

Foundations of Christian Theology

Lesson 2

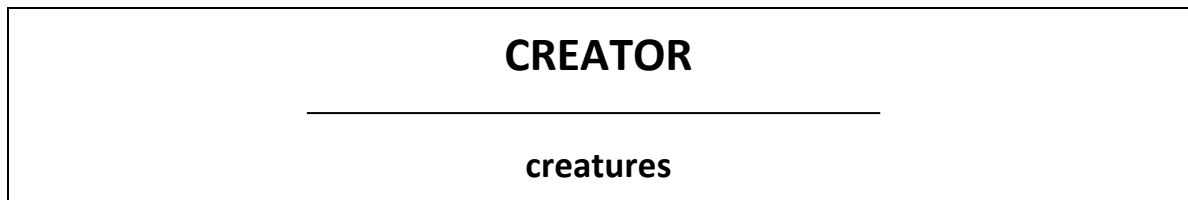
The Revealing God: How Do We Know God?

Goal: To understand and rejoice in the fact that God is a revealing God, and to explore the ways he has revealed himself to us.

I. Recap from Lesson 1

II. Is Theology Possible?

- Men at the elephant



III. What Is God Like?

- **He is a transcendent God**

God is spirit (Jn. 4:24) and is invisible (Col. 1:15), which means he is not accessible to our senses. John tells us that “no one has ever seen God” (Jn. 1:18), and Paul tells us that God is the one “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). We often summarize these things by saying that God is **transcendent**.

Genesis 1:1, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

God is distinct and separate from his creation.

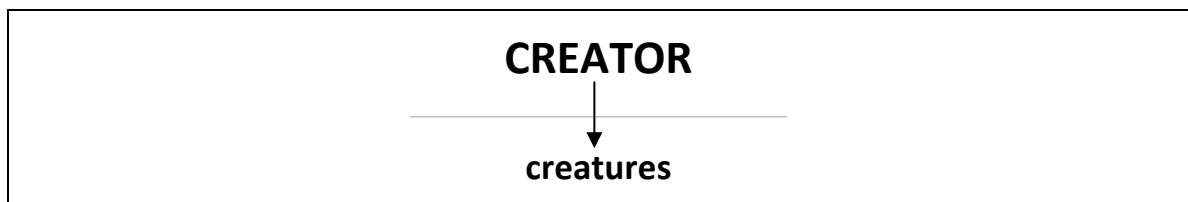
Matthew 11:25-30, ²⁵At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (See also 1 Cor. 2:11)

“If it is true that man can have knowledge of God then this fact presupposes that God on his part voluntarily chose to make himself known to man in some way or other. We cannot credit a knowledge of God to ourselves, to our own discovery, investigation, or reflection. If it were not given us by an act of free and unobliged favor, there would be no possibility that we could ever achieve it by exertion of our own efforts...Except he lets himself be found, we cannot seek him. Except he give himself, we cannot accept him.” – Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), *The Wonderful Works of God*

WCF 7.1, The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

- **He is also an immanent God**

He condescends in his actions, but he also condescends by revealing himself to us. He could remain hidden within himself, but instead he is a revealing God.



Theology is only possible because God has revealed himself

“Theology is the science which derives the knowledge of God from his revelation, which studies and thinks into it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then tries to describe it so that it ministers to his honor. And a theologian, a true theologian, is one who speaks out of God, through God, and does this always to the glorification of his name.” – Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), *The Wonderful Works of God*

Meditate: God could have created the world and us without telling us anything about himself or us. He could have made a law (a way life works best) and not told us. He could have made plans for the world and not told us any of that. If so, he would have left us in the dark. But instead, he is a God who reveals himself to his people. Reflect on how amazing God’s revelation is.

IV. How Has God Chosen to Reveal Himself to Humanity?

A. Kind: Ectypal theology

“Does this mean that we cannot know God at all? Are comparisons meaningless? Not at all, because God has revealed himself through everyday language. Like ‘baby talk,’ God speaks in ways that we can understand. His communication is effective, though he infinitely transcends his own revelation. When he tells us that he is good, speaks of himself as a loving parent or king, and responds to our prayers, we can be confident that he is telling us the truth as far as we can know it—even though it is not the Truth as he knows it. God’s knowledge is archetypal (original), while ours is ectypal (a finite copy). God is not only infinitely transcendent, but freely immanent as well—that is, coming to us, getting involved in our lives. Because our God does not remain aloof in blissful detachment but enters into our history by speaking his Word and then sending his incarnate Word to us for our redemption, we can know God truthfully as finite creatures.” – Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 33

Archetypal – original

Ectypal – finite copy

“For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.” – John Calvin (1509-1564), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.1

Deuteronomy 29:29, The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Question: What does this mean for the way we do theology? Should we have confidence that we can know God truly? If so, where should that confidence be based?

B. Means: General Revelation

God reveals something of himself to everyone (the “general” is with respect to the recipients of the revelation). He does this through the physical world (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:19-20), his providential provision for all people (Acts 14:17), and the moral consciences of all people (Rom. 2:14-16). These things reveal the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. They also reveal something of what God expects of humans—to worship him (Rom. 1:21, 25) and obey his law (Rom. 2:15).

Romans 1:18-23, ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

However, general revelation is not sufficient for knowledge of salvation. Without special revelation there is no hope of salvation.¹

WCF 1.1, Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church...

C. Means: Special Revelation

Special revelation is God's disclosure to humans concerning himself, the way he created the world and humanity to work, and the salvation of his people. It is distinct from general revelation in that it is not given to everyone (the "special" is with respect to the recipients of the revelation).

God's special revelation took on many different forms in biblical times—his perceivable presence to humans (theophany; Gen. 32; Ex. 3; 19), dreams (Gen. 28; Mt. 1:20), visions (Is. 6; Acts 10:10ff), and casting lots (Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6; Acts 1:26). God's *actions* are also a form of special revelation, particularly his miraculous actions (Ex. 7-15; 1 Kgs. 18). But the way above all others that God has chosen to reveal himself is by *speaking*.

- **God is a speaking God**

"Thus saith the LORD" appears about 1,900 times in Scripture. The story of the Bible begins with God speaking and what he says taking effect.

¹ This position is often referred to as "exclusivism," as opposed to "inclusivism," which suggests that people can be saved with only access to general revelation. The discussion is complex and requires careful distinctions (e.g., it is important to remember that hearing the good news of the gospel can happen in a myriad of ways). But the Reformed tradition decidedly falls on the "exclusivism" side (cf. WCF 1.1). For a helpful case on this topic and answers to common objections, see *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* ed. by Robert A. Peterson and Christopher W. Morgan (IVP, 2008).

Genesis 1:3-5, And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

God doesn’t just speak to *act*. He also speaks to *communicate*. He communicates his *commandments* or *wishes* (Gen. 1:28; 2:16-17; cf. Ex. 20:1-17) as well as *information* and *meaning* (Gen. 1:29-30; 2:18). He tells us what he is like (Ex. 3:13-15; 34:6-7) and also what we are like (Gen. 2:18, 24-25).

But God doesn’t just say what *is*; he also says what *will be*. Sometimes these are *curse*s (Gen. 2:17), but the Bible especially focuses on God’s verbal *promises*.

Genesis 3:15, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Genesis 12:1-3, Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Exodus 3:12, He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Our God is a God who reveals himself by speaking.

“It is of particular significance in the Old Testament that God is heard rather than seen. Moses reminded the second generation of the Exodus, “The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice” (Deut. 4:12). Unlike the nations around them, Israel was not to make images representing their God (Deut. 4:15–18). Worship of the living God was to be a matter of hearing, believing, and obeying the words that he had spoken rather than bowing before an image of him. When Moses himself asked to see God’s glory (Ex. 33:18), the revelation he was given was not so much in a highly circumscribed vision (Ex. 33:23) but in the proclamation of “the name of the Lord” (Ex. 34:5). God’s eternal character, which had been demonstrated in the deliverance from Egypt—compassionate and merciful but also just—was *proclaimed* to Moses... God’s verbal address of his people—directly, in whatever way he chooses, or through the agency of his prophets—distinguishes the true

and living God from the false gods represented by idols.” – Mark Thompson, *The Doctrine of Scripture: An Introduction*, 62-63²

All of God’s revelation—words and deeds—culminate in the incarnation of his Son.

John 1:14, 18, ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has **made him known**.

Hebrews 1:1-2a, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days **he has spoken to us by his Son**.

This is why Jesus is called “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). One way Jesus describes his work as making known God’s name to his people (Jn. 17:26; cf. 17:6; 14:6-9).

However, just like in the Old Testament, when God reveals his glory in Jesus, he specific turns our attention away from what we see to what we hear.

Matthew 17:2, 5, And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light... behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

- **The Written Word**

First, God’s Word is often *intentionally* given second hand.

Exodus 3:13-18, ¹³ Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “**Say this to the people of Israel:** ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “**Say this to the people of Israel:** ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. ¹⁶ Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of

² This book (Crossway, 2022) is an excellent introduction to the doctrine of Scripture, as well as *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* by Timothy Ward (IVP, 2009). Two other great, very short introductions are the two books in the P&R Basics of the Faith booklet series—“What Is the Bible?” by Guy Waters and “Why God Gave Us a Book” by Gene Veith.

Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, ¹⁷ and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.” ¹⁸ And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’

Second, God frequently commands the prophets to “Write down” what he has done or told them (Ex. 17:14; 34:27; Deut. 17:18; 27:3; Neh. 8:1-8; Is. 8:16-20; 30:8; Jer. 30:2; 36:2, 28; Hab. 2:2; Lk. 1:3; Rev. 1:11, 19).

Exodus 34:27, And the LORD said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” (see also Ex. 24:1-8)

Isaiah 30:8, And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

Jeremiah 30:2-3, The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. ³ For behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it.”

Revelation 1:10-11, ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

Third, appeals back to the word of God and its authority are often explicitly made to the *written* word.

Matthew 4:3-4, And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

“‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (cf. v. 5, 10)

Matthew 19:4-5, He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? (cf. Mt. 12:3, 5; 22:31)

2 Timothy 3:15-17, From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The word “Scriptures” means “writings” (Lk. 4:21; 24:27; Acts 1:16; Rom. 15:4; Gal. 3:8; 1 Tim. 3:15-4:2; 2 Pt. 1:20; 3:16).

WCF 1.1, ... Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

Hebrews 4:12, The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Discussion Groups

- **Inward Application:** How does knowing that God is a revealing God affect my communion with him?
- **Outward Application:** How does God’s revelation through words affect the way we do evangelism?
- **Basic Understanding:** Clarifying questions.
- **Further Understanding:** Why is it important to think about revelation as part of our doctrine of God rather than merely an introduction to where we get theology from?
- **Reading Scripture:** Matthew 11:25-30.