

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 2

How Can I Know God?

We can know God for one reason only: God has *made* himself known. If God had not chosen to do this, we could not have known him. That is, God is not accessible through our senses, our reason, our experience, or any other means apart from his willingness to be accessible. Our knowledge of God is absolutely dependent upon divine revelation; and not only is he *willing* to be known, he *desires* to be known.

The term *revelation* comes from the Greek word *apocalupsis* (also the title of the New Testament's last book), which means an "uncovering" or "revealing" of something that was previously unknown. The doctrine of revelation, then, means we can know God because he has chosen to make himself and his works known.

There are two kinds of divine revelation: general and specific.

General Revelation

General revelation refers to knowledge of God that is available to all people of all times and all places. Such knowledge comes in three ways.

First, *general revelation comes through nature*, that is, through what God has made. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." God communicates through his creation. Paul writes, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Some of God's nature can be "clearly seen" through his works. This is not just communication but *clear* communication, which is why "people are without excuse." Everyone should see the degree to which God is revealed through nature.

Second, *general revelation comes through human beings*, that is, those who bear God's image. This would include, for one thing, a sense of the divine. In the verse before Paul's statement about what can be known of God in nature, he says, "*What may be known about*

God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them” (Romans 1:19). God has placed within all humans an inner sense of his existence, and he has made this plain.

All humans have a sense of the eternal as well. **Ecclesiastes 3:11** says, *“He has also set eternity in the human heart.”* This means we all have a God-given inner sense that there is more than just the here-and-now; there is an eternal realm—God’s realm.

As Paul shows, all humans also have a God-implanted sense of morality:

When Gentiles, who do not have the [written] law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.

Romans 2:14–15

This moral sense is the human conscience, a reflection of God, who himself is the moral standard. **He has written his laws on our hearts.**

Third, *general revelation comes through history*, that is, how God works in time and space. This is what Daniel had in mind when he said that God *“changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others”* (Daniel 2:21; see also Job 12:23; Acts 17:26). History is the working out of God’s plans and purposes, and whether we know it or not, we experience and observe his work in all current events.

So through at least these ways—nature, humans, and history—God has made himself known to all people. Everyone everywhere knows that the one true God exists and knows something about him. As Paul makes clear, all people are accountable for this knowledge (*“without excuse,”* **Romans 1:20**), but tragically, all *“suppress the truth by their wickedness”* (**Romans 1:18**).

Specific (Special) Revelation

Whereas general revelation is available to all people generally, specific (or special) revelation is only available to specific people and at specific times and places. Historically, this has taken many forms, such as the following:

First, God has revealed himself *through an audible voice*. This seems implied in Genesis 12:1: “The Lord had said to Abram...” A clear example is when God called out to Samuel (see 1 Samuel 3), and at first Samuel thought Eli was calling him.

Second, God has revealed himself *through dreams*, such as Joseph’s (**Genesis 37:5–11**). Later, Pharaoh had two related dreams and God enabled Joseph to interpret them (**Genesis 41:1–37**). Joseph specifically told Pharaoh, “God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do” (**vv. 25, 28**).

Third, God has revealed himself *through visions*, for instance, to Abraham (**Genesis 15:1**). The book of Daniel contains four visions God gave him regarding future world rulers, kingdoms, and God’s work to establish his eternal kingdom that would replace all human kingdoms (**Daniel 7–12**).

Fourth, God has revealed himself *through messengers*, such as prophets and angels. The Hebrew word translated *prophet (nabi)* means “speaker,” that is, one who speaks for God. The Hebrew and Greek terms translated *angel (malak and angelos)* both mean “messenger.” Sometimes angels accompanied a vision God gave to a prophet (e.g., **Zechariah 1:9; 2:3**).

Fifth, God’s ultimate revelation of himself was *through his Son, Jesus Christ*. This began even before the incarnation, that is, before he permanently took on a human nature in addition to his eternal divine nature. For example, the Old Testament often references the “*angel of the LORD (Yahweh)*,” as in **Judges 6:11**, when this specific “angel” came to Gideon while he was threshing wheat. In the same passage, this individual is referred to only as “*the LORD*” (**v. 14**), so clearly this is not just any angel of God but God himself. Most scholars believe this specifically is the second person of the Trinity appearing on earth as a human. The term applied is *theophany*, an appearance or visible “manifestation” (Greek *phainō*—to become visible, to appear) of “God” (Greek *theos*).

This ultimate revelation became permanent when Jesus was born. The apostle John shows the significance by referring to him as the “Word” (*logos*)—“*The Word was God*” (**John 1:1**), and “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*” (**v. 14**). As a result, he “*has made [God] known*” (**v. 18**). Jesus Christ is the supreme communication from God and of God. We can know God because he became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Essentially, for us today, specific revelation is the written Word of God, the Bible. In the Gospels we have the record of the ultimate revelation, Jesus Christ. We also have the records of God's own voice, of dreams, of visions, of prophets and angels, and so much more. The Bible—what it says about itself and the implications of this—will be the focus of chapters 3–5.

SOBERING FACT

While general revelation is sufficient to make all people guilty of turning away from God (**Romans 1:18–20**), it is not sufficient to provide salvation for anyone. Only specific revelation—specifically, Jesus Christ and the gospel—are sufficient for salvation (**Romans 10:13–17**).