

The Strange and Wonderful Attributes of God

Lesson #8 – God’s Ineffability²³⁰⁸

Here in God’s Ineffability, we confront an attribute of God that is a way for humans to express the absolute Supremacy, Glory, and Otherness of God. We could acknowledge this attribute of God by holding your tongue to avoid speaking of things that you cannot comprehend.

What God has revealed to us is ours to know. To go beyond what God has revealed to us is to invite dangerous error in your faith. God is holy! He is set apart from us and alien to our natural mind.

Deut 29:29 *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.*

Rom 12:1-2 *Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

I. Definition of God’s Ineffability

The dictionary definition of “ineffable” is – “1. Beyond expression; indescribable or unspeakable:” from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

There are two different meanings within this definition that are related and are theologically/culturally overlapping. These are:

- 1st Unable to describe in language. Beyond the capacity of language to express. Not within the capacity of the human mind to understand.
- 2nd Theologically/culturally not to be spoken. Forbidden to speak. Includes blasphemy, foul language and in this case (the Tetragrammaton), a form of honor among Jews to not speak of God’s **JHWH** name at all.

In English pronounce it as Yahweh^{English} or Jehovah^{German}. Most often written as LORD in our Bibles.

Categorical Discussions:

Is this an Existential or a Relational Category? This is an existential attribute. God knows and understand Himself entirely. We know God by that which He has revealed about Himself in Scripture and by General Revelation of nature. Such knowledge is limited and incomplete for men.

Note: Those who are in Christ have available within themselves the Holy Spirit of God that assists us to know the God-head more fully.

Is this an Incommunicable or a Communicable Category? This is an incommunicable attribute. We are not ineffable, unknowable, or indescribable.

Humans are certainly capable of secretiveness, disguise, obfuscation. These are generally psychological weaknesses, not natural strength attributes.

Problem Statement: “All of us, naturally, try to form some picture of God and try to imagine God’s existence. The problem when we try to do this is that we end up in one of two places, **both not good**.

1. On the one hand, we often end up with an image of God as some superman, a person like ourselves, except wonderfully superior to us in every way. We picture God as a superhero, divine, all knowing, and all-powerful, but still ultimately like us, capable of being imagined and pictured, someone whom we can circumscribe, put a face to, and count. While this is natural and hard to avoid, it leaves us, no matter how sincere we are, always, with an idol, a God created in our own image and likeness, and consequently a God who can easily and rightly be rejected by atheism.
2. On the other hand, sometimes when we try to form a picture of God and imagine God’s existence, something else happens: We come up dry and empty, unable to either picture God or imagine God’s existence. We

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then end up either in some form of atheism or afraid to examine our faith because we have unconsciously internalized atheism's belief that faith is naïve and cannot stand up to the hard questions.

When this happens to us, when we try to imagine God's existence and come up empty, that failure is not one of faith but of our imagination. We are living not so much inside of atheism as inside of God's ineffability, inside a "cloud of unknowing", a "dark night of the soul". We are not atheists. We just feel like we are. It's not that God doesn't exist or has disappeared. It's rather that God's ineffability has put God outside of our imaginative capacities. Our minds are overmatched. God is still real, still there, but our finite imaginations are coming up empty trying to picture infinite reality, tantamount to what happens when we try to imagine the highest number to which it is possible to count. The infinite cannot be circumscribed by the imagination. It has no floor and it has no ceiling, no beginning and no end. The human imagination cannot deal with that.

"God is infinite and, thus, by definition unimaginable and impossible to conceptualize. That's also true for God's existence. It cannot be pictured. However the fact that we cannot imagine God is very different than saying that we cannot know God. God can be known, even if not imagined. How?"

Ron Rolheiser – Blog (Catholic)

II. Logic and Importance of God's Ineffability

As we studied the Transcendence of God in our last lesson, clearly God is "other than" all that we know. Our whole experience in this life is in relationship to other creatures and other created things.

The lost man has no experience with God at all. He cannot imagine what God is really like. It's not that the lost man or woman is not smart, it's that his mind has been massively corrupted by the fall.

The man or woman in Christ has experience with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This experience is real and powerful, but it is not objective, it is not based on our senses, it is not visual. There is no visual within this created order. Our experience within this created order is based on spiritual communication between the Holy and our own newly born spirit.

Additionally the man in Christ has the Word of God illuminated by the Holy Spirit of God as we seek to
2 Tim 2:15 *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."*

Consequences of God's Ineffability: Often we are forced to describe God using **apophatic** (see handout #4116) terminology, e.g. terminology that declares what God is **not**, rather than what **He** is.

The very act of using capitalized pronouns is in fact a deferment to the ineffability of God. In this practice, in a small way we are acknowledging that our knowledge of the Holy is limited and far below His actual Person, His Glory, and His Honor due to Him.

Historicity of God's Ineffability: Justin Martyr was the earliest church father to emphasize in some detail the Ineffability of God. (100 – 165 AD by martyrdom)

III. Scriptural Basis of God's Ineffability

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptures are quoted from the New American Standard Updated version (NASU)

Dt 29:29 *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.*

Job 37:21-24 *Now men do not see the light which is bright in the skies; but the wind has passed and cleared them. ²²Out of the north comes golden splendor; around God is awesome majesty. ²³The Almighty — **we cannot find Him**; He is exalted in power and He will not do violence to justice and abundant righteousness. ²⁴Therefore men fear Him; **He does not regard any who are wise of heart**.*

Psalms 139:1-6 *O Lord, You have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. ³You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. ⁴**Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it all**. ⁵You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. ⁶**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it**.*

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Psalm 145:3 *I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever. ²Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever. ³Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.*

Isa 55:6-9 *Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. ⁷Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ⁸For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.*

Rom 11:33 *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? ³⁵Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? ³⁶For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

The Gospel According to Job

Job answering his accusers: (Probably the oldest gospel account in all of Scripture.)

Job 9:30-35 *If I should wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, ³¹yet You would plunge me into the pit, and my own clothes would abhor me. ³²For He is not a man as I am that I may answer Him, that we may go to court together. ³³There is no umpire between us, who may lay his hand upon us both. ³⁴Let Him remove His rod from me, and let not dread of Him terrify me. ³⁵Then I would speak and not fear Him; but I am not like that in myself.*

Job 16:18-22 *O earth, do not cover my blood, and let there be no resting place for my cry. ¹⁹Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and my advocate is on high. ²⁰My friends are my scoffers; my eye weeps to God. ²¹O that a man might plead with God as a man with his neighbor! ²²For when a few years are past, I shall go the way of no return.*

Job 19:23-27 *Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! ²⁴That with an iron stylus and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! ²⁵As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. ²⁶Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God; ²⁷whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!*

IV. Important Points About God's Ineffability

1st How God's Ineffability Relates to Other Attributes

All of God's attributes are ineffable, incomprehensible fully, beyond our own imagination or ability to describe fully. If you think that you understand a particular attribute of God, I would suggest that you could spend a lifetime studying, and grow mightily in knowledge of God, but yet still have very much to learn of that attribute someday in heaven!

2nd Why God's Ineffability is Important to Our Faith

Our faith is based on and expressed in objective truth. Yet, in every aspect of God, His decrees, His domain, His works, there is mystery. We seek to understand that which God has revealed to us, but as we study deeper and deeper in any given theological area, we reach an end of our ability to reason about the infinite, the eternal, and the ineffableness of His attributes.

3rd Confessions or Creeds that Address God's Ineffability

From the 1689 London Baptist Confession; Chapter 2, Article 1; "whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself;" and "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto;" who is immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty - - -"

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Those Who have Taught Ineffability in the Church throughout History

Early Church Fathers:

Irenaeus of Lyons, 130 – 202 AD
Tatian the Assyrian, 120 – 180 AD
Clement of Alexandria, 150 – 215 AD
Origen of Alexandria, 185 – 254 AD

Medieval Church Fathers

Augustine of Hippo, 354 – 430 AD
Anselm of Aosta, 1033 – 1109 AD (quoted below)
Thomas Aquinas, 1225 – 1274 AD

Reformation Fathers

Martin Luther, 1483 – 1546 AD
John Calvin, 1509 – 1564 AD

Post-Reformation Theologians

Jacob Arminius, 1560-1609 AD
Stephen Charnock, 1628 – 1680 AD (Quoted below)
R. L. Dabney, 1820 – 1898 AD

Taken from **Dr. Norman Geisler's** *Systematic Theology; Volume 2; p. 247*

Important Quotes About God's Ineffability

We cannot have an adequate or suitable conception of God: He dwells in inaccessible light; inaccessible to the acuteness of our fancy, as well as the weakness of our senses. If we could have thoughts of Him, as high and excellent as His nature, our conception must be as infinite as His nature.

Stephen Charnock; *The Existence and Attributes of God;* p. 196; Discourse III; Section III; Item #1

The yearning to know what cannot be known, to comprehend the Incomprehensible, to touch and taste the Unapproachable, arises from the image of God in the nature of man. Deep calleth unto deep, and though polluted and landlocked by the mighty disaster theologians call the Fall, the soul senses its origin and longs to return to its Source. How can this be realized? The answer of the Bible is simply "through Jesus Christ our Lord". In Christ and by Christ, God effects complete self-disclosure, although He shows Himself not to reason but to faith and love. Faith is an organ of knowledge, and love an organ of experience. God came to us in the incarnation; in atonement He reconciled us to Himself, and by faith and love we enter and lay hold of Him.

A. W. Tozer; *The Knowledge of the Holy;* p. 9

When we try to imagine what God is like we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. If we insist upon trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts, and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand. **A. W. Tozer;** *The Knowledge of the Holy;* p. 8

The knowability of God is a topic in Christian theology that deals with the degree to which God can be known by mankind. Some religions contend that he cannot be known, sometimes arguing that God is so unique from humanity that it is absurd to think that finite humans can relate or know him in *any* significant way. Christians, however, contend that although we cannot fully know everything about God, since he has chosen to reveal himself to his creatures in a variety of ways we can know him personally, meaningfully, and significantly, in a limited but ever-increasing way throughout eternity.

Theopedia; *The Knowability of God*

Still You hide away, Lord, from my soul in Your light and blessedness, and so it still dwells in its darkness and misery. For it looks all about, and still does not see Your beauty. It listens, and does not hear Your harmony. It smells, and does not sense Your fragrance. It tastes and does not recognize Your savour. It feels, and does not sense Your softness. For **You have in Yourself, Lord, in Your own ineffable manner,** those [qualities] You have given to the things created by You according to their own sensible manner. But the senses of my soul, because of the ancient weakness of sin, have become hardened and dulled and obstructed.

Anselm

The results of philosophy are the uncovering...of bumps that the intellect has got by running its head up against the limits of language.

Ludwig Wittgenstein; *Philosophical Investigations,*