

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's spirituality, which is the first of his communicable attributes we are considering. We have shown that spirits are self-conscious, intelligent, moral, volitional, personal beings. And we have noted that although God created angels, which are pure spirits, God's spirituality is qualitatively different than theirs. We have also discussed the fact that we have a spirit in addition to our body and that our spirit is the essential part of us and will continue to exist even when our body is dead. Dr. Spencer, what else do you want to say about spirits and God's spirituality?

Dr. Spencer: I want to wrap up the discussion by making a couple of brief comments. First, let me read Grudem's statement defining this attribute of God. He wrote that "God's spirituality means that God exists as a being that is not made of any matter, has no parts or dimensions, is unable to be perceived by our bodily senses, and is more excellent than any other kind of existence."¹

Marc Roby: That seems to be a reasonably complete summary of much of what we have said.

Dr. Spencer: It is. He makes four points. First, God is not made out of matter. As we have noted, Jesus' statement in John 4:24 that "God is spirit"² tells us that God's essence is entirely different than the stuff this physical universe is made of. Second, he says that God "has no parts or dimensions", which is a result of the fact that he is present everywhere in the totality of his being as we noted in discussing his omnipresence. When the Bible tells us that God is everywhere, as in Psalm 139 for example, it makes no sense to think of just some part of him being there. To use anthropomorphic language, it isn't as though there is a hand here, an arm there and an eyeball somewhere else.

Marc Roby: That is a rather gruesome picture and clearly would not do justice to the biblical passages we looked at.

Dr. Spencer: No, it wouldn't. The third thing that Grudem says is that we cannot perceive God by our bodily senses. Which is true, but we must also remember that he is able to make his presence manifest to our senses when he chooses to, and he can do so in different forms. With the Israelites in the desert after the exodus from Egypt he showed himself as a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night as we read in Exodus 13:21, which says "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night." But then there are also times when God shows up in the form of an angel or of a human being. In Genesis 18:1-2 for example, we read that "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 187-188

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sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby.”

Marc Roby: What amazing condescension that was on God’s part, to come in a human form and speak with Abraham.

Dr. Spencer: It is hard to imagine. What must Abraham have been thinking during that conversation? But, getting back to Grudem’s statement about God’s spirituality. The fourth and final thing he says is that God’s spirituality “is more excellent than any other kind of existence”.

Marc Roby: That phrase should win an award for understatement.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should. As we noted, God’s spirit is eternal, omnipresent and so on. In other words, all of the incommunicable attributes describe his essence. It is far beyond anything we can imagine. But there is one more important thing to say about God’s spirituality.

Marc Roby: What is that?

Dr. Spencer: That we can have fellowship with him. God made us in his image, which is a mysterious statement, but certainly includes the fact that we have spirits and can have fellowship with God as a result.

Marc Roby: And that is our greatest joy and the source of our hope. Are we done talking about God’s spirituality?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are.

Marc Roby: Alright. What attribute are we going to look at next?

Dr. Spencer: We’re going to continue following the presentation in Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology book, which means the next attribute I want to consider is God’s invisibility.

Marc Roby: Isn’t that really the primary aspect of God’s spirituality?

Dr. Spencer: I would say so, but there are a couple of things to say about this that will be useful. First, Grudem writes that “God’s invisibility means that God’s total essence, all of his spiritual being, will never be able to be seen by us, yet God still shows himself to us through visible, created things.”³

Marc Roby: Like the theophanies we have already discussed.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. But independent of the fact that God has shown himself in some way through these theophanies, the Bible is clear that no one has ever seen God. In fact, with our standard five senses it is evident that would be impossible since he is spirit and we can’t see spirits unless they make themselves visible, in which case we are obviously seeing only what they choose to have us see. In John 1:18 we are told that “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” Which is an amazing statement

³ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 188

that we have looked at before. First, it tells us clearly that no one has ever seen God. But then, even more amazingly, it speaks of Jesus Christ and tells us three things about him. First, he is “God the One and Only”, second, he is “at the Father’s side”, and third, he “has made him known”, meaning he has made the *Father* known.

Marc Roby: That is incredible. But it is also what the writer of Hebrews tells us. In Hebrews 1:3 we are told that “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being”.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. We have spoken about these verses before in the context of examining the biblical evidence for the deity of Christ, so I don’t want to spend more time on them now. But I do want to mention what is often called the beatific vision.

Marc Roby: And the word beatific means to make happy or blessed.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right.

Marc Roby: I assume this is the second thing you said you wanted to point out from Grudem?

Dr. Spencer: You’re right again. The beatific vision refers to the fact that when we die we shall see God “face to face” as we are told in 1 Corinthians 13:12, which says, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Marc Roby: That promise is enough to blow your mind.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. When it says we shall see “face to face” it isn’t implying that God has a literal face of course, but it is using a common expression for being in intimate fellowship.

Marc Roby: Although Jesus Christ does have a human face.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. And we will see him in the flesh. But we will also somehow see God the Father. We have this wonderful promise given to us in 1 John Chapter 3. The first two verses say, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Marc Roby: I love that passage. What we will be has not yet been made known. We have the most incredible surprise possible awaiting us in heaven!

Dr. Spencer: It will be the greatest surprise ever. And the reason I read both verses is that it makes it clear that John is talking about God the Father. It started off saying “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us”, so when it says in Verse 2 that “we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” the antecedent is the Father. Many, if not most, people assume that it is speaking about Jesus Christ and his second coming, but I think John Murray is correct in saying that it is referring to the Father. Murray wrote that “It is of the Father that John is speaking in this context, and so it is likeness to the Father he has in view.

Seeing the Father as he is does not refer to physical sight, but to the fulness and clearness of the knowledge of the Father that will follow upon understanding undimmed by sin, and the revelation of the full splendor of the Father's glory."⁴

Marc Roby: Now that is something to look forward to!

Dr. Spencer: Yes, with great joy and anticipation. The Bible explicitly tells us that we can have great joy even though we don't see God with our physical eyes. 1 Peter 1:8 and 9 tell us that "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

Marc Roby: That is truly a great comfort. Do you have anything more to say about God's invisibility?

Dr. Spencer: No, that was all I wanted to cover. So, I think we are ready to move on to God's knowledge.

Marc Roby: And a brief statement about God's knowledge would simply be that he knows everything.

Dr. Spencer: Which is why this attribute is also called God's omniscience. The word omniscient means to know everything. But I think we can profit from looking at the topic in more depth. Let me begin by reading Grudem's statement about this attribute. He says that "God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act."⁵

Marc Roby: The word "simple" is obviously not being used in its normal way in that statement.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. It is being used in the same way we did when we spoke of God's simplicity. It means not broken into parts. God knows all things immediately, and I mean immediately both in the spatial and temporal sense. He doesn't have to scratch his head and try to dredge up some memory, nor does he have to go out and investigate. Grudem notes that "If he should wish to tell us the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the number of stars in the sky, he would not have to count them all quickly like some kind of giant computer, nor would he have to call the number to mind because it was something he had not thought about for a time."

Marc Roby: That example makes me think of Luke 12:7, where Jesus tells us that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered." It's impossible for us to understand that kind of comprehensive and perfect knowledge of absolutely everything.

Dr. Spencer: It is absolutely impossible for us to understand. And notice that Grudem said it was "one simple and eternal act." Not only does God not have to think about it or try and remember, but he also never learns anything. He already knows everything that ever will or could happen. And notice that saying God can't learn anything new and that his knowing is not a process that

⁴ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 310

⁵ Grudem, *op. cit.*, pg. 190

uses different parts of his being – like eyes and ears – is really a restatement of his incommunicable attributes of simplicity and immutability. So, it is in fact a good illustration of God's simplicity! We can't think about any of his attributes without thinking about others too. For example, his knowledge is a simple and immutable knowledge.

Marc Roby: The Bible does tell us some astounding things about God's knowledge. John states it quite boldly in 1 John 3:20 where we read that "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."

Dr. Spencer: That is an amazing statement, and it is not the only place where the Bible makes such a claim. Psalm 147:5 says, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit." And when Jesus asked Peter the third time if he loved him, Peter responded, in John 21:17, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Marc Roby: It can be terrifying to think that God knows absolutely everything about us, even our thoughts as we read in Psalm 139:2.

Dr. Spencer: That is terrifying, and we must think about that. We are told in Hebrews 4:13 that "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." But we will deal with the implications of and reactions to God's omniscience later.

Marc Roby: Alright, getting back to Grudem's statement then, it's also amazing to think about the first thing he said; namely, that "God fully knows himself". It almost seems impossible for anyone to fully know themselves. You would think that you need to be greater than someone to fully understand that person.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, it seems that way. But God is infinite and we really can't grasp the meaning of infinity. In fact, there are some very interesting paradoxes having to do with infinity. For example, there is Hilbert's hotel. Imagine a hotel with an infinite number of rooms, all of which are occupied. Now suppose that an infinite number of new guests show up and want rooms. Can the hotel accommodate them?

Marc Roby: Do I have to answer that question?

Dr. Spencer: No, I'll answer it for you. The answer is, surprisingly, yes! The full, but infinite, hotel can accommodate an infinite number of new guests. All you have to do is move everyone to a different room. For example, have everyone move to a room whose number is twice the number of the room the person is in now. So, the person in room 1 moves to room 2, the person in room 2 moves to room 4, the person in room 3 moves to room 6 and so on. When you are done with all of these moves, all of the odd rooms are empty. And, since there are an infinite number of odd rooms, you can accommodate the infinite number of new guests who want rooms.

Marc Roby: I think my head is starting to hurt.

Dr. Spencer: Sorry about that. But I've been a bit loose here since there are different kinds of infinities and to keep things simple I wasn't specifying which type I was talking about. But the

point I am trying to make is simply that infinity is a very difficult concept and an actual infinity cannot exist in our physical universe, it leads to logical contradictions like Hilbert's hotel.

Marc Roby: And it also leads to headaches.

Dr. Spencer: I can certainly see that it does. But, everything that is revealed to us about God teaches us that he is, in some sense, infinite. Eternity is infinitely long. God's knowledge is without limit, which means infinite, and so on. I'm again using the word loosely, but my point is that we should not expect to be able to understand God. We've said that before, this is just the latest manifestation of the fact.

Let me remind our listeners of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's answer to Question 4, "What is God?" The answer is, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." That is a short listing of attributes and it does not explicitly include God's knowledge, but it is there implicitly. Wisdom is the ability to make right decisions, but to be infinitely wise God must also be infinite in knowledge, otherwise he might make an unwise choice out of ignorance, which is unthinkable and unbiblical.

Marc Roby: I think this is a good place to stop for today, we can pick up this topic again next time. So, I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We'd appreciate hearing from you.