

Mystery | Is God Comprehensible?

This morning we are venturing into very deep waters. Don't worry, they aren't drowning waters. But they will overwhelm. The God who doesn't overwhelm is manageable, no God at all. For ten weeks we are going to look at *Glory: the Weight of God's Perfections*. We will take a perfection a week: holy, immensity, love. Pray for me. All sermons are intimidating, to stand up before you week after week and say: this is God; this is true. But a series on God's *glory*? I feel like a cricket chirping in the darkness, a feather in the weight of God's perfections. Today we begin with God as *mystery*. Is God truly knowable? Some branches of Christianity would say no. Others would say yes. Can we describe God? Is he a mystery? Lets see.

Mystery

Who is God? How should we describe him? Many Scriptures describe God as indescribable: incomprehensible, inscrutable, hidden, past finding out, a mystery. God is so mysterious that authors of Scripture often resort to images to communicate who he is: cloud of fire, fountain of life, the light of men. In the words of Paul, God "dwells in *unapproachable* light." He is enshrined in mystery, a bright, shining sun, which illuminates our world with warmth and light, but if looked upon directly, is blinding to the eyes. He is a mystery. If so, can he truly be known? I was talking to a barista this

week who said he prefers not to think of God as someone he is above but rather between us, an experience. Acknowledging God as mystery has a rich history. Tertullian the church father said: “[That which is infinite is known only to itself.](#)” In other words, we can’t really know God as finite beings. The medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing*: “[He may be well loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held but by thinking never.](#)” Although they may not know it, many Austinites practice this kind of theology—God is something to be experienced but not known. A mystery. Consider the mysterious statements from Scripture: the mystery of his will (Eph 1:9), mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4), mystery of the faith (1 Tim 3:9), the mystery of godliness, and God the great mystery: “[Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord...”](#) (Rom 11:33-35). Mystery, transcendence. Apophatic theology actually avoids saying what God is out of reverence to his mystery. It prefers to think of God in terms of images like the burning bush, the glory cloud, the still small voice, the I AM. Who is God? Moses sees a lone bush burning but not consumed. Staring at it, God calls out to him, “Moses, Moses.” When Moses asks who is speaking, God replies by saying: “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” Ineffable. God gives a self-reference. Notice he did not say I am omnipotent, omniscient, and

omnipresent, rolling off a list of attributes from his systematic theology. God simply states, "I AM WHO I AM," which is later shortened to YHWH, I AM. If God just *is*, and is gloriously beyond our comprehension, then who are we to lift a pen to describe him? Is he not a mystery? In the words of Gregory of Nyssa, "[God's name is not known; it is wondered at.](#)"

Puzzle

The problem with many Christians, with us, is that we've lost a sense of God's mystery. When we hear mystery, we think a puzzle to be solved. We skip right over wonder and go straight to work on the puzzle. Find the pieces, figure how they fit together, snap them in place, and you've got God! Some people thrive on this. Do your theology right and you win. After college I took a course on the book of Revelation. Once I'd studied it for several months, I called my dad and told him, "Dad, I've figured out the book of Revelation!" One of the scary things about treating God as a puzzle is that **we can actually know a great deal about God while hardly knowing God at all**. We can be like a person who, walking up to the Grand Canyon can't take their eyes off their iPhone, because they are too busy learning "about" the Grand Canyon to take in the greatness of the canyon. Has your knowledge eclipsed your wonder? Have you amassed theology only to leak awe? We would do well to learn from

the theologians who acknowledge God's mystery and encourage awe. But is the way forward an emptying of our minds, an experience? If God is a mystery, and he is not a puzzle, what kind of mystery is he? In their very helpful book, *The Mystery of God*, Boyer & Hall make a distinction between an investigative mystery and a revelational mystery. An investigative mystery is more like a puzzle or a suspense TV show, something to be solved. **A revelational mystery, however, it a mystery that, once revealed, remains a mystery.** [Space & subatomic particles] In Scripture, the mystery is revealed. In fact, in all the instances of the word "mystery" reveal something that gives greater knowledge *and* therefore, greater awe. The "mystery of his will" is revealed as a new humanity that is reconciled to God and one another—the church. The "mystery of Jesus Christ" is that God would come to man and die for us, rise from the dead, and begin a whole new world. And Paul's doxology about the "mystery of God," in unsearchable wisdom and inscrutable ways, is followed by an exhortation to offer him "reasonable worship," awe that flows from what we know, not what we do not know. **So, God is a revealed mystery that, once revealed, increases our wonder.** This means we don't need to abandon the study of the Scriptures, but rather, learn how to read them in a way that ends up with both reason and worship, knowledge and awe. Commenting on the enterprise of knowing God, J. I. Packer notes that it is cruel to

ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing the God whose world it is and who runs it. Spurgeon comments: **But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe...the most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity.**" The question, then, is how to we cultivate this wonder over a mysterious God

Response

Three ways to know the mystery: glory, person, worship. **Glory.** After Moses responded to God's revelation in the burning bush, he led Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness for a terrible forty years. Prior to escaping the wilderness and entering the Promised Land, Moses was speaking with God, through a cloud, as he did regularly on behalf of the people. He pleads with God's presence to go with them. God agrees. Then Moses asks for more: "Please show me your glory." The word glory, kavod, means weight. The glory of God is the weight of his perfections, the sumtotal of his essence, character, and power. Moses is asking to see it. Most of us can't imagine making such a request. Why? Is it because we are more humble than Moses? I think it is because we are accustomed to weightlessness. In browsing the Internet, for example, we tend to

give every piece of information the same weight. We may check ESPN stats, browse Pinterest, read an article on the Statesman, check Facebook, and read something about God, all in the same sitting and attach equal value to each thing. These are but bits of information; knowledge scanned, sorted, discarded, or kept. Then we move on. God is just part of the information stream. If we do encounter transcendence or awe, it is more likely to occur over a social media connection where someone says something about us. We are simply to fast for glory. **The information pushes our desires around, but Moses pushed into God with his desire.** Relentless in his pursuit of God he said: "Show me your glory." God responded by telling Moses all his goodness would pass before him. But first, God hid him in a crevice of rock, lest he die, and showed him only the back of his glory. When is the last time you encountered something so great, you had to hide? Like a child shying away from an adult they are fond of, do you shy away with great desire for God? For this to happen, our weightless practices will have to be curtailed, and practices that invite the glory of God take their place. Practices like prayer, meditation, reading. Seek his glory. Now, how can we seek his glory without it crushing us? Moses was sandwiched in a rock. When God revealed his glory to Moses, his name as YHWH, it came attached with this phrase: "**God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.**" The weight of glory is mystical but it is also **personal**. It relates. This is

our second way to respond. **God is not an idea to be affirmed or denied but a person to be known and loved.** Knowing God is not a matter of believing him; it is a matter of loving him. If you were to look up John Scotch in a phonebook or whitepages, you could easily say that you believe John Scotch exists. That would not mean that you know John Scotch. That, would require a relationship. So it is with God. *It is not enough to believe he exists, to know about his character and ways; we must **love** him to know him.* God reveals himself as a person, three persons to be exact—Father, Son and Spirit. Do you know them? Do you have affection for them? Or are they mere equals in to everything else in your life browser? Do they have *weight*? YHWH. The I AM, self-referencing, self-sufficient, glory. How does he not crush? In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: “**Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was I am**” (8:58). He makes these I AM statements around a dozen times. He lines himself up with the Father. What is he saying? God is personal and God is *Jesus*. That’s how the weight can turn to wonder...by looking at Christ. In Jesus, the glory of the Father shines with warmth and light, *for us*. Christ steps in front of the bright and blazing sun, making the unapproachable light approachable. The unknowable becomes known. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob becomes *our* God. How? Jesus disrobes himself of glory. He embraces the shame and guilt of our sin on a cross...and emerges in fresh, resurrection glory

to claim us as his very own, the sons and daughters of glory. The person of Jesus is how we know the mystery. Our final way to know the mystery, **worship**. Now we have reason to worship. The mystery of God is revealed in the person of Christ, and he is full of grace towards those who hope in him. Oh, sing, pray, and exult in the Son of God. You have been baptized into his death and raised to walk in his newness of life. He has shown you his glory, in the Son. He has promised his presence, in the Son. Moses plead for his presence. Why? Because just prior, Israel had turned their backs on God by worshipping a golden calf, asking it to deliver them. Though we have turned our backs on God, assigning weight to weightless things, YHWH says to us in Christ: "I will go with you. I will not abandon you. I know your name. You have my favor. You are my son, you are my daughter, you are my people. This kind of God is worthy of worship. He is not a puzzle to be solved but mystery revealed, revealed in the person of Christ, who when revealed remains a mystery. His name is to be wondered at.