

## **The Incomprehensibility of God**

**Adapted and expanded by Bob Young\***

### **Introduction**

When we talk about God, human beings come face to face with two seemingly contradictory ideas. We want to know God—God cannot be understood. This article seeks to sort out the differences and the implications in understanding God and knowing God.

The Bible teaches us that we can have a true and personal knowledge of God. This does not mean we can understand him completely. The Bible says again and again that God is ultimately incomprehensible to us, that we can never fully comprehend his whole being.

- Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand? (Job 26:14)
- Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. (Ps. 145:3)
- For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither 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. (Isa. 55:8–9)
- 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, or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:33–34)
- To explore this idea further, read passages such as Job 42:1–6; Ps. 139:6, 17–18; 147:5; Isa. 57:15; 1 Cor. 2:10–11; 1 Tim. 6:13–16)

These verses say that God's whole being is incomprehensible. His wisdom, judgments, thoughts and ways cannot be understood. The Bible also says that all of his attributes—both his incommunicable and his communicable (moral) attributes—are beyond our human understanding.

We can, however, know something about God. We can know God in some sense. But we cannot know everything there is to know about God. In fact, we cannot know everything there is to know about even one minute aspect of God's character or actions.

Let us unpack this biblical contrast between the incomprehensible God and the God who reveals himself and makes himself known.

### **God Is Incomprehensible**

The main reason God is incomprehensible is that He is in all of his attributes infinite. First, God's incommunicable attributes (He is self-existent, eternal, self-sufficient, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, immutable, immeasurable, sovereign) combine to make him incomprehensible. These aspects of God's existence exceed the limitations of human thought. Second, with regard to God's communicable attributes (He is living, Triune, personal or relational, communicative, good, holy, just, merciful, gracious, loving), these describe God to an extreme that is beyond human experience, thought, and comprehension. God is all of these things perfectly, in harmony, never sacrificing one in order to be another.

A simpler way of saying this is that God is incomprehensible because....

- He is infinite and his creation is finite.
- Creation depends on the Creator for existence and thus experiences limitations. Yet God is without limitations in every quality he possesses. The gap between Creator and creation, infinite and finite will always exist.

- The perfect unity of God’s attributes is beyond the realm of human experience. God’s love, wrath, grace, justice, holiness, patience, and jealousy continually function in a perfectly integrated yet infinitely complex way.
- Some things about himself God has not revealed.

Perhaps we will understand and know more in heaven. Nonetheless, God will always be infinite and humans will always be finite, so he will always be beyond human ability to understand, and our knowledge of God is always dependent on what he reveals and what he wants us to know.

### **Implications of God’s Incomprehensibility**

**WORSHIP.** Because God can never be fully understood, those who seek God should be deeply humbled. God is wholly “other” and wholly “us” at the same time. How is such possible? The appropriate response is a heart of worship, wonder and awe at his incomprehensible greatness and goodness.

**SEEKING.** Because God can never be fully understood, the possibility of new understanding always exists. God-followers never cease seeking Him.

**FAITH.** God’s incomprehensibility means that beliefs can be held with firm conviction even though they may be filled with inexplicable mystery. Triune God, Christ with both divine and human natures, divine sovereignty and human response (responsibility), and other fundamental teachings of the Christian faith are profoundly mysterious. Believing them requires a robust affirmation of the incomprehensibility of God.

**RESPONSE.** That God cannot be fully understood does not deny the possibility of response—it demands response. Appropriate responses to God’s incomprehensibility will always be guided by what God reveals. Finite human creation can never reach a point where we have the ability to define what God wants, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

### **God Can Be Known**

The incomprehensibility of God could lead to despair or apathy in the quest to know God, but the Bible teaches that God is knowable. While God can never be completely understood, he can be known truly, personally, and sufficiently. God is personal, with certain moral characteristics, and he has personally revealed himself so that he can be truly known. The multiplication of grace and peace in our lives depends on knowing God (2 Pet. 1:2–3), and this knowledge provides sufficient resources for life, for responding to God, and for becoming the people God wants us to be.

Knowledge of God in Christ should be our greatest delight (Jer. 9:23–24; 1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14). It is the basis of attaining eternal life (John 17:3); it is at the heart of life in the new covenant (Heb. 8:11–12); it was Paul’s primary goal (Phil. 3:10); and it leads to godly love (1 John 4:7–8). Just as God can never be understood completely, God will never be known absolutely because he possesses even the moral or communicable attributes to an extent that is beyond human experience and fathoming. Nonetheless, we can know things about him that are absolutely true so that we confidently live according to those beliefs. God has provided knowledge of himself that is personal, relational, and sufficient for fruitful, faithful, godly living. No one will ever be able to say he lacked the necessary revelation to know God and to live as God intends.

### **Implications of Knowing God**

God’s personal and sufficient revelation of himself should lead to solid conviction among believers. We need not live in ambiguity and uncertainty about who God is and what he wants from his Creation. The increasing influence of Eastern religions on the West, certain postmodern views of truth, and religious pluralism all emphasize God’s incomprehensibility so much that he is eventually made to seem

unknowable. The common view in the world today is that it is impossible to say anything definitively true or false about God...that the only heresy is claiming that there is any heresy at all...that the only false claim is to say that there are false claims...that truth is totally relative.

God's revelation makes it possible for human beings to know the things he has revealed, even as God is never fully understood. Truth can be known, even when all truth cannot be known. Objective truth exists. That is, truth exists whether I as a human being recognize it and acknowledge it or not.

Some things about God can be known because God has revealed them.

**GOD WANTS TO BE KNOWN CONSISTENT WITH HIS NATURE.** God reveals himself, he shows his nature so he can be known and recognized as God. In the Old Testament, God reveals himself primarily through his actions. The ultimate revelation of God in the New Testament is through Jesus Christ, so that we can know the Father.

**GOD WANTS TO BE WORSHIPED CONSISTENT WITH HIS NATURE.** The worship God wants is always consistent with and according to his nature, not according to the nature of the worshipers. What human beings want or prefer is never the question in worship. God can be known, and what he reveals of himself guides the worship of those who honor and revere God.

**GOD WANTS HIS CREATION TO SHARE HIS NATURE.** God created "in his image" and the story of the Bible is a story of healing and repairing broken relationship so that relationship can be restored and human creation can participate in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

**GOD WANTS HIS CREATION TO REFLECT HIS NATURE.** God transforms his human creation through Christ so that his glory is seen in those who are transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

Because of God's gracious revelation, God can be known. This should lead to eager, diligent, devoted study of God's Word so I can understand him as he has revealed himself and avoid any false view of God that will dishonor him, so I can worship him acceptably, and so I can share and reflect his nature. I must never grow apathetic in seeking to know God. He wants me to know him and live according to his nature to please him.

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\*Adapted from a post by Erik Thoennes, professor and department chair of biblical and theological studies at Biola University. The post by Thoennes was adapted from the *ESV Study Bible*.