

God's unchangeable nature

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[0 : 00] Yes, let me pray for us as we start. Let me pray. Father, we want to ask for your help this evening. Maybe our minds are wandering to tomorrow morning already and things that we've got on this week.

Perhaps we've had a busy day. Lord, we pray that you might quiet our hearts as we think about perhaps the most holy of subjects, as we think about your character and what you're like. Please help us to do so with an appropriate reverence and carefulness, we pray. And Lord, that you might enlighten our hearts and our minds and help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So perhaps you say to somebody, oh, I believe in God. Or somebody else at work says to you, oh, yeah, I believe in God.

When you say that, what do you mean? Who is the God that you believe in? What are they like? What's different between the God that you say you believe in and the God that I say I believe in?

[1 : 02] Or the God that you say you believe in and the God that the Muslims next door that way in the, yeah, in the next door building that they believe in?

What's the difference? What's the difference between the God that you believe in, the God that your Muslim friends believe in, and the God that maybe your kind of theistic or deistic friends believe in, who they don't go to church, but they don't want to write off the idea of God altogether.

I mean, that seems crazy, doesn't it? Let's not write him off altogether. What is the difference? And how do you know that you're right? How do you know that your God exists and their God doesn't exist?

How do you know? Are you just wishfully thinking that that might be right? Or are you blindly just believing that it is? Or do you have some reasons behind it?

Well, those are going to be our questions for the next few weeks. And I want to show you again, if I can, that we're not the first people to ask that kind of question. And those questions are anticipated by the confessions.

[2 : 06] And the confessions have really good answers to that. So you might remember, if you've been here in previous weeks, that there are three confessions written by the Protestant Church in the light of the Reformation.

The first was the Westminster Confession, written on the instructions of the British Parliament by over 150 theologians working together just down the road from here in Westminster.

Then there was the Savoy Declaration, which came after that, which was written by the Congregationalists just a few years later, which was basically a copy and paste of the Westminster Confession. If they were submitting these as essays in university, they would be done for plagiarism.

But they deleted the Presbyterian Church governance out of the Westminster Confession and put Congregationalism in the Savoy Declaration, but retained infant baptism. And then in 1689, after a period of persecution, the London Baptist Confession was written by the Baptists, who, again, copied and pasted large portions of the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, but removed the bits on infant baptism, kept the bits on congregational governance and added credo baptism, baptism on profession of faith.

And each of those confessions, then, not surprisingly, starts in the same way. So we have been looking over the last few weeks that each of them starts with the Bible, right?

[3 : 27] Starts with the Bible, starts with God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures, and then go on in chapter 2 to talk about the nature of God, what he's like, and how he works.

And before we look in any detail at that second section, I want just to say a couple of things about this. The first is I want to say the order here is important. The order is important. You might have

wondered, if you were going to write a confession, right, so you're going to write down what it is that you believe, where would you start?

If someone said to you, they say to you at work, or your neighbor, or a member of your family, he says, well, what do you believe? Perhaps you would start with God. That would seem like the most obvious place to start. But none of the confessions do that.

They start with the Scriptures. And that's right, because it is important to note that without the revelation of the Scriptures, what we say we know about God is really only a projection of our own imagination.

If you say, I believe God is like this, just because of your internal impression, what you believe in is really a projection of your ideals about what God might be like.

[4 : 35] Some of which might be true, and others which might not be true. We're just making it up. But we need to start with God's self-revelation of himself, that God speaks and God tells us what he's like.

You may have heard the parable of the blind man and the elephant. It has origins in Buddhism, I think, but it's become quite popular today. The parable goes something like this.

A long time ago in India, there was a king who wanted to teach an important lesson. So he gathered a group of men who had been blind since birth. None of them had ever seen an elephant, and they'd never touched one.

The king ordered that an elephant be brought before them, and he led the first man forward and placed his hands on the elephant's side. This blind man felt the side of the elephant. It was a solid surface and said, an elephant is like a wall, he said.

The second man was led to the elephant. He reached out and touched the elephant's tusk. It felt smooth and pointed. He said, no, an elephant is not like a wall. An elephant is like a spear.

[5 : 38] The third man felt the elephant's trunk, and he said, no, you're both wrong. An elephant is like a snake. The other man grasped his leg. He said, no, you're all wrong. An elephant is like a tree trunk.

Anyway, it goes on. Now, the theory of the parable is basically this, that no one really knows for certain because you only have a little bit of it.

And so the king steps forward and says, you're all partly right. You've all touched one part of the elephant, but no one has touched the whole because each of you only felt a part.

You think your experience is the complete truth. Then the blind men fall silent, and they begin to realize their ignorance. Now, the parable has become really popular in, like, truth claims, religious truth claims.

You know, Christians, you might have got the trunk. Muslims, you've got the tail. Secularists, you've got the legs or something. But the parable collapses, doesn't it, in the face of the scripture's claim to be God speaking.

[6 : 41] Because the claim, essentially, to read it back into the parable, is that the elephant has a voice. The elephant speaks, which, of course, changes everything, doesn't it?

No, just hang on a minute. You've only got my trunk. Let me describe to you what I am really like, says the elephant. Let me tell you what I look like. And that means, doesn't it, that our understanding of God, and it's really important, must not be based simply on our own experience, our own ideals.

You're not to say, oh, when I think of God, I think of God like this. You're to say, no, I know that God is like this because he has told me he is like this. And that's not a proud claim.

It's not a proud claim to have worked out everything for ourselves. Rather, it's a humble claim, isn't it? It's a humble claim to say, no, I'm listening. I'm listening to the God who speaks. And so God's speaking needs to be considered before we think about what he is like.

So that's the first thing. The order is important. Secondly, we are unable to understand everything. I had a lecturer at seminary who used to introduce his lectures on the doctrine of God with a moment of silence and reverence.

[7 : 52] Because he would say to us, how dare we speak about the living God in our words, thinking that we might summarise him in his greatness.

We don't belong. Yeah, like that. Not wanting to answer any of his questions. But he's right, isn't he? We're on holy ground that we might think to try and describe our creator when we are only creatures.

And we must understand that that means that we can only understand in part. We are unable to understand everything. And so when it comes to knowing God, we cannot know all there is to know about God.

That is beyond us. So when the elephant speaks and describes to us what he himself is like, he must do it in a simplified way that we are able to understand.

So God speaks truly about who he is, but not fully, because we can't understand everything, but we can understand true things.

[8 : 57] John Calvin understood this. He talks in the Institutes about people who imagine that because God says that he speaks and he hears, that therefore God must have a mouth and ears.

What I love about Calvin's Institutes, right, if you've never read the Institutes, he's just quite rude about the people who he disagrees with, which is probably not to be commended, but it's kind of funny.

So he makes some insults about people who imagine that God has mouth and ears. And then he says this. For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to lisp in speaking to us.

So the nurse talking to their infant in this image is speaking in baby language, aren't they? Say hello to dada, mama.

Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as to accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.

[10 : 02] To do this, he must descend far beneath his loftiness. God is speaking to you and me in words that we might understand about who he is, to communicate true things to you and me.

But we must understand that the very process of him doing that is him being gracious in accommodating himself to our limited understanding. So when we think we grasp something about God and we know it, we have to accept humbly we only really know a part of it because we can't know it fully.

Obviously, the ultimate or the ultimate or the sort of the maximum accommodation of God's revelation in showing us what he's like is what?

It's the incarnation. The arrival of the son in human flesh. The son who in his divinity is the exact representation of God's being, but he and his humanity veils his glory so that we might see him and know him.

Now, just to tease this out a little bit more so that we don't know fully, but we know in part, it doesn't mean that we don't know the truth.

[11 : 15] I made a terrible mistake in life of taking A-level physics. I did it at my father's advice. He might watch this, but he knows it was a mistake. So I did physics A-level.

What they tell you when you do physics A-level is, listen, what you need to understand is everything we taught you at GCSE is complete nonsense. And so they just go, anything you thought you knew about physics is no help to you now.

I'm going to teach you again. And the problem is I could never grasp it the second time round. Now, there's a sense in which, isn't there, that if you oversimplify, you end up saying something that's not true.

But God is not like that. God, in his accommodation to our understanding to reveal who he is and explain who he is, is able to teach us true things, even in our limited understanding.

God is never misleading us, even if we can only know in part. Okay, so there we have it, right? Revelation first, and then accommodation.

[12 : 15] Revelation and accommodation. Now, with that in mind, I'm going to read this opening statement on the doctrine of God in the 1689 Baptist Confession. I've put it on your handout there.

And then what I'm going to ask you to do, and you can do this with the person next to you, is to underline anything that either stands out or you don't understand or is kind of surprising to you. So you might want to start that process as I read it out to you.

Okay? I'm going to read it to you. Underline things, and then you can talk to your neighbor about them in a minute. The Lord our God is one, the only living and true God.

He is self-existent and infinite in being and perfection. His essence cannot be understood by anyone but him. He is a perfectly pure spirit.

He is invisible and has no body, parts, or changeable emotions. He alone has immortality. Dwelling in light that no one can approach.

[13 : 19] He is unchangeable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, in every way infinite. Absolutely holy.

Perfectly wise. Holy free. Completely absolute. He works all things according to the counsel of his own unchangeable and completely righteous will for his own glory.

He is most loving, gracious, merciful, and patient. He overflows with goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.

He rewards those who seek him diligently. At the same time, he is perfectly just and terrifying in his judgments. He hates all sin and will certainly not clear the guilty.

Okay. Talk to the person next to you. Anything that stands out, that's surprising, or that you don't understand, have a look at that for a few moments, and then we'll get back together.

[14 : 24] Okay. Does anyone want to yell anything out?

Yes. My wife? All right. No, sorry. All right. I'm speaking for myself. Wow. It's the first time ever, this. The question that is in my mind is that is not incomprehensible only for all means. Was he incomprehensible to Adam?

Yes. And no. So I would say God is by definition incomprehensible to his creatures in their totality, because we're only ever creatures, right?

And we are finite, yes. But there is a sense in which that situation is made worse by the fall. Yeah.

Right. We had a good question at the back, which was, why is God able to work for his own glory?

[15 : 41] Does it not seem that God doing things for his... Is that not a little bit sort of self-interested? Yeah. I think the answer to that is, it would be for anybody else.

But for God, it's right for him to do this, yeah? So Romans 11, from him and for him and to him, all things exist. And so for God to work for the purpose of someone else's glory is for him to lie about himself.

For you to work for anybody's glory but God's is for you to lie about yourself. It's as if to say, oh, no, actually, this was all me, right? That is a lie, yeah?

The strength, the understanding, the wisdom, the skill, all comes to you from God. So it's all to his glory. Yeah. Okay, let's keep going with some things on here.

And you can come back to me at the end if you've got more questions. I'm going to try and summarize two things from this statement. And yeah, anyway, let's see how it goes. Number one is this.

[16 : 43] God is not like you or me. Now, in a way, that's just really obvious, okay? The Bible says this directly in a number of places. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.

In Hosea 11, God talking about why he's not going to destroy the Israelites, he says, For I am God and not a man, the Holy One amongst you. I will not come against their cities.

Perhaps the most foundational statement, really, in the whole Bible about who God is. In the beginning God, from Genesis chapter 1, verse 1. Now, what really the confessions do is they extrapolate from those statements, theologically and philosophically, and others like them, to underline the ways in which God is different from us and the implications of it.

So you are told in the confession, firstly, that God is self-existent. That is, God was not made. God is, and always has been, and always will be.

He says to Moses, doesn't he? I am who I am. God is self-existent. He relies on no one, is created by no one. He is the one who did not need to be made.

[17 : 54] He, therefore, is the origin of all that is made, and by definition existed before and outside all things. Now, listen, this is really obvious, okay?

So if you think, wow, this sounds, from Steve's tone of voice, that he's saying something way more complicated than this actually seems. Is he just saying that God existed before and outside of all that's made? Yes, I am.

That is all I'm saying. I'm not trying to say anything more complicated than that, but it is important. Our existence is not self-existence, right? Our existence is, if you like, contingent.

That is, our existence depends on the existence of someone or something else for its existence. We did not make ourselves. We were made. We are part of the creation, but God is not.

He existed before all things. And so because of that, God is not made up of the stuff of this world, right? Because he is the creator of all of the stuff.

[18 : 49] He was there beforehand. And so God, therefore, if we keep building on this idea, is what the confession calls perfectly pure spirit. That is, he is outside all that he has made.

So he doesn't have parts. He doesn't have physical parts like you and I do. So he doesn't have arms, legs, mouth, ears. But also he doesn't have sort of emotional parts or attributes in that sense. You know, you could chop off my arm and I would still be me, but without my arm, right? You could remove my patience, what limited patience there is.

You could remove that from me and I would still be me, right? You could experience my moodiness instead of my kindness and you'd still be experiencing me.

You can sort of divide me up both physically and emotionally because I have stuff. I'm made of stuff and stuff can be taken away from me. But God is not like that, right?

[19 : 53] Because he is not made up of parts physically or emotionally. He doesn't possess anything. He is those things, right?

So the confession says that he is invisible. He has no body, parts or changeable emotions. In other words, God is all that he is all of the time. So you don't encounter God as being good one day and kind another day and gracious another day and then another day something completely different. Because God is all of those things all at the same time. He has no changing moods. He is not changed by his creation. He is all of his attributes all at the same time.

So God doesn't have goodness. He doesn't have patience. He doesn't have kindness. God is goodness. He is kindness. He is patience.

God doesn't possess life like you and I possess life. He is life. We can have our life taken from us.

[20 : 54] But God cannot have his life taken from him because he is life and existence itself.

Probably the most familiar verse in the Old Testament for Jews, they're required to say it twice a day, is Deuteronomy 6 verse 4.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Now, oneness there means that God alone is God, right? There are no other gods.

But also that he himself is a oneness. He has no parts. Now, there's an irony to this because theologians call this the doctrine of divine simplicity.

And it's not actually that simple. But their idea is that God himself is simple. Again, not because God is easy to understand. The doctrine of simplicity is not, hey, it's kind of obvious and it's easy to understand.

It's not that at all. Rather, it is that God is not made up of component parts, but he is a simple one being. And so he is all of his essence all of the time.

[21 : 57] Augustine, who is the great African bishop, put it like this. It's amazing. He's writing this in the fourth century. He says this. It is for this reason, then, that the nature of the Trinity, the nature of God, is called simple.

Because it has not anything that it can lose. And because it is not something different from what it has, in the way that a vessel is different from its liquid or a body from its color or the air from its light or heat or the mind from its wisdom.

But none of these things is what it has. The vessel is not the liquid. The body is not color. The air is not light or heat. The mind is not wisdom. And hence, they can be deprived of what they have and can be turned or changed into other states or qualities.

The vessel may be emptied of the liquid of which it is full. The body may be discolored. The air may grow dark or cold. The mind may be foolish. But God cannot.

God doesn't change because he is simple. And he cannot change. Now, I wonder what you think.

What is the point of all that? How does that help you and me?

[23 : 03] What's the value in thinking like this about God? Well, Malachi chapter 3, verses 6 and 7 says this. Really picking up on this idea. I, the Lord, do not change.

But God cannot change because he doesn't have anything that can be taken away. Nothing can be added to him. So he is simple and cannot change. And what's the implication of that?

So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.

You know, as Malachi teaches this, as well as God speaks to Malachi and reflects on this, his unchanging oneness means that his people are safe and not destroyed.

Because, why? Well, God is not going to wake up tomorrow and have forgotten to be gracious to them. He is not going to forget his promises to them and his goodness.

[23 : 59] He can't be good and gracious today and bad and ill-tempered tomorrow. But also, he can't tomorrow be the God who regrets the promise that he made. Because he's not learned anything new about them that he didn't know when he made the promise.

Exactly what he expected and knew is exactly what is happening. He doesn't find out, oh, do you know what? Steve is not quite the person I thought he was when I called him to be mine.

No, he doesn't feel like that. He doesn't think like that because he knows exactly who I am. And so we can pray and we can come to God again and again in confession and faith, knowing that God is unchanging, unmoved and unflinching, that he knows all there is to know about me and he still saves me.

Which is amazing, isn't it? I'm going to make one last point if I can and then I'll take some questions. Number two, God is not wicked. Okay, so this comes through, doesn't it?

Over and over again in the confession. God is absolutely holy. God is perfectly wise. God has a completely righteous will. He overflows with goodness and truth.

[25 : 08] He hates all sin. He will not clear the guilty. Again, this is really important, isn't it? I'm sure you can think of Bible verses that would just say exactly the same sort of thing.

You say, even the confession itself kind of quotes, doesn't it? 1 Timothy 6, that the Lord dwells in unapproachable light. He is so holy and other and no darkness or evil or wickedness can even come anywhere near him.

You know, the living creatures around the throne bow down and sing, holy, holy, holy. Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord and it is the train of his robe that fills the temple.

It's like not even just the hem of his robe fills this awesome space because he is so majestic and glorious. And as he sees the vision, he says, woe is me, a man of unclean lips.

He sees God to be holy, holy, holy. Now, but think about what that means. If God is, right, if God is before all things, the origin of all things, and he is good and pure and holy, he lives in unapproachable light, surrounded by angels calling out his holiness.

[26 : 26] If that's true, where does evil come from? Where does evil come from? Who made evil? Now, again, that is a tough question for 726 on a, or whatever it is, 723 on a Sunday evening.

But Augustine helped us out with this, and this, again, is the backdrop to lots of the stuff in the Confessions. He says, I was going to read you a whole chunk of his book called The Confessions. I don't know whether you like old books, but The Confessions, if you do like old books, then you can kind of stick with them. The Confessions is worth a read. I was going to read you a chunk, but I think it's just going to be confusing.

So let me just read to you his conclusion, which comes in his book, The City of God. He says this. Now, that's what's being picked up by the Confessions.

God is pure and holy and without sin, so much so that it is, if you like, the absence of God, or perhaps better, the exclusion of God in his goodness and as the source of all goodness, which is evil.

[27 : 39] Evil is the label for the exclusion of God or his absence, if you like. Not that it's entirely possible for God to be completely absent.

So do you believe in God? Well, yes, I do believe in God. Who is he? Well, he is the self-existent I am. The one who did not need to be made.

The one who is pure in spirit. Who is a simple, complete oneness. Who is good and defines good. And who owns goodness to the point at which evil is defined by his absence.

That is the God I believe in. Why do you believe in that God? Because that's the God who speaks and who has arrived in the person of the Son and who we know about from his revelation in the Scriptures.

Okay, so those are the two things I wanted to cover this evening. And we're going to do more next time. But I wanted to give you a chance for questions or comments. So you can have a little shuffle and a think and then ask a question if you'd like to.

[28 : 41] I'd like to just qualify the thing that Augustine says here. Because the fact that he's defining philosophically the absence of God. Yeah. And the fact that you can say that's the absolute truth. But there's also the fact that evil does have a positive operation in our lives.

So this definition is not pretending to do away with that. Okay, yes. So if, yes, if the, if that statement from Augustine gives the impression that evil has no power or influence, then yes, that's not.

Yes. Yes. Yes. That is helpful. So evil is parasitic. Yes. Whereas goodness can exist without evil. Evil cannot exist without evil. Thank you. That's really helpful, Mike. Just a small thought. Yes. So that's what we were looking at a couple of weeks ago in Romans 8, isn't it?

That the Lord, so although he is without sin and is completely pure and holy, still he is sovereign and his sovereignty is not threatened by evil in the world.

[29 : 53] And he is even able to use wickedness and evil without being morally responsible for it in a way that accomplishes his purposes. Which is cross.

I think what you were saying is very good about the simplicity of God. There are some good people that, like some rabbis, well, I see rabbis say there's a difference between God's essence and his manifestation.

Right. The manifestation, if you take it, and the Eastern Orthodox, Gregory Palamas, who guys decide if it's God and his energies. Okay. So if you take that view, you're looking at God through a perspective which does not enable you to know whether you've got an accurate view of God, because there's a screen.

Yeah. Whereas in the Bible, God's manifestations, you can trace them back to the source in a more direct way. Yes. And know that God embraces all of this.

Yes. That's a bit like a rainbow. Yeah, yeah. Trying to work out how to simply summarize that for people. So if you say that you, so God as he really is, right, in his essence, is how he is communicating himself to us.

[31 : 07] So he is not projecting something and say, well, know that, know my power, and then kind of try and extrapolate back about what my essence might be like. He is actually, in his revelation of himself, opening the window of his essence so that you might see who he really is.

And that's, that's like incredibly gracious of him to do that, isn't it? So, you know, with someone that you really love, a really dear friend or a member of your family or a husband or a wife, you might, you might show them what you're really like.

Yeah. So you're not projecting anymore. And God is showing us his divine essence, especially in the person of the son, as he comes in human flesh, which is unbelievably brilliant.

Right. Amy, yeah. Yes. So, God not changing. Or changeable emotions as well.

How it puts it in the confession. How does that fit with sometimes the Bible talks about God changing his mind or God relenting in response to people's prayers. I think there are, there is just like some fences, aren't there, to put up.

[32 : 42] So to say, it can't be that God discovers new information in the prayers of people. It must be that their praying and their prayerfulness is part of his sovereign will and purpose.

And so that in some way that is mysterious to us, he is using our prayers to accomplish his foreordained purposes. And so that our prayerlessness or our prayerfulness is the way that God is accomplishing the ends to which he wants to work, whilst also holding us morally responsible for them.

But the other thing I think to say is about the accommodation language that we're talking about at the beginning. For us to, to, to as closely understand God as we can, he reveals himself in ways like that.

Because that's, he wants you to know how much he is concerned for your prayerfulness, that he would describe it like that. And so, and even though, again, so God doesn't experience emotions in the same way that we do.

And yet in the person of the son, according to his human nature, he experiences the full range of human emotion, doesn't he? He weeps, he laughs, he experiences hunger and tiredness and all those things.

[34 : 01] So yeah, there's mystery there, but I think accommodation and yet God's sovereignty are even over what happens and doesn't happen in our prayer. So maybe put it like this, right?

So who knows, right, whether God's chosen means of saving that family member that you care about deeply is not that you might go home and pray for them tonight, that they might come to know Christ and get up tomorrow morning and do the same and go to bed the following night and do the same.

No, actually, that's how God works, isn't it? It's not that you're twisting his arm to do something that he hasn't intended to do anyway. It's that actually his intended means of doing it is you and me praying and coming to him, which is a wonderful opportunity.

It's half past seven. So I'm going to close in prayer and then we'll come back to it next week. Let's pray. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Amen.

[35 : 34] Amen. Amen. Thank you.