

LESSON 1

The **WORLD** Before

P r o l e g o m e n a ¹

Theology

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “theology”? Perhaps you’ve heard that theology is just for professors and preachers, or that “average” Christians should stay out of theology. But what is it? Have you ever really looked into theology? Simply put, **theology** is the study of God. The first thing we must recognize when embarking on a theological journey is that as we learn more about God our attitude must be a dependent and receptive one. We must approach God and His Word allowing Him to change us, allowing His Word to shape our beliefs. We must submit to His sovereignty and the authority of His Holy Word. Theology is different than biology and geology because in theology we are dependent upon God taking the first step to approach humanity. Only as far as He has shown Himself can we know Him. God must take the initiative in showing Himself to us.

1. Theology is the _____ of _____.

2. God must come to _____ before we can _____ to _____.

Revelation

God has shown Himself to us! Isn’t it wonderful to recognize that God didn’t simply create the world and then leave it to wind down on its own? Not only did God create the world, but He also chose to reveal Himself to His creation. There are two ways in which God makes Himself known to us. The first way He reveals Himself to us is in

creation itself. Psalm 19:1 says, “*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*” In the next verse the psalmist tells us that the heavens speak of and declare God’s glorious handiwork. Many theologians describe this way that God shows Himself to us as *general revelation*. **General revelation** is God revealing Himself to humans in creation. Paul says in Romans 1:19-20 that what may be known about God is clearly seen, because God has shown it to us. Even since the beginning of time, Paul continues, God’s power and divinity have been plainly seen.

But general revelation isn’t enough. By itself this kind of revelation can never lead us to an intimate knowledge of God, nor can it cause us to love and adore Him as Savior. General revelation only leaves us “*without excuse*” (Romans 1:20). Unbelievers cannot claim that it is God’s fault that they do not worship Him. God has shown Himself to all people in creation, but in our sinfulness we “*neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him...their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*” (Romans 1:21). We can call this a guilty knowledge of God. Although the heavens declare God’s glory, humans, by nature, refuse to glorify God as God, nor do we thank Him for what He has given us. This makes us guilty before His presence. By nature we can never reason or rationalize our way to a saving knowledge of God. We need more than general revelation to show us who God is and how we can be delivered from the misery caused by sin.

3. One way _____ has shown Himself to us is _____ revelation.

¹Prolegomena means “to say before.” Prolegomena, in theology, deals with important topics that must be covered before one begins studying the basic truths of the Christian faith.

4. _____ revelation is God revealing _____ to humans in _____.

5. We need more than _____ to show us who _____ is and how _____ can be delivered from our _____ and _____.

God has gone beyond simply revealing His existence through creation. While the magnificent sunset declares God’s abounding glory, and the snow-capped mountains echo His power and splendor, they do not explain how we, as sinners, can stand blameless before a holy and righteous God. We need *special revelation* to show us the way of salvation. **Special revelation** is God’s Word. God made Himself known specifically and precisely as He spoke to His people through His chosen messengers. Special revelation is necessary for us to understand God’s saving grace through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. The special revelation of God is His revelation of redemption. In the Bible, God clearly shows us our sin, the way of salvation in Christ and grateful response of service to God. Special revelation, God’s Word, tells us that “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Timothy 1:15). Special revelation also illumines our minds, shows our will what is right in God’s eyes and prepares us for our heavenly home (Psalm 19:8 & 119:105).

6. _____ revelation is God’s _____.

7. _____ revelation is necessary to _____ us God’s _____ grace in the _____ of His Son, _____.

Although many people have tried to make vain speculations about God and who He is, we need not speculate about the nature of God; He has specially and explicitly revealed Himself to us. We have the record of God’s mighty acts in history and His own interpretation of those acts, better known as the Bible. [IN-DEPTH] God has revealed who He is in His Word. God wants His people to know Him—the Bible reveals God to us,

Jesus reveals God to us and the Spirit reveals the things of God through His Word to us. Theology is the study of the three-in-one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A careful reading and study of the Bible is necessary as God has not revealed the way of salvation anywhere else. The theologian J. I. Packer once said, “We must seek, in studying God, to be led to God. It was for this purpose that revelation [the Bible] was given, and it is to this use that we must put it.”²

8. God has clearly _____ who He is in _____.

Systematic Theology

The primary concern of this course is theology, and the specific method adopted to approach this subject is called *systematic theology*. Let’s define **systematic theology** as the presentation of the truths of Scripture in an orderly arrangement. In this course, we will be looking at the major Christian doctrines³ and putting them in an organized sequence. Most teachers and scholars put the truths of Scripture in the following order:

- 1) The Doctrine of God (Theology Proper)
- 2) The Doctrine of Man (Anthropology)
- 3) The Doctrine of Christ (Christology)
- 4) The Doctrine of Redemption/Salvation (Soteriology)
- 5) The Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology)
- 6) The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

In this course, we will be following a similar outline:

- 1) The Doctrine of God (Theology Proper)
- 2) The Doctrine of Man (Anthropology)
- 3) The Doctrine of Christ (Christology)
- 4) The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)
- 5) The Doctrine of Redemption/Salvation (Soteriology)
- 6) The Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology)
- 7) Christian Ethics
- 8) Apologetics

²Packer, J.I. *Knowing God*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1973.

³Doctrine means principle, instruction or truth.

Remember, the topics in this outline are not in historical order, nor are they in the order in which they appear in the Bible; rather, they are organized in a topical order, helpful for studying biblical doctrines. Another theological approach, biblical theology, traces the flow of history from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, while systematic theology puts the major biblical doctrines in topical order. When they are used in a complementary manner, both approaches are coherent, helpful ways to understand God and His Word.

9. Systematic theology is the _____ of the _____ of Scripture in an _____ arrangement.

10. Doctrine means _____, _____ or _____.

Knowing Our God

Why should we learn more about God? Why can't we just leave these things to college professors and preachers? There are many reasons. For example, Scripture calls us to "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 3:18). Scripture also says, "*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent*" (John 17:3). Maybe you haven't really thought through these ideas, or maybe they have been on your mind for years. Either way, the words of the Psalmist should be your words: "*My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God*" (Psalm 84:2). We challenge you not to ask the question, "Why should I learn more about God?" Ask instead, "Why *shouldn't* I learn more about God?" If you belong to Christ then God has chosen you to be His treasured possession. If you are His, He is yours!

One teacher has said, "...since on our behalf and for our salvation He has condescended to work and speak in the form of time...let us also seek to know Him as the One that is, that was, and that is to come, in order that no note may be lacking in

that psalm of praise to be sung by the Church into which all our theology must issue."⁴ Consider also Paul's fervent yearning in Philippians 3:7-11, where he says, "...*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.*" If you do not wish to learn more about God, His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, you had better start asking yourself some serious questions!

11. Scripture calls us to "_____ in the _____ and _____ of our Lord and _____ Jesus _____".

12. Paul says in God's Word, "*I _____ to _____ Christ, and the _____ of his _____.*"

Another reason to learn systematic theology is to assist us in our fight against our natural tendency to be doctrinally one-sided, studying only what interests us. To be one-sided doctrinally is to be one-sided spiritually. Think about it: if you didn't study all the aspects of God in His Word, couldn't you inadvertently downplay some of His most important aspects? Paul told the Ephesian Christians, "*I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will [or counsel] of God*" (Acts 20:27). We need the whole counsel of God, whether or not it makes us feel good. Some things God reveals to us in His Word will perhaps frighten us, others will cut to our very souls by the truth they declare, yet others will make us sing a new song of joy to the Lord. A study of systematic theology will help us maintain a healthy balance as we look into the whole counsel of God and who He is. If we are doctrinally balanced, by God's grace we will be spiritually balanced as well.

⁴Vos, Geerhardus, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*. P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ. 1999.

13. A study of systematic theology will help us _____ a healthy _____ as we look into the _____ of _____ and who _____ is.

Learning about God also compels you to learn about yourself. If you do not truly know yourself, you will not truly know God. This means that before you seriously endeavor to know God, you must understand the truth about yourself. Once you see that your condition apart from God is nothing but sin, death, misery and darkness, you will truly know of your desperate need for divine help and deliverance. You will then turn to God and His Son, by His grace. And once you learn about God and His goodness, splendor, power and righteousness, you will also be driven to the dust as you realize that you are not good or righteous on your own. You will never know your true condition until you gaze upon God's majesty and holiness. John Calvin, a preacher from the 16th century, put it this way, "...man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty."⁵

14. Before you seriously endeavor to _____, you must _____ the _____ about _____.

Who God Is

The Bible does not contain an exact definition of God. Although we can put verses together and learn many things about who God is, we cannot turn to one verse and read a clear definition. The closest we can come to a concise definition of God in the Bible is found in John 4:24, where Christ says, "*God is spirit.*" By this statement, we can conclude that God does not have a body, and is no way visible to the physical human eye. God is also a personal God, with whom we can communicate, and is distinguished from His creation by His infinite power and absolute sovereignty.⁶

Our God is infinitely perfect, as the children of Israel sang, "*Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory...the LORD will reign for ever and ever*" (Exodus 15:11 & 18). Paul also uses beautiful words to describe God in 1 Timothy 6:16, "[God,] *who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever.*" While God is spirit, personal and perfect, He has revealed Himself to us as a "simple" God. That is, God and His perfections are one. He is not made up of many different parts, but He is one with His attributes, or characteristics. In other words, every attribute of God is co-extensive with His being.

15. "*God is _____.*"

The Attributes of God

God tells us in His Word that He has different attributes. In theology, we take different aspects of who God is and define them so we can know more of His power and might. Some characteristics of God emphasize the absolute distinction between God the Creator and man the creature. These attributes are called **incommunicable attributes**, which humans do not "share" with God, because they are unique to Him alone. One incommunicable attribute of God is that He is self-existent. That means that God exists in Himself, and does not depend on anything or anyone to support Him. We as creatures are dependent upon God, and need Him to give us life, breath, food and so on. But God necessarily exists independently. God is also immutable. Immutable means that God is unchangeable. God Himself declares, "*I the LORD do not change*" (Malachi 3:6). He is omnipotent, or all-powerful, as the prophet says, "*...nothing is too hard for you*" (Jeremiah 32:17). God is also infinite and eternal; He is not subject to limitations. He is absolutely perfect, from everlasting to everlasting. He is not bound by time or space. God is omniscient, or

⁵Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. 1981.

⁶Sovereignty means that God is completely and wholly all-powerful over everything, and includes the fact that He upholds all things with His power and determines the ends to which they were created to serve. See Psalm 115:3, Romans 9:15-18 and Revelation 4:11 for more information.

all-knowing. He doesn't learn; He has always known all things in their totality.

These things make us bow and adore almighty God, saying with the apostle Paul, "*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen*" (Romans 11:33-36).

16. God's _____ attributes are _____ to Him alone.

17. God is immutable, which means _____; God is omnipotent, which means _____; God is infinite, which means He is not _____ to _____; God is omniscient, which means _____.

God's **communicable attributes** are those qualities of which we find some resemblance in humans. We must remember, however, that man is finite (limited), and even the attributes that God "shares" with humans are only a faint glimmer within us. God's communicable attributes are: knowledge, wisdom, goodness, love, holiness and righteousness, along with several other characteristics that God has revealed in His Word.

18. God's _____ are those _____ of which we find _____ in _____.

The Names of God⁷

"*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth*" (Psalm 8:1). Even by declaring His name, God has come down and revealed Himself to us. Although God uses many different names to show Himself to us, it is good to remember that these names simply express different characteristics of the same one true God. We didn't make these names up; God has declared them to us

so that we might know Him better. In order for us to know and understand Him, God used human language to describe Himself. Think of a parent talking to a young child. The parent uses "baby-talk" to converse with the child. They must stoop to the child's level of understanding to communicate. In the same way, God stooped down to our level and revealed His true nature to us by using our language and terms we can understand.

One of the most common names for God in the Old Testament is EL (or ELOHIM). As you read the Old Testament and come upon the word "God," most likely the Hebrew word behind it is EL or ELOHIM. This name for God is found over 2,300 times in the Old Testament. EL or ELOHIM means being first, being Lord, God, god or being strong and mighty. Psalm 86:10b states, "*You alone are God.*" See Genesis 1:1, 1 Samuel 1:17, Psalm 56:1 and Isaiah 35:4 for additional examples of this name.

19. God _____ down to our _____ and revealed His true _____ to us by using our _____ and terms we can _____.

20. One of the most common names for God in the Old Testament is _____ or _____.

You are probably also accustomed to seeing the name for God (capitalized), "LORD." When you see the name LORD, this is the English word for the most sacred and holy name of God. The Hebrew word which is translated into LORD is YAHWEH.⁸ This name of God, LORD, appears in the Old Testament around 6,500 times. It means the self-existing one: He that always was, that always is and ever is to come.⁹ The law of God declares that "*anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death*" (Leviticus 24:16). When you read LORD, remember that this is God's covenant name, the name which is holy, and

⁷In this section, we are simply looking at the most common names for our God found in Scripture. Just remember that there are many more. Perhaps you can keep track on your own while you go through this course.

means “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14-15). This is the name of God that He used in His covenant bond with His people to create a gracious and merciful relationship. The LORD is the author and sustainer of this covenant relationship.

The New Testament also has different names for God. The most common New Testament name for God, “*theos*,” is just like EL or ELOHIM in the Old Testament. *Theos* is a Greek word which simply means God, or god (see Mark 5:7, Luke 1:75 and Acts 7:48 for more information). *Theos* appears in the New Testament over 1,100 times. We derive the word *theology* from this name for God.

21. The covenant name of _____, His most holy name, is (Hebrew) _____. We usually write it like this: _____.

22. The most common New Testament name for God, _____, is just like _____ or _____ from the _____.

When discussing the name of God, it is important to remember that there is one primary and brilliant instance of God’s name. The clearest manifestation of God’s name is in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself declared, “*before Abraham was born, I am*” (John 8:58). In this verse we see God-in-the-flesh, Immanuel, declaring His name, I AM (see also Matthew 1:23). Jesus prayed to God, “*I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world*” (John 17:6 KJV). Remember God’s name, remember Jesus Christ, God’s Son and remember that “*there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Remember that God gave Jesus “*the name that is above every name*” (Philippians 2:9). “*On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS*” (Revelation 19:16).

Learning about God’s name leads us to rejoice simply because we *can* know the name of our God. As we think about Jesus, whose name is the

Word of God, the Prince of Peace and Mighty God, we humbly adore Him as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Isaiah 9:6 and Revelation 19:16). Christians can take pleasure in the fact that when the earth is removed and heaven is our eternal dwelling place, we will see the Lord’s face, and His name will be on our foreheads (Revelation 15:2 and 22:4).

⁸Some translations of Scripture also use JEHOVAH, which is derived from the same Hebrew word for LORD and YAHWEH

⁹For further study, see Psalm 90:2, Isaiah 44:6, John 8:58, Hebrews 13:8, Revelation 1:4, 1:8 and 4:8.

Short Answer Essays

1. Explain in your own words how theology is different from biology and geology, and why it is important for Christians to study theology.

2. Explain general revelation and give Scriptural support for your answer.

3. Explain special revelation and give Scriptural support for your answer.

4. If God has clearly shown Himself to all humans (Romans 1:18-20), why is special revelation necessary?

5. Read Judges 13:22, Job 38 and 42:1-6, Isaiah 6:5, Luke 5:8 and Revelation 1:17. What did the people in these passages learn about God and themselves?

6. What do the following verses say about knowing God: Jeremiah 24:7, 2 Corinthians 4:6 and Colossians 1:10?

7. What is an “incommunicable” attribute? Name and define at least three of God’s incommunicable attributes.

8. Explain the significance of “baby-talk” and what that tells us about how God reveals Himself to us.

9. What are the two names for God that are used most often in the Old Testament? For each name, list how often the name is used in the Old Testament and the meaning of the name. Cite a Scripture passage to support each answer.

Digging Deeper

1. Compare general revelation and special revelation and explain how both are used by God to reveal Himself to us. Define each and explain these concepts as if you were sharing them with someone who had never heard them before. Use any verses that come to mind, as well as the following: Psalm 19, Acts 14:17, Romans 1:18-32, Psalm 103:7, John 1:18 and Hebrews 1:1-2.

2. What is your ultimate aim and object in occupying yourself with the study of God? How can you truly know God? Use Scripture references that come to mind. Also look at the following references to guide your answer: Genesis 1:1, Psalm 46:10, Isaiah 44:6, Jeremiah 10:10, 1 Corinthians 2:9-16 and 1 John 5:20.

3. Do *you* want to learn more about God? Why or why not? Also, can you think of any reasons (other than those listed in this lesson) why it is good for *you* to study systematic theology?

4. Using the appropriate section from the lesson and the following verses, write several paragraphs that describe and define God's name YAHWEH, or LORD: Genesis 2:7, Genesis 14:22, Genesis 15:1, Exodus 3:13-16, Psalm 135:13 and Isaiah 44:6 (see also John 8:58 as compared to Exodus 3:14).

5. IN-DEPTH ESSAY: Christians are not the people of a faith based on myths or fairy tales. Rather, we know that our faith is historic, which means that it is based on events that actually occurred in history. Why is it significant that God spoke and acted in history?

Definitions

Theology: The study of God.

General Revelation: God revealing Himself to humans in creation.

Special Revelation: God's Word, the Bible.

Systematic Theology: The presentation of the truths of Scripture in topical order.

Incommunicable Attributes: God's qualities which are unique to Him alone.

Communicable Attributes: God's qualities of which we find some resemblance in humans.

What I Confess

1. As I seek to learn more about God, my attitude is one that depends upon Him to show me who He is.
2. God has shown Himself to me in creation, where I behold His glory in the beauty of the skies and seas.
3. God has more clearly shown Himself to me in His Word, where I learn of His redemptive plan through Jesus Christ.
4. I want to learn more about God, because He is *my* God; my chief goal in life is to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

IN-DEPTH NOTES—LESSON 1

Revelation, or the process of God showing Himself to people, is historical. That is to say, in history, God revealed Himself to people, beginning with Adam. We must remember that God revealed Himself in history, in time, on earth. God revealed Himself to His people in words and in historical acts. For example, God spoke with Adam, and He also showed His power to the Israelites as they were dramatically saved from the bondage of Egypt. These acts of God need no elaboration; they speak for themselves. We know that the flood, another mighty act of God, was a means of redemption for Noah and judgment for the sinful world. The action *itself* was an act of redemption. God's redemptive acts in history speak loud and clear of His supernatural power of salvation.

The brightest and most spectacular work of redemption, the pinnacle of God's mighty acts, is Jesus Christ—His life, crucifixion, death and resurrection. All of the Old Testament acts of redemption point us forward to this greatest act of redemption—Jesus Christ on the cross. Geerhardus Vos said it beautifully 100 years ago, “All Old Testament redemption is but the saving activity of God working toward the realization of this goal, the great supernatural prelude to the Incarnation and the Atonement.”¹⁰

In history, Christ clearly reveals God to us. He came to declare who God is, but He also served a definite purpose in God's plan of salvation. God spoke in Christ and acted in Christ. Jesus is the Word, but He is also the final Sacrifice. As we'll learn in upcoming lessons, He revealed God to us and He took our place on the cross; He was God in the flesh, but He was made sin for us. He is the way to the Father, but He was made a curse. If you want to see God's redemption, look to Christ. If you want to see God's love, go to the cross!

¹⁰Vos, Geerhardus. *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*. P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ. 1999.