zophar and Isaiah are getting at here is that God is incomprehensible. I cannot, you cannot, we cannot comprehend *God*! He is not comprehensible.

The great theologians of the Protestant Reformation, Luther and Calvin, addressed this. Luther speaks repeatedly of the "hidden God." And distinguishes the "hidden God" from the "revealed God." He even puts these together at times and says God is still the hidden God even when He is the revealed God, because we cannot fully know God. Calvin writes about God, in the depths of His being, being beyond finding out and says, quote, "[God's] essence is incomprehensible; so that His divinity wholly escapes all human senses (as quoted in *Systematic Theology* by Louis Berkhof, 29)." That was Luther and Calvin.

Whatever we say about knowing God we must say that God is incomprehensible. That is, we do not ever know God fully, completely, exhaustively, and perfectly. Let's follow Charles Hodge some more, from his *Systematic Theology, Volume I*. This 19th century doctrinally sound theologian writes, "To comprehend is to have a complete and exhaustive knowledge of an object. It is to understand its nature and its relations. We cannot comprehend force, and specially vital force. We see its effect, but we cannot understand its nature or the mode in which it acts. It would be strange that we should know more of God than of ourselves, or of the most familiar objects of sense..."

...To comprehend is first, to know the essence as well as the attributes of an object. Second, it is to know not some only, but all of its attributes. Third, to know the relation in which these attributes stand to each other and to the substance to which they belong. Fourth, to know the relation in which the object known stands to all other objects. Such knowledge is clearly impossible in a creature, either of itself or of anything out of itself." He adds, "God is past finding out. We cannot understand the Almighty unto perfection (*Systematic Theology Volume I*, 337)."

God cannot be comprehended. God is incomprehensible. Let us forever keep this in mind. *However*, having said this, we affirm that *yes* God can be known and God is known. Let's go back to the Scripture and to none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to the words of Jesus in John's Gospel chapter 17 and verse 3. This is the beginning of the greatest prayer that has ever been prayed. God the Son, in prayer, with God the Father says this. John 17, verse 3, **"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."**

Capture this: Jesus says eternal life is to *know* the only true God through Jesus Christ. So, God can be known *and* knowledge of God is necessary for salvation. The same Apostle who wrote the Gospel of John also wrote the book of 1 John and listen to 1 John chapter 5, verse 20, **"And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life."** This verse certainly speaks to knowing God. "And we *know* that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may *know* [God] who is true...this is the true God and eternal life." 1 John 5.20.

Highlight the word *know* used twice. And highlight the connection again between knowing God and eternal life. Louis Berkhof, another outstanding theologian, writes, "God can be known and that knowledge of Him is an absolute requisite unto salvation (*Systematic Theology*, 29)."

Friends, what we have here are two things that are true at the same time. God can be known. And yet God cannot be fully known. God can be known. And yet God cannot be exhaustively or perfectly known. God, revealed in Jesus, can certainly be known and known unto salvation. And if you, like me, have been saved from your sin by the grace of God, then you *know* God! We know Him!

Let me continue to quote from Dr. Berkhof to get to the bottom line: "Reformed theology holds that God can be known, but that it is impossible for man to have a knowledge of [God] that is exhaustive and perfect in every way. To have such a knowledge of God would be equivalent to comprehending Him, and this is entirely out of the question...At the same time it is maintained that man can obtain a knowledge of God that is perfectly adequate for the realization of the divine purpose in the life of man (30)." And of course by "man" he includes woman.

When I was in seminary I had a professor by whom I was well taught. And one of the things he said on this very topic of knowing God has stuck with me all these years. He put it this way: we may apprehend God, but we can never comprehend God. Let me give this again because I think this will be helpful to you. I want to make sure you get this. We may apprehend God, but we can never comprehend God. To apprehend is to arrest or to take hold of. To comprehend is to have a complete and exhaustive knowledge of. We certainly apprehend the Living God, we by faith, reach out and take hold of Him (of course, because He takes hold of us first, as we will talk about). But we do not comprehend Him. We will never have a perfect knowledge of God. We may apprehend God, but we can never comprehend God. I hope that is helpful to you also.

Still, we must circle back to the second part of our question: *how* do we know God? This is the question we really want to answer in the coming days. So, let me encourage you as follows: be with us each weekday at this same time on this same radio station and/or via the God Is Podcast available from godisministry.org. Second, invite someone you know to join us. Make a call, send a text, mention this ministry at church or synagogue or at a family meal. Let's gather a few new listeners along the way. Third, visit us on social media and pick up encouragement for you all throughout this series *God Reveals Himself*. On Facebook and Instagram search for GodIsPodcast. That's GodIsPodcast. Follow us and like our posts.

And be sure and join us next as we continue to discover who God Is!

---END---