

Chapter 6 God's Omniscience

His understanding is infinite. (Psalm 147:5)

Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Hebrews 4:13)

These texts say that God's understanding is limitless, that His knowledge is perfect, and that there isn't a creature anywhere in the universe that isn't plainly visible to His sight. Nothing is shut before the eyes of God. That is what is called divine omniscience, one of the attributes of God. An attribute, as I have said before, is something which God has declared to be true about Himself.

God has declared by divine revelation that He is omniscient, that He knows everything. The human mind staggers under this truth when we consider how much there is to know and how little we know. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, for example, that if a man were to start reading the books in the British Library on the day he was born and read day and night for seventy years, without taking time to eat or sleep, he would only be able to read a small section of the books in that collection.

Even those who know so very much, know so very little. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great English lexicographer, was known as the most learned man in England. When he was compiling the first English dictionary, he defined a hock (the middle joint on a horse's rear leg) as a horse's knee (the middle joint on a horse's front leg). Some time afterward, at a party somewhere, a society lady turned to the great doctor and thought she would get a rise out of him.

She said, "Dr. Johnson, why did you define a hock as a horse's knee?"

He said, "Ignorance Madam, sheer ignorance."

He was the most learned man in all England, but he admitted that he was ignorant on some things. Will Rogers said, "Everybody is ignorant—only on different subjects." [1] And when it comes to knowing anything, I get very discouraged when I go to a library. I come out feeling as if I know absolutely nothing at all—which, if the truth were known, is a lot nearer to the facts than I would like to admit!

When I received one of the honorary degrees that have been bestowed on me, I said, "The only thing that is learned about me is this pair of glasses." If a man has his hair slicked back and a pair of learned-looking glasses, they call him a doctor. We don't know very much, really, and when we consider the great God who knows all there is to know with perfection of knowledge, we stagger under that. The weight of the truth is too much for our minds.

When Sir Isaac Newton, the great English scientist, was an old man, someone said to him, "Dr. Newton, you must have a tremendous store of knowledge."

He responded, "I remind myself of a little boy walking along the seashore picking up shells. The boy has a handful of shells in his little hand, but all around him is the vast seashore stretching all directions as far as the eye can see. All that I know is simply a handful of seashells, but the vast universe of God is filled with knowledge that I do not possess."

When we talk about God's knowledge of everything, we're talking about a rational approach to God. There are two ways to approach God: theologically and experientially. You can know God experientially and not know much theology, but it's good to know both. The more you know about God theologically the better you can know Him experientially.

A rational approach to God is what I can get into my head. You can't get too much into your head, really. And what I can get into my head about God isn't very much at all. But that's one way to approach God—through theology, through your intellect, through doctrine. But the purpose of doctrine is to lead you to see and to know God experientially, to know God for Himself, for yourself. But until we know God theologically, we're not likely to know God very well experientially.

Reason can best think of God in negatives. In other words, as the old mystic devotional writers used to say, we can best conceive of God by conceiving of what He is not. We can always know what God is not, but we can never know quite what God is. The greatness of God's mind leaves all our soaring thoughts behind. God is ineffable (incapable of being expressed in words), inconceivable and unimaginable.

What's unimaginable mean? It just means that you can't think of what God is like. One man I heard about used to kneel down in front of a chair and say, "Jesus, You take the chair." And then he'd imagine Jesus on the chair. I've never cared for that sort of thing. I've never cared much for religious pictures, either. I'm always horrified when I see Michelangelo's picture of the creation. God Almighty is portrayed as an old, bald-headed man lying on a cloud, pointing His fiery finger down at Adam, as Adam comes to life. Can you imagine conceiving of God as a bald-headed old man? I think the artist would have done us a wonderful favor if he had reverently laid down his brushes and never tried to paint the figure of God.

We don't know what God is like. If you can think it, it isn't God. If you can think it, it is an idol of your own imagination. If you don't believe what I'm saying, read what the Holy Ghost said in First Corinthians 2:7-11:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the princes of this world knew.... But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit

searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

And you'll never know what I'm talking about without the illumination of the Holy Ghost. When we crowded the Holy Ghost out of the Church and took in other things instead, we put out our own eyes. The Church is filled with blind men who cannot see because the Holy Ghost has never opened their eyes. Lydia could not believe in Christ till the Lord had opened her eyes. Those disciples could not believe on Christ there on the Emmaus Road until He had opened their eyes. No one can see God nor believe in God until the Holy Ghost has opened their eyes. When we grieve and quench the Holy Ghost, when we neglect Him, crowd Him out and substitute other things for Him, we make blind men out of ourselves.

We must come to God reverently, on our knees. You always see God when you're on your knees. You never see God when you're standing boldly on your feet, in full confidence that you'll amount to something. God is unimaginable, inconceivable; you cannot get into your head what God is like, or visualize God's being. The rule is, if you can think it, God isn't like that.

God is not like anything you know, except the soul of a man. It was old Meister Eckhart, the German saint, who said that the soul of a man was more like God than anything in the universe. He made man in His own image; you can't see a man's soul and therefore you've never seen anything that is like God. You've never heard or touched anything that is like God, except within your own heart. God lies beyond our thoughts, towers above them, escapes them and confounds them in awful incomprehensible terror and majesty.

As I said, we are driven to the use of negative statements when speaking about God. When we speak of the self-existence of God, we say God has no origin. When we speak of God's eternity, we say God has no beginning. When we speak of the immutability of God, we say God has no change. When we speak of the infinity of God, we say that God has no limits. When we speak of the omniscience of God, we say that God has no teachers and cannot learn. All these are negative statements.

We would cut down the length of a lot of prayers if we recognized that God can't learn anything. The average church deacon may take up to twenty minutes every Sunday giving God lessons. But God can't learn because He already knows everything there is to know. He knows the thing that you're trying to tell Him and He knows it more perfectly than you do.

Well now, the Scripture takes this negative method too. Scripture says the Lord "fainteth not, neither is weary" (Isaiah 40:28) and that He "cannot lie" (Titus 1:2). It says, "I am the LORD, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). It says, "with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). And it says God "cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). And all of those things are, of course, negative. Now in case somebody charges me with being negative

in my outlook, let me read what our Lord Jesus Christ said here in the 11th chapter of Matthew:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. (Matt 11:25-27)

I cannot know with my head but I can have it revealed to my spirit, by the Holy Spirit. My knowledge of God is not the knowledge Paul referred to when he said,

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Remember, this was a Grecian city; they thought in the context of Greek philosophy. Paul was a thinker too, a philosopher. But he said, "When I came to you, I came not using big words; I came determined to know nothing except Jesus and Him crucified."

You see, if your faith stands in human argument, someone who is a better arguer can argue you out of it again. But when the Spirit of God reveals truth to your heart and God manifests that truth to your heart, nobody can argue you out of it. If you know God through Jesus Christ the Lord, nobody can argue you out of it.

When I was in my twenties, I used to read more philosophy than I did theology. I read books by psychologists and philosophers, yards and yards of them. I tried to make myself acquainted with what the great minds of the ages have thought. And sometimes I would run into somebody with an argument I couldn't answer, which made it look bad for the Bible and bad for me. Then I would get down on my knees and say with joy in my heart, "Lord Jesus, this man got to me too late. I have found Thee, and though I can't answer his arguments, I have Thee and I know Thee." And I would have a joyful time of worship on my knees. My head couldn't enter, but my heart was already in, on its knees saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

Since then I have learned that nobody knows enough to contradict the Word of God successfully. Some people think they do, but they don't. One man told me, "Sometimes I am troubled by the foundations of my faith. But when I'm worried about the foundations, I dive deep down into the Bible and examine the foundations. And I always come back out and shake the water out of my hair and sing, 'How firm a foundation, ye

saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!" You may be sure nobody knows enough to contradict the Word of God.

God Knows Himself

Divine omniscience, among other things, means that God knows Himself. According to Paul, "the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11). God thus knows Himself. And since God is the source and author of all things and contains all things, it follows that God knows all things. In one effortless act, God knows instantly and perfectly all things that can be known.

It's good sometimes to be around people who can do things easily. They don't have to strain until the muscles stand out in their necks. For example, I like to hear someone take a high note and hold it. We have a record of a great Italian soprano; there seems to be no top to her voice at all! She goes way up over the staff, up over the top of the book, up to the ceiling and then threatens to soar away into the blue. And she never seems to strain one muscle at all.

It's nice to know somebody can do something without effort. Most of us have an awful time getting anything done. I've written some books and it's cost me sweat and blood. But when it comes to God, He does everything effortlessly. God never strains. He never says, "Oh, this is going to be a hard one!" Never! God is able to do it as easily as He is able to do anything else.

In the same way, God, in one effortless act, knows instantly (not a little at a time, but instantly and perfectly) all things that can be known. That's why I say that God cannot learn. As I said before, if we realized that God couldn't learn, we could shorten our prayers quite a bit and step up their power. There is no reason to tell God things that He knew before you were born!

God knows the end from the beginning and He knew it long before it happened. Long before your parents met, God knew what you would be doing at this very moment. Before your grandparents met, before England was a nation, or the Roman Empire dissolved, or the Roman Empire was formed, God knew all about us. He knew everything about us—every hair on our head, our weight, our name, our past. And He knew it before we were born.

He knew it before Adam was. And when Adam walked in the garden with God, God knew all about Adam, all about Eve, all about their sons, all about the human race. God never gets astonished, astounded or surprised, because He already knows. You can walk down the street, turn the corner and get the surprise of your life. But God never turned the corner and got surprised, for the simple reason that God was already around that corner before He turned it. God already knew before He found out! God knows all things.

It's nice to sit down and talk things over with God. The Psalms are full of that, as well as the history of the saints. It's good to talk to God, even though we are talking to God

about things He already knows. But this idea of giving God a lecture, I never did believe very much in it.

I love to hear people pray, but I don't like to hear them pray the same prayers, day in day out. That's why I don't always go to all the prayer meetings I might. I know what they're going to say anyhow, so why not just say as the cowboy did when he wrote his prayer on a card and stuck it on the head of his bed. When he got into bed, he said, "Lord, them's my sentiments," and went to sleep! I don't know why I should have to go and spend a half hour on my bony knees listening to some old deacon lecture God for three quarters of an hour. God already knows! He cannot learn.

If there was anything God could learn, it would mean that God didn't know it before. If He didn't know it before, then He didn't know everything. And if He didn't know everything, He wouldn't be perfect, and if He isn't perfect then He isn't God.

The God who can learn anything is not God. God already knows all that can be learned, all there is to know, and He knows it instantly and perfectly and without strain or self-consciousness. He knows it all. That's what Paul meant in Romans 11:33-36:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

It says God has no counselor—another negative expression. God had no teacher. He never went to school. Who could teach God? Could God call in an archangel and say to him, "Archangel, I'd like to get a little information about this"? We know the President of the United States has people all out over the country with their ears to the ground, providing him information. Politicians are always trying to find out what the public is saying. And as soon as a politician finds out what the public is saying, he gets up and boldly announces, "Them's my convictions." And he gets elected. But he got elected by finding out what the public wanted him to know.

Can you imagine God calling in a seraphim and saying, "There's a galaxy out there so many billion light years away that kind of got out of my range; I'd like to have you visit it and bring back information so I'll know how to run my universe"? I couldn't worship a God like that; I'd pity Him. I'd say, "What a wonderful big universe, but such a small god!" No, God never sends anybody out after information. God has it instantly, perfectly and effortlessly. God knows all that there is. He never discovers anything and He never finds out anything. He never wanders around seeking information.

One challenge to this that may come to mind is that passage back in Genesis, "I will go down now and see if these things be true, about that city of Sodom" (see Gen 18:21). Do you know why God said that? God—who had made Sodom, who knew the end from the beginning—knew what was true, but He was dealing with people. Sometimes our

Lord asked people questions, but He didn't ask for information, "because he knew all men... he knew what was in man" (John 2:24-25).

He just asked to draw the man out, the same as if you said to a five-year-old boy, "Johnny, who was the first President of the United States?" You're not asking him in order to gain information! Reminds me of the boy who started his first day of school. He came home and announced that he wasn't going back.

"Why?" asked his mother.

"Well," he said, "the teacher is the dumbest woman I've ever seen in my life. She knows absolutely nothing at all. She has to ask me everything!"

So God said, "I'll go down now and I'll see" and He asked a question. Jesus our Lord asked questions of His disciples, but He already knew the answers. So God knows!

It is a great consolation to me that God knows instantly, effortlessly and perfectly all matter and all matters, all law and all laws, all space and all spaces, all principles and every principle, all minds, all spirits and all souls. God knows all causes and all relations, all effects and all desires, all mysteries and all enigmas, all things unknown and hidden. There are no mysteries to God.

There are many things that are mysteries to you and me. "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16).

Theologians throughout the centuries have reverently tried to discover how the infinite, inimitable God could condense Himself into the form of a man. It's a great mystery. We don't know, but God knows and God isn't worried about it. That's why I can live a good and peaceful Christian life, even though I am not a man that takes things very easy.

I'm not worried about these satellites they're shooting around the earth. I'm not worried about Kruschev (former leader of the Soviet Union) or any of the rest of those fellows over there with names you can't pronounce. Because God's running His world and He knows all about it. He knows where these men will die, He knows where they will be buried and He knows when they'll be buried. God knows all hidden things, "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto" (6:16).

And He also knows His people. You who have fled for refuge to Him, Jesus Christ the Lord, He knows you, and you're never an orphan. A Christian is never lost, though he may think he is. He may be in the north woods hunting deer and lose his way, but he's not lost; the Lord knows where he is. The Lord knows all about him. The Lord knows about his health and knows about his business. Isn't it a consolation to you that our Father knows it all?

He knows, He knows

The storms that would my way oppose

He knows, He knows And tempers every wind that blows.[2]

Is that a consolation to you? It is to me. It's a consolation to me to know that

I know not where His islands lift

Their fronded palms in air;

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond His love and care.[3]

Is your blood pressure running high? Are you worried? Maybe you don't know what to do and you think nobody else knows. Well, I have news for you. He that is perfect in knowledge is with you and He knows! If you'll trust Him He'll bring you out all right. He is perfect in knowledge and will lead you through. And when you come out you will know that everything God did was right.

"He hath done all things well" (Mark 7:37). Do you believe it? Do you believe that God's dealing with you is right? Maybe the person you married didn't turn out to be the angel that you thought. Well, God knows all about you. And He knows that even if it was a mistake, it is a mistake that God can overrule. God can take nothing and make something out of it. God can take your mistakes and polish those mistakes.

Have you heard the old story about the beautiful cathedral window that was vandalized? Some children threw pebbles at it and it was cracked all over. They sent for one of the finest artists in the land and asked, "What can you do?" He said, "Leave it to me." And he went to work with his fine chisels and began cutting the glass. He made artistic lines wherever there was a break, turning each crack into a beautiful thing. When it was all over, the sun shone in on one of the most beautiful pieces of art glass in the world.

I remember that passage back in the book of Psalms that says, "Though ye have lien among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold" (Psalms 68:13). Now what does that mean? It shows the picture of a poor dove that fell down among the old cans and broken pots, the place where old junk is thrown out. Perhaps someone shot an arrow, hit this little dove and she went tumbling down and landed there. She wasn't dead, but she was in bad shape. So she got some sunshine and pecked a few seeds here and there, waiting for nature to heal her wing. And one day the sun was bright and the other birds were up in the air, so she tried out her engines, revved up her motor and off she went.

As she circled around, someone said, "Oh, look at the beautiful dove, shining in the silver!"

"Yes," another said, "look at the gold along the edges of her wing."

She had just been down in the junk pile a little while before, but now she arose by the grace of God into the sunshine. That was David's way of saying that God can take nothing, can take the poor wrecks of you and me, and can change us and make us into doves with wings of silver and gold.

God Knows the Unsaved

God even knows the unblessed man, the man without God. If I were speaking to an unsaved man, the first thing that I would say to him is, God knows you by name. Isaiah 45:4 says, "I have even called thee by thy name... though thou hast not known me." God knows your name and He knows you fully. According to Psalm 139, He knows why you're rejecting His Son. He knows your secret sins.

You know, a person with a secret sin can get away with it for a long time. I read in the newspaper about men who for twenty years have been robbing banks. You can rob banks or juggle your books, but one person knows about it, and that's God. God knows your excuses and your real reasons, those that you hardly know yourself. He knows your checkered past and your future.

He knows the last place that you're going to lie down. He knows the name of the driver of the hearse that's going to drive you out to that last place. He knows all about it. He knows and sees what you don't know or see. He knows why you're not a Christian, why you're not following His Son. So why not put yourself in His keeping now?

There's a great old Latin hymn in which the writer reminds Jesus Christ (I'll put this in my own words), "Lord Jesus, remember why You came this way. I'm the reason." That's your plea, no matter how bad you are, no matter how crooked, deceptive and deceitful, no matter how you've assimilated and dissimilated. You can always go to Jesus Christ and the Lord will take you and receive you to Himself. What wonderful news—"This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:2).

We can't tell God anything He doesn't already know and we can't excuse ourselves for anything. Our reasons are paper-thin and God sees through them. But in spite of it, God loves you, God invites you and God will receive you. There is no reason why you shouldn't come.

1. Will Rogers, quoted in Quote, Unquote, comp. Lloyd Cory (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977), p. 161.
2. "My Father Knows" (hymn), S.M.I. Henry, 1897.
3. John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), The Eternal Goodness.