

Knowing About God

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[0:00] This morning, I'd like us to turn back together to Isaiah 55, and I'm going to read these wonderful words from verse 8 and verse 9. 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.

Today, we're going to do just a short series this week and next week of three parts called Knowing, Speaking, and Thinking About God.

So we can pop these up on the screen. We're going to think about each one of these in turn this morning, tonight, and next Sunday morning.

So today, we're just looking at the first of these, Knowing About God. And that might sound like, in any way, kind of obvious. All three of these are quite obvious, straightforward things. This is what we do at church. We want to know about God. We want to speak about God. We want to think about God.

But unpacking these actually leads us into some very, very fascinating areas of theology. And knowing about God is actually an incredibly important thing for us to consider.

[1:16] And that applies to every single one of us here, because if you're following the Lord, you need to know what you're following. And if you're not following the Lord, you need to know what you're rejecting.

And so knowing about God is massively important for us to think about. But as I said, it's a fascinating area for us to unpack, especially when we start to think about the difference between what God knows and what we know.

And this is really the starting point for us in this topic, is recognizing that when we speak about knowing about God, there is a big difference between God's knowledge of himself and our knowledge of God.

And this is where I want us to start, and we're going to unpack this a little bit. So God's knowledge of himself is perfect. It's complete.

And it's true. And so when we think about God, we are thinking about God the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's self-knowledge is perfect.

[2:24] And even that is something that we can't quite relate to in regard to ourselves, because our self-knowledge, our knowledge of ourselves, isn't actually complete in the way that God's self-knowledge is.

So when we think of God, we recognize that he has perfect knowledge of himself. His knowledge is perfect, complete, and true. Our knowledge is different. It's imperfect.

And it's not complete. But it still can be true. And that's the important thing I'm trying to get at here, that our knowledge of God will never be at the same level of God's knowledge about himself.

And we will never have the breadth and depth of truth that God himself has. Our knowledge of God will always be imperfect.

It will always be limited. It will always be incomplete. But that doesn't mean that it's untrue or that it's unusable, because our knowledge of God can still be true. So, for example, God knows all the truth about his existence.

[3:27] So God has existed forever. God is the absolute of reality. And God knows everything about everything about his existence.

We might know that God exists. And even though we can't grasp the fullness of the majesty and the glory and the splendor of that infinite, eternal, and unchangeable existence of God, even though we might just think, well, we just know that he exists, that's still true.

Even though it's incomplete and limited. So we need to start with this difference between what God knows about himself and what we know about God.

Now, that difference is set before us very powerfully in those verses that I read. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are not our ways.

And as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are his ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts. Even in that verse, you can see the difference. And other parts of Scripture express this as well.

[4:34] So I'm going to put some passages from Hebrews, Isaiah, and Romans on the screen. They're talking about God's knowledge. Hebrews 4.13. No creature is hidden from his sight. All are naked and exposed to the eye of him, to whom we must give account.

Nothing's hidden from God. Isaiah 40. Who's measured the Spirit of the Lord? What man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult? And who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice and taught him knowledge and showed him the way of understanding?

It's a beautiful verse because it's basically saying, that's describing God as the ultimate, as the absolute. Nobody taught God. He didn't have to ask anybody's advice. Everything is found in him. And Paul captures this amazingly in the United Romans 11. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord? Who's been his counselor? Who's given him a gift that he might be replayed from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. So these verses and others speak about that astonishing, perfect knowledge of God that he has of himself and of all things.

[5:46] We can have knowledge as well, but it's at a lower level. And scripture speaks of that. Daniel chapter 2 is an example. Daniel answered, said, Blessed be the name of God forever and ever.

To whom belong wisdom and might. That's God's perfect knowledge. He changes times and seasons. He removes kings, sets up kings. And now he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and hidden things.

He knows what's in the darkness and the light dwells with him. So this is starting to point us to the fact that from God's perfect knowledge, we can learn things. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 13. Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then when we go to heaven face to face, now I know in part, then I shall know fully. Even as I've been fully known. John says the same thing. Beloved, we're God's children now.

And what we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that when he appears we'll be like him, because we shall see him as he is. Both those bottom two verses are speaking of the fact that now we learn some things, and these things are true, but we don't know it all.

[6:47] There's still so much for us to discover. So we're thinking about these two categories of knowledge of God. Now, to help us think about this, I'm going to give you two very obscure theological words that you may have never heard of, and you may never remember again.

And if you don't, it's fine. But these two categories are described as theologians as archetypal and ectypal knowledge. You might think, why are you teaching us these pointless words?

Well, I want you to know these words for two reasons. One, you might read them in books, but two, they actually connect with one of the most common pastoral struggles that we can have.

And I'll explain that in a wee second. So we have archetypal knowledge. That's God's perfect, exhaustive self-knowledge of himself.

Arche is the Greek word for beginning, so it's like beginning knowledge, source knowledge, ultimate knowledge, archetypal knowledge. Ectypal knowledge, ek is like the word for out, so knowledge that comes out from that, that we receive, that we can learn, but we do that as creatures, and it's not the same exhaustive knowledge that God has of himself.

[8:00] I'm going to put a quote up from a theologian called J.V. Fesco, John Fesco. He's a teacher in Jackson, Mississippi, and he's got a great summary paragraph here. I'll just read it to you. Given that God is infinite and human beings are finite and temporal, we can speak of theology in terms of God's own self-knowledge and our creaturely knowledge of him, or archetypal and ectypal theology.

Archetypal theology is God's own perfect, infinite, and absolute knowledge of himself. Ectypal theology, on the other hand, is the finite but true revealed copy of the divine archetype. God makes

this finite but true theology available to humans through his creation, his word, and chiefly the incarnation.

Now, you might be thinking, Oshke Thomas, that sounds incredibly not very interesting and a million miles from my life. Well, this is so important to recognize because it all connects with one of the most common struggles that we have.

All of this connects with the questions, how and why? So often we look at things in the Bible and we're like, how does that work?

I don't understand this. How does this fit together? And so often in life, we experience things in our own lives or we see things in the lives of others and we find ourselves saying, why is this happening?

[9:23] And all of this is connected together. And so let me just unpack a few bits of this and then we'll make some applications.

So I'm just going to press quite hard on this distinction so that we get our heads around it quite clearly. This distinction between God's perfect knowledge and our imperfect but true knowledge. That distinction was true even in the Garden of Eden when humanity was created because we are finite creatures.

It's so important to remember that, that we are not infinite. We're not at God's level. We're finite. So we can never know and understand things the way that God can. But then the reality of sin in Genesis chapter 3 just exacerbates the issue because our sin distorts our thinking.

And it leads us to struggle to hold the right conclusions. It leaves our desires misplaced. And so often we actually hold opinions about God that are inaccurate.

And the whole fall in Genesis 3 happened by Satan tempting Adam and Eve to doubt God's word, to doubt something that was true about God. So our thinking about God is always going to be limited by these two things.

[10:36] First, because we're finite creatures, but secondly, because we are sinful. However, we can still learn about God. And there's various ways that we can learn about Him.

One is what theologians have called the fact that within humanity, within all of us, there is what's called the sense of the divine, a sense of God.

And this is something that's been recognized by theologians for centuries, that there is something within us that looks for answers, something that seeks an explanation for reality, and something that makes us think that there is more than just what we can see in front of us.

That in Latin, it's called the *sensus divinitatis*. I don't really know Latin, but if I say Latin, that makes me sound super clever, but I don't really know Latin at all.

But that divine sense, there's something, that something that's in there, that's teaching us about God. We also learn about God from general revelation, the fact that what we see around us in the world is speaking to us.

[11:49] We've looked at this over the past few weeks, that the heavens declare the glory of God, that the goodness of God, even in the provision of rain and in all the other ways which He blesses us, is pointing us back to the fact that He is our Creator.

So we have this sense of God from our very core. We have it looking at the world around us. But most importantly, we learn and know about God through the Bible, through God's special revelation, teaching us about God.

And so all through Scripture, that's part of what God is trying to do. He's revealing Himself to us so that we can know more about Him. That knowledge will never be perfect, but it is teaching us something, and it's helping us to learn.

And of course, the climax and center point of Scripture is the coming of Jesus Christ, and it's in Jesus that God is revealed most perfectly. Jesus, of course, is God Himself, God the Son, taking up our flesh.

And so if we want to know what God is really like, we look at Jesus as He's revealed in Scripture.

[12:55] And so all of this is helping us to learn about God, and all of this is in the context of dependence, the fact that we are dependent on God to reveal Himself to us so that we can learn about Him.

And so often we can get this the wrong way around. We can think that we're kind of humans, that we're starting in kind of neutral territory, and we're going on a journey where we're going to search out, and eventually we might find God. And sometimes it can feel like that, and there's a tiny sense

in which it's true, but it's not really the way it is, because we think that it's as though it starts with us, and by our own efforts, we will find God.

The truth is actually the other way around. God reveals Himself to us, and He finds us, and He takes us back to Him.

And so that concept of God's perfect knowledge being revealed to us through what's within us, what's around us, and most of all, what's written in Scripture, is all immensely helpful for us in terms of thinking about our knowledge of God.

Another way to summarize this is, I'm just going to, if you can pick up a couple of slides, I'm missing out those quotes. Next one, there we go. Another way to summarize this is to think in terms of three categories of knowledge that we can have within this framework.

[14 : 25] So this is what I've been trying to say. Our knowledge of God, two categories. God's perfect and true knowledge of Himself. That's archetypal, and then archetypal, imperfect, but true on this side.

Beneath that, there's three subcategories that we can stick on, and these have come from a friend of mine who's a teacher in North Carolina. His name's Bob Cara. He likes to speak of surface knowledge, deeper knowledge, exhaustive knowledge.

Surface knowledge, deeper knowledge, exhaustive knowledge. And the first two are both archetypal. They're both types of knowledge that we can have. So everybody has a surface knowledge that to a certain extent is true.

And we learn that from, like we said, what's within us, what we see around us. And many people can hold knowledge about God and about reality that's true, and common grace enables them to do that.

But as believers, as we look at Scripture, we can gain a deeper level of knowledge. And we can be led further into the truth of what is around us.

[15 : 28] And so a great example of this would be high-energy astrophysics. You can have people who are looking at the universe, and they're seeing all sorts of stunning things.

And they're learning stuff that's true. You see the universe, the expansion of the universe, the formation of solar systems, all this stuff that's beyond my knowledge. But they look at it, and they're like, we're seeing this, we're observing it, we're coming to conclusions, and that's true.

That's a surface knowledge that's true, and that's magnificent. And the believer can learn all of that and go deeper. Because they can see that the hand of God is woven through it all.

And that in it all, you know, we're not just seeing a random but spectacular universe. We're actually seeing God saying, this is a glimpse of how glorious I am.

That's a deeper knowledge. And we want to go further into that depth of knowledge, and that's part of what we're trying to do as Christians all the time. We're trying to learn bit by bit. Exhaustive knowledge, though, belongs only to God.

[16 : 35] He is the only one who has full and perfect and complete knowledge. So although we can go from surface to deeper, we'll never reach exhausted. That belongs to God alone.

Now, why am I telling you all of this? Well, I think there's three important points of application here that I just want to unpack in our last ten minutes.

This sounds like a very obscure technical theological distinction, and in some ways it is. But it's so, so relevant to our lives today.

And there's three points of application I want to unpack. First of all is that this is just massively important for us in terms of our starting point when we're approaching anything to do with theology or any judgment or evaluation that we're making about God.

Because it's guarding us against the easiest mistake that we can make is that we think that we can look at God from a kind of neutral position.

[17 : 49] And this is the big mistake that we so often make, that we can take God and we can pop Him on this table and we can make decisions about Him. That we're going to put what we know about God on our examination table and we're going to decide from a kind of neutral or even a superior position what God is or isn't like.

It's so important to recognize that is impossible. You cannot do that because we are only ever under the infinite, eternal, unchangeable authority, majesty, and glory of God.

He's never on our table. And so, yes, we can look at glimpses of Him, but we're doing that always from a position of being His creatures, made by Him, made for Him.

And so that should immediately reset our posture from one of sort of like, well, I'm going to kind of suss out God to one of profound humility and of total dependence and of astonishing privilege. And that's true for all of us. Whatever stage we're at, I spend my life studying God. It's my job, which is, by the way, the coolest job in the world.

[19:11] But I spend my life doing that. But I cannot put God on my table like I could when I was an engineer, where I could put an engine on the table. So, always God is above me.

And it's an extraordinary privilege to learn about Him. It also means that we have to be so, so, so careful with the phrase, I know I'm right.

And isn't that such an easy phrase for us to do? And I see it all the time. I've done it myself. I know I'm right about this. I know I've got this. I know that. The minute you think about archetype or an ectipal knowledge, you're like, those words are never going to come out of my mouth again.

Because God is just at a different level. And I bow before Him in wonder. And I just, instead of saying, I know I'm right, our phrase should simply be, I hope I'm listening.

I hope I'm listening to what God is telling me. So, it sort of sets our approach for theology. Secondly, archetypal, ectipal distinction is so, so, so important when dealing with one another, particularly when people are facing problems or difficulties.

[20:27] The thing you need to remember is that our knowledge of people, of situations, and of problems is always ectipal knowledge. What do I mean by that?

I mean that when you look at somebody and there's something going on in their lives, you do not know the full story. And neither do I.

None of us do. And so often we do. I've made this mistake a million times. You look at somebody's behavior, they're doing something, they're saying something, they're behaving in a way. Sometimes you find it concerning, sometimes you find it frustrating, sometimes you find it off-putting, and you judge them.

I've done this myself. I've judged them, and I've criticized them, and I've thought, oh, that's because, and then you realize, I had no idea what was actually going on in their lives. And that's massively important for us in terms of how we interact with one another, and it's just a really helpful thing for us to remember, especially if we find somebody is not themselves or difficult or something.

Well, you know, before we immediately jump to a conclusion to think, oh, you know, they're this, they're that, they're the next thing, remember that your knowledge is ectipal. It's limited, and you do not know the whole story.

[21:36] And related to that is that, you know, sometimes we have to be very careful of jumping to the conclusion that we can explain why something has happened.

So it comes back to the why question. Sometimes we'll face difficult situations, and sometimes, either in relation to ourselves or in relation to other people, we will try to say to someone, oh, this is why this has happened. This is why this has happened.

And this is why this has happened. Now, that might be true. It might be true to an extent, but it's always ectipal. It's always incomplete. In other words, we'll never have a perfect explanation as to why something is happening.

And so it's important, I think, for us when we're trying to help and support one another, not actually to sort of say, look, I've sussed this out and I've got the answers for you. We actually just want to point people to Jesus and say, look, look to Jesus.

Rest in him. He is the one who actually knows why this is happening and it is always safe in his arms. So there's a big, big thing here that's helpful for our pastoral care.

[22:39] And then the final point of application that I want to unpack is that all of this is teaching us that theology, theology involves accepting what we could call healthy, unresolved tensions.

Theology is always going to involve accepting healthy, unresolved tensions. In other words, there's going to be things in the Bible and things in theology that we cannot fully explain.

And they're going to appear to us quite often as though they're in tension. So you see things and you think, well, if that's this and that's that, how do those things fit together? There's a kind of tension there and we find ourselves puzzled and confused and uncertain.

Now, the big thing I want us to emphasize is that the archetypal, ectipal distinction is telling us that these tensions are to be expected. And these tensions are logical.

And these tensions are absolutely appropriate because our ectipal knowledge is never going to be archetypal. In other words, we will never have knowledge and explanations and clarity to the level

that God has.

[23:57] That means that there's always going to be things that we can't fully grasp and we can't fully explain. And that just means that theology is always going to involve an element of mystery.

Unresolved tensions are inescapable because we are a tiny speck thinking about the infinite, eternal, unchangeable God.

There's always going to be tension there because our minds are like a thimble and the truth about God is an endless ocean.

And of course, that's part of what makes theology such a stunning subject to consider. I'm going to put some examples of this on the screen. The Trinity. God is one. God is three. One substance. Three persons. God the Father. God the Son. God the Holy Spirit. I can't fully explain how that works. That's a tension. That's a healthy, unresolved tension.

[25:01] The incarnation, the fact that God the Son became human and that in Jesus Christ you now have one person who is fully and truly God, fully and truly human.

I can't fully explain how that works. Eternity and time. God dwells in eternity and we dwell in time. Everything that ever happens is true and clear and known by God at every moment.

Everything that happens to us is on this continuum of time that moves from past to present to future all the time. I can't really explain how that works, how that interacts.

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The fact that God is sovereign over all things and yet we have responsibility in ourselves. That's a tension that theologians have never been able to fully unpack. God's will and prayer. So the things that God wants and we're going to pray for them. And are we telling God what to do? Is he telling us what to do? How does that work? Can't fully explain it. There's a tension there. And the fact that God is unknowable and that he's infinite, his ways are above our ways and yet he's intimate. He's our father, our loving father whose arms we can fall into.

[26:11] That's a tension. How can we explain that? These are healthy, unresolved tensions. The archetypal, archetypal distinction tells us that we're not going to be able to fully grasp how all of that works.

None of these are tensions to God. But they're tensions for us. However, there's one exception to this pattern, which is why there's a gap in the middle.

There is a massive tension between how guilty sinners can approach an impeccably holy God. That is a monumental tension. God is immaculately and impeccably holy. And that means that anything, anything that is not at that level is completely incompatible with being in his presence. And to be a sinner, which basically means to have said to God, I'm not listening to you and I'm going my own way. To be a sinner is to be completely, completely incompatible with God.

[27:29] That is a monumental tension. But the incredible thing is that this tension gets fully and completely and majestically resolved, explained, and announced in the gospel.

So God doesn't tell you how the Trinity works. He doesn't tell you fully how the Incarnation works. He doesn't tell you how eternity and time interact. He doesn't unpack and untie the knots of sovereignty and responsibility.

He doesn't fully explain how his will and prayer and all of that works. And doesn't unpack the unknowableness of God and the intimacy of his presence. He doesn't really fully explain any of these things. But how sinners can come into the presence of a holy God is completely resolved and revealed in the gospel.

And it's resolved because God, the Son himself, comes to take the place of sinners. And all our sin is placed on him on the cross.

And there, in his death on the cross, he carries all the implications of our sin, defeats the power of death, rises again in power and glory.

[28:54] And by faith, we can be united to him. And so just as he is the Son of God, we can become the children of God as well.

Why do you think that's the tension that gets resolved and explained? because that's the one you need to know. That's the one you need to know.

And so don't worry if you can't resolve the other ones. You're not actually meant to. It's the middle one that matters.

It's the restoring of the relationship with a loving heavenly Father whom we have sinned against so grievously. That is what the gospel is aiming for.

And all of this takes us back to Isaiah 55 because verses 8 and 9, my thoughts are higher than your thoughts, my ways are higher than your ways. That's a wonderful verse about the archetypal-ectypal distinction, but look at the context of it.

[30:06] It's in the context of one of the most open and beautiful invitations that God is extending to us.

The chapter starts with God saying come, verse 6 says, seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he's near, let the wicked forsake his way, the unrighteous man his thoughts, let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

That is the invitation of the gospel and the pathway that makes that possible has been resolved and revealed so clearly in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's all really quite amazing because there are so many how questions and why questions that we're never going to be able to answer. But I want you to go away focusing on the one why question that you do have an answer to.

Why has God done all that he's done in order to resolve that tension and provide salvation? Why has he done all that? The answer is because he loves you.

[31:21] And when you think about love is actually just in terms of that archetypal, distinction that your understanding of love is actually just a glimpse. That in God you find an immeasurable, indescribable, utterly glorious love for you revealed through his Son, our Lord Jesus.

And in response to that, we need to listen to the words on the screen. Seek the Lord when he may be found, call upon him while he's near.

Amen. Let's pray.