

Series: God Reveals Himself #1632

Title: Colossians 2.8

Epistemology

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. Last time we began to explore another aspect to our growing understanding of the nature and character of God by talking about our knowledge of the Living God. The question before us was: can God be known? Can God be known? And if we answer yes, as we do, then the second question is: *how* can God be known? To answer the question *how* can God be known we need more time beyond what we had so we continue with this now, and really for the next several times that, Lord willing, we are together.

What I want to do today is to affirm what was said last time, then add a little something more to those insights. And then I want us to pause for discussion that will send us on a short excursion – a topic related to our primary question, *how* can we know God? I am glad you are here and I both pray and have the expectation that this will all be instructive, convicting, and helpful to you. I think this will be a good use of your time on what is very likely a busy day for you. Let's dig in.

And I remind you that we believe God can be known. And we said this, keeping in the forefront of our minds and hearts, that God is incomprehensible. That is, we do not ever know God fully, completely, exhaustively, and perfectly. However, God can be known and God *is* known. Listen to the words of Jesus Christ in John 17, verse 3, **“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”** Christ says that we may know the only true God. In fact, it is eternal life to know God. And we also talked about 1 John 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...”** The Apostle affirms that indeed God can be known and is known by those who receive the understanding the Son of God gives to us. You will want to have these verses highlighted. John 17.3 and 1 John 5.20.

Listen to this wisdom first from Louis Berkhof, “Our knowledge of God, though not exhaustive, may yet be very real and perfectly adequate for our present needs (*Systematic Theology*, 32).” And from Charles Hodge, “While, therefore, it is admitted not only that the infinite God is incomprehensible, and that our knowledge of Him is both partial and imperfect; that there is much in God that we do not know at all, and that what we do know, we know very imperfectly; nevertheless our knowledge, as far as it goes, is true knowledge. God really is what we believe Him to be, so far as our idea of Him is determined by the revelation which He has made of Himself in His works, in the constitution of our nature, in His Word, and in the person of His Son (*Systematic Theology Volume I*, 338).” End quote.

This is so very well said. And Hodge ends this paragraph with a very important statement: so far as our idea of [God] is determined by the revelation which [God] has made of Himself in His works, in the constitution of our nature, in His Word, and in the person of His Son. That is, we only know God because God has chosen to reveal Himself to us. We are going to learn that God reveals Himself to us, and how He does. So, please plan to be with us. Do not leave us now. We are just getting started.

For now, and as we put it last time, think of what is being said this way: we may apprehend God but we can never comprehend God. We may apprehend God, but we can never comprehend God.

Now, I want to insert here a word about philosophy. Because what we embark upon as we discuss knowledge of God is what the philosophers call epistemology. Epistemology. This word comes from the Greek words *episteme* meaning knowledge and *logos* meaning reason. Epistemology is the study of the nature, origins, and limits of human knowledge or we can say epistemology is the theory of knowledge. All of the best of the ancient and modern philosophers deal with this all the way from the ancient Greeks to the present day thinkers. Alongside metaphysics, logic, and ethics epistemology is one of the four main branches of philosophy.

So when we ask questions about knowing and knowledge and how we know what we know, including knowledge of God, we are dealing with philosophy. And the question is: is there any use for philosophy in theology? Is there any way in which philosophy can inform our theology or should you and I reject it outright? The answer, I think, depends on *how* we use philosophy. There is that word “how” again! Let’s talk about this a little. And, do not worry, I am not about to launch us into a detailed and hard-to-grasp course on philosophy! While I am personally interested in the discipline, I am not adequately prepared and competent enough in this field to give you such a short course.

But I am equipped, I think, to tell you how philosophy can be safely used by Christians as we seek to *know* God. Here is an analogy that will prove helpful to us. I suspect many of you are familiar with the true story, in Genesis, of Sarah and Hagar. If so, you will remember that Sarah (wife of Abraham) had a maid named Hagar. And when Sarah was unable to get pregnant by Abraham then Sarah (foolishly) sent her servant Hagar in to have sexual intercourse with Abraham. The two slept together and Hagar became pregnant and so on. Well, Philo of Alexandria, a Greek speaking, Hellenistic, Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria Egypt. He was born in 20BC and died in 50AD, so his life spanned that of Christ’s.

Philo says, when using philosophy in conjunction with theology, that we must remember who is the master (Sarah) and who is the servant (Hagar). The master is theology and the servant is philosophy. Theology always rules over philosophy. And after Philo bit still a very long time ago, another of the early church fathers, Clement also of Alexandria, said this (quote), “Let philosophy submit to theology, as Hagar to Sarah, and suffer itself to be admonished and corrected; but if it will not be obedient, cast out the handmaid (as quoted in the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume One* by Francis Turretin, 45).” End quote.

Now *that* is great advice and wisdom we *really* need today. What Philo and Clement are saying is it is OK for the biblically and doctrinally sound believer in Christ to use philosophy that is in alignment with the Word of God. But when we come upon philosophy that is not in alignment with the Scripture, then we must admonish the bad philosophy; we must correct it when it needs correcting and if the philosophy will not become obedient to good theology, then cast it out. Do not use it! This is an urgent warning for us. The early church fathers should be studied and listened to in this century.

Here is another, this from Tertullian, who warned that sometimes (quote), “philosophers are the patriarchs of heretics (*Treatise Against Hermogenes* as quoted in the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume One* by Francis Turretin, 47).” This is a warning that must be applied today: sometimes philosophers are the patriarchs of heretics. Christians, we must be very discerning and cautious about what philosophies we let in to influence us in our understanding of who God is and how we are to live before God. These are wise words from Philo of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.

And right about now we hear the words of the Apostle Paul ringing in our ears. I am reading the New Testament Book of Colossians, chapter 2 and verse 8. Colossians 2.8 says, “**See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.**”

It is not that the Apostle Paul refused to deal with philosophy, to use philosophy, or even to let the right kind of philosophy inform his theology. Next time I want to give you a few examples of Paul and philosophy existing together in the New Testament. But it is that Paul remembered who the master is and who the servant is. The master is doctrinally sound theology. The servant is philosophy. And this is precisely what we must remember, as well. Paul’s instructions to the Colossians are our instructions also. So when we study and talk about epistemology, for example, let us be wise and unafraid to cast out that which conflicts with the Word of God. This is my main point today.

Let’s continue this discussion next time, when you join us, because God Is.

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