

§ 3. Doctrine of God
Lecture 12
Practical Application of God's Incorporeality /
God's Omniscience

We've been talking about divine incorporeality, that is to say that God is not a material body but rather is spiritual. We come now to some practical application of this attribute to our lives. What practical difference does it make (or ought it to make) that God is incorporeal? Three things come to mind.

1. Most fundamentally, it means that *that which is ultimate is not material*. The importance of this, I think, is hard to overestimate. That which is ultimate in life is not material. Rather, ultimate reality is spiritual, specifically personal. God is a personal spiritual being. So ultimate reality is personal and spiritual.

What that implies therefore is that the locus of value is persons. Value is invested principally in persons, whether these be divine persons of the Godhead or human persons created in his image. By contrast, things have value only in relationship to persons. This is the distinction between something's having intrinsic versus extrinsic value. Persons have intrinsic value. That is to say, they are ends in themselves. They are intrinsically valuable in and of themselves. Things have only extrinsic value insofar as they serve the ends of persons. So, for example, a person is intrinsically valuable created in God's image – a person. It doesn't matter how gifted that person is, how useful he is to society. That person is intrinsically valuable simply because he is a person. By contrast a material thing like a whiteboard or a podium or a hammer has extrinsic value in that they serve purposes of human beings and therefore have a value insofar as they serve us. But if there were no human persons in existence these things would have no value. Their extrinsic value would simply evaporate. Therefore, persons are the locus of value. They have intrinsic value as opposed to mere extrinsic value.

Think of what that implies. That means that one person is worth more than the entire material universe put together. You are worth more in God's sight than the rest of the entire material universe taken together. What an incredible thought.

How ought we to conduct ourselves in life? It means that we need to love people and use things, not vice versa. Of course the temptation for us sinful persons is to love things and use people. That is an utter inversion of the proper order of things. Rather, we ought to love persons as intrinsically valuable and use things which have extrinsic value, but not to use people for our ends and to devote our lives to loving things. What are the two greatest commandments that God has given in Scripture? They are to love the Lord your God with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your might, and to love your

neighbor as yourself. It is loving persons (whether divine or human) that comprise the whole moral duty of man.

This fact that God is incorporeal, that ultimate reality is spiritual, I think is revolutionary and ought to affect the way we live in a very fundamental way. That leads to my second point of application.

2. It implies that therefore *we ought to have a spiritual focus in life and not a material focus*. Our focus in life should be spiritual rather than material.¹ Look at Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:19-21. I think these ought to be the theme for all of us as Christians. Jesus says,

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Our focus should not be on these material things but rather on spiritual things. That will then guide our lives. So in Matthew 6:33 Jesus sums it up by saying, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well." Our primary focus in life should be on seeking the Kingdom of God and the righteousness that belongs to it, and then to trust God for our material needs.

The author C. P. Snow once remarked that the worst thing that could happen in the world would not be worldwide famine. He said the worst thing that could happen in the world would be there would be worldwide famine and we in the West would watch it on television. That remark, I think, is very convicting. When you think of the material prosperity that we enjoy, we need to ask ourselves, "Are we focusing on material prosperity and accumulating goods, or are we doing what Jesus said – laying up treasures in heaven rather than these transitory things?" Where are our hearts? They need to be not on material things but on spiritual things and on the Kingdom of God.

3. This implies that *our most important needs are not physical but rather are spiritual*. Paul gave the following advice to his disciple Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:7b-8. He said to Timothy, "Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Here Paul doesn't say that bodily exercise has no value, but what he does say is that compared to godliness bodily exercise or bodily training is of secondary importance. Bodily exercise, being fit and healthy, holds promise for this life, but godliness, he says, has promise not only for this life but for the life to come which will be everlasting life. So we need to train ourselves in godliness.

¹ 4:58

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 9:25 Paul makes this athletic comparison: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath [an Olympic wreath, a garland], but we an imperishable.” We train ourselves in godliness because we have an imperishable reward in the life to come. Now think of how much time we lavish upon our physical bodies. Working out. Trying to eat right. The whole cosmetics industry – millions and millions of dollars invested in cosmetics. Hair salons and hair treatment. We do so much to try to make our physical body in appearance to be all that we would like it to be. But how much time by comparison do we spend on our soul? On nurturing our spiritual self, our spiritual lives?² Do we exercise this same sort of rigor and discipline that the athlete does in his bodily training when it comes to training our souls in Bible study, in prayer, in corporate worship, in other spiritual disciplines? I think that we need to remind ourselves that ultimately our most important needs are not our physical needs. We shouldn't neglect those, but nevertheless we need to attend to our spiritual needs and the nurture and care of our souls because this is going to have promise for the life to come.

So I think you can see the fact that God is spirit and not corporeal is just a fundamental factor in the Christian world and life view and ought to impact how we live.

As spirit, as self-conscious mind, God possesses all of the attributes of personhood – intellectual attributes, emotional attributes, volitional attributes – but to an infinite degree. We now want to turn to a study of some of those personal attributes that God has.

The first of God's personal attributes is his intellectual attributes. That is to say, God's omniscience. The omniscience of God is his attribute of being all-knowing. The word “omniscience” comes from the Latin words *omni* (which means “all”) plus *scientia* (which means “knowledge”). We obviously get our word “science” from that Latin word, but the word means knowledge, not simply science. *Omni-scientia* – God has all knowledge. That is what it is to be omniscient. Let's first look at some of the scriptural data about this attribute of omniscience.

First, I want to read Psalm 139:1-6 as a wonderful exposition of the omniscience of God. The psalmist writes:

O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!
Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
and art acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.

Thou dost beset me behind and before,
and layest thy hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, I cannot attain it.

Here the psalmist gives a wonderful description or poetic account of God's omniscience. Let's look specifically at some of the things that God knows in virtue of being omniscient.

First of all, God knows everything that happens. God knows everything that is going on. Job 28:24 says, "he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens." Here it portrays God as surveying the Earth and he sees everything that is going on. He is aware of everything. Turning over to Job 31:4 the author asks, "Does he not see my ways, and number all my steps?" Of course the answer is yes, God knows every step that he takes and sees all of his ways. God knows everything that is going on. Turn a couple chapters more to Job 34:21-22: "For his eyes are upon the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps. There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves."³ Here there is nothing that is undisclosed to God. He sees everything that is happening.

This same truth can be found in Proverbs 15:3: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good." This is an expression as it were of the omnipresence of God as well.

Finally, this same truth is taught in the New Testament in Matthew 10:29-30. Here Jesus is speaking and asks, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered." Jesus is emphasizing here that God knows the tiniest details about you – even the number of hairs on your head are known to God.

So God knows all things that happen in the world. Not only that, but God knows the secret thoughts of every individual. He not only sees what is happening everywhere in the world, but he knows the secret thoughts of every person. That is to say, God reads your mind. 1 Chronicles 28:9. This is David's instruction to Solomon.

And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father, and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every plan and thought.

So God searches the hearts and he understands every person's thoughts.

Similarly, in Psalm 44:21. We don't need to turn to it, but I'll just focus on the phrase there that God knows "the secrets of the heart."

Then in Jeremiah 17:9-10:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? [Then here comes the answer from God.] “I the Lord search the mind and try the heart, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”

So God searches and knows people’s hearts. Again, this same truth is reaffirmed in the New Testament. For example, in the book of Hebrews 4:13 it says, “And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” So there are no secrets from God. He even reads your mind. He knows the depths of your heart and your inner motives. As the author of Hebrews said, it is as though you are naked and laid bare to the eyes of God even in your innermost thoughts.

Thirdly, even more remarkably perhaps, the Scriptures affirm that God knows the future. We’ve already seen this affirmed in Psalm 139. Let’s go back and look at that again, verse 4 in particular: “Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.” So even before you speak the words that you speak, God already knows them before you utter them.⁴

Also in Psalm 139:14b-16,

Thou knowest me right well;
my frame was not hidden from thee,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in thy book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

Here the psalmist affirms that even as you were being formed in the womb and had not yet been born, all of the days of your life were already written in God’s book. All of the days that you would live – from the day of your birth to the day of your death – God knows them. They are in his book so to speak.

So God knows the future. This knowledge of the future was thought by Jewish prophets to be one of the distinguishing marks of the true God of Israel from the false gods of Israel’s neighbors. In contrast to the God of Israel, the true God, the pagan gods could not tell the future. They did not know the future. This exposed them as false deities. Look at Isaiah 41:21-24. Here is the challenge that Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel, issues to these pagan pretenders.

Set forth your case, says the Lord;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are,
that we may consider them,
that we may know their outcome;
or declare to us the things to come.
Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm,
that we may be dismayed and terrified.
Behold, you are nothing,
and your work is nought;
an abomination is he who chooses you.

Here God makes his deity to stand or fall on his foreknowledge of the future. The God of Israel knows the future, and therefore is the true God. The gods of Israel's neighbors cannot foretell the future and therefore are false gods. So God makes his deity stand or fall upon his ability to foretell the future.

Also look over at Isaiah 46:9b-10 where God says in verse 9: "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" The God of Israel, the God of the Old Testament, is a God who completely knows the future, even the very words that you are going to speak before you speak them. That is why the God of the Bible is a God of prophecy. Over and over again we find prophecies of highly contingent events that could not have been predicted by the causal factors that were present at the time the predictions were given.

This, of course, then carries on into the New Testament where you have Jesus, the Son of God, exercising his role as a prophet in predicting not only his Second Coming and the signs of the end times but also highly contingent events like Peter's denying him three times before the cock crows twice, or Judas' betrayal of him. The Bible, I think, is clear in affirming God's foreknowledge of the future.

Finally, the fourth point is God cannot learn anything. In Romans 11:33-36, Paul gives a doxology to God in which he refers to the excellence of God's knowledge.⁵ Paul exclaims,

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever.
Amen.

Here Paul extols the unsearchable depths of God’s understanding and knowledge.

Similarly, in the Old Testament in the book of Job we have God’s understanding extolled. Job 21:22 asks, “Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those that are on high?” The obvious implied answer is no. No one can teach God knowledge because God already has knowledge that is perfect. In Job 37:16 it refers to God as the one who is perfect in knowledge and therefore cannot be instructed or learn anything.

Psalms 147:5 is our final verse that we want to look at. It says, “Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.” God’s understanding is infinite. It cannot be compassed. It is beyond measure.

The scriptural data on God’s omniscience is astonishing in the greatness of God’s intellectual powers. God knows all things, everything that happens. God knows the secret thoughts of every individual. God even knows the future. God has immeasurable, perfect knowledge such that he cannot learn anything because he is perfect in knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Student: Those Isaiah verses 46 and 45 are good texts if you are encountering a Mormon because they refer to God being the only God, there are none before and none after.

Dr. Craig: Yes. Isaiah has a very lofty concept of God in many ways.

Student: In 45:5 – “I am Lord, there is no other. Apart from me there is no other.” That goes along with the 46 verse that you mentioned. Those are awfully good texts for someone who thinks they are going to be God or there are other gods.

Dr. Craig: What he is thinking of is in Mormon theology, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints, they believe in polytheism. It is a very crude, materialistic form of polytheism where God is a sort of humanoid material individual who lives on a planet in outer space and is lord over this universe. Some day, if we live correctly, we, too, will become gods and sire children that can go on to become gods as well. You are right. This is one of the most bizarre religious groups that has ever sprung out of American soil, and I think contradicts clearly the monotheistic teaching of Old Testament Judaism.

Student: In my reading of philosophical theology, my understanding is that there are quite a few people who doubt that God has middle knowledge. I am aware of the Scripture in

favor of that doctrine, but in light of the scriptures that you just went over why is there this doubt that God has middle knowledge if God is omniscient? It seems like it would be a necessary component of omniscience.⁶

Dr. Craig: All right. Let's talk about this because I did not actually read any verses as proof texts of what is called "middle knowledge." Middle knowledge, or in the Latin *scientia media*, is a type of knowledge. It was a theory developed especially by a Jesuit counter-Reformer named Louis Molina. What *scientia media* holds is that God not only knows everything that could happen, he not only knows all the possibilities, and he not only knows everything that will happen (all the things that will take place), but he also knows everything that *would* happen under other circumstances. This is a very different kind of knowledge than foreknowledge. This is not knowledge of the future.

The things that God knows via middle knowledge may never come to pass. It is knowledge, if I can use this terminology, of subjunctive conditional statements. A subjunctive conditional is an if-then statement in the subjunctive mood. We don't, as native English speakers, do a very good job of using the subjunctive mood. Most of us probably have no idea what it is if we remember it from our high school English classes. But the subjunctive mood is a mood that is used to express contrary-to-fact situations like "if I were rich I would buy a Mercedes." I am not rich! And I haven't bought and will not buy a Mercedes. But a subjunctive conditional would say in the subjunctive mood "if I were rich then I would buy a Mercedes" for example. These subjunctive conditionals are very, very different from indicative conditionals. Indicative conditionals are conditionals in the ordinary indicative mood. Here is a wonderful example to illustrate the contrast. Consider the indicative conditional: "If Oswald did not shoot Kennedy, somebody else did." I am sure every one of us would agree with the truth of that indicative conditional because we all know Kennedy was assassinated. So if Oswald didn't shoot him, somebody did. So that indicative conditional is clearly true. If Oswald didn't shoot Kennedy, somebody else did. But now consider the subjunctive conditional: "If Oswald had not shot Kennedy, somebody else would have." Is that true? Well, that is not at all obviously true unless you are a conspiracy theorist and you think there was another gunman on the grassy knoll or something of that sort. I think most of us would say that conditional is not true that if Oswald had not shot Kennedy somebody else would have. You can see there is a huge difference between these subjunctive conditionals and indicative conditionals.

The theory of middle knowledge is that God knows the truth of all of these subjunctive conditionals like "If Mike had been the Roman prefect of first century Palestine he would have sent Jesus to the cross. He would have done what Pilate did." Or, "If you had been

in ancient Israel, you would have been a Jewish monotheist.” Those are the sorts of things that God is said to know by means of his middle knowledge.

As indicated, the subject of God’s middle knowledge is a subject of huge controversy among theologians because although it is fairly easy to provide prooftexts of God’s foreknowledge (that is his knowledge of what *will* happen) it is not quite so easy to provide prooftexts that God has middle knowledge. One of the Molinist’s famous prooftexts is the story in the Old Testament when David is fleeing from King Saul and he goes down to a city called Keilah.⁷ He ensconces himself at Keilah.⁸ They have there a kind of divining instrument called an ephod which they could use to foretell the future. And so David has the priest to use the ephod to answer the question, *If I remain in Keilah, will Saul come down to attack?* The ephod says, *Yes, Saul will come down and attack.* So David asks then the next question, *If Saul comes down to attack, will the men of Keilah turn me over to Saul?* And the ephod says, *Yes, the men of Keilah will turn you over to Saul.* Whereupon David flees the city so that Saul doesn’t come down and the men of Keilah don’t turn him over. What the Molinists pointed out was clearly the ephod was not giving him foreknowledge of the future. It wasn’t telling him what will happen because we know those things didn’t happen. Saul didn’t attack the city. David didn’t stay there. And the men of Keilah didn’t turn him over. Rather, what it was giving him was knowledge of these subjunctive conditionals. If you *were* to remain in Keilah, Saul *would* attack the city. If Saul *were* to attack the city, the men of Keilah *would* turn you over to him. Knowing that then David flees. This was one of the proof texts that Molinists would use to show that God in fact does have middle knowledge.

We will talk about this later, but at this point I simply had not thought to bring it up because it is so controversial. We will talk about it some more later on as to whether God has this kind of knowledge.

Let me just say this. I think that it is difficult through these kinds of stories to prove that God has middle knowledge because the doctrine of middle knowledge requires that God has this sort of knowledge logically prior to his decision to create any world. He uses this middle knowledge to create a certain world. These stories are about what is going on in this world rather than God’s status logically prior to his decision to create a world. So even Reformed theologians and other theologians would agree that God has knowledge of these subjunctive conditionals. Until modern times, it really wasn’t a matter of controversy whether God had knowledge of subjunctive conditionals. Of course he did. Everyone agreed that he did. The dispute was when does he have this knowledge? Does he have it prior to his decision to create a world? Or does he have it only after his decision to create a world? That question is one for theological reflection. It is not one

⁷ cf. 1 Samuel 23:9-12

⁸ 35:13

that you can just prooftext, I think. For that reason I haven't brought it up. But now we have had a fairly nice discussion as a result of your question of what middle knowledge is, how it goes beyond even foreknowledge, and what scriptural warrant has usually been given for it.

Student: I know that this example doesn't prove that he had knowledge of this before the world was created, but what about the example in Esther where Mordecai tells Esther, *If you don't act, do you think that God will not accomplish his purpose through another?*

Dr. Craig: Hmm. That is an interesting verse. I've never heard that one used before as a prooftext, but yes, Mordecai does seem to think there that God would know how to do this. Maybe that could just be a verse indicating God's power. That if you don't do this, God has the power to get somebody else. It might not necessarily indicate middle knowledge that there is somebody else who would do it. It is probably more reflective of God's power, I think, to use someone else. But there are other scriptural verses.⁹ For example, when Jesus pronounces the woes upon Bethsaida and Chorazin.¹⁰ He says, "If the miracles done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon they would have repented in sack clothes and ashes." Molinists use that as a prooftext for middle knowledge. God knew what the people in Tyre and Sidon would have done if they had seen the miracles that the people in Bethsaida and Chorazin did see.

Student: Just a couple of quick examples pop into mind. The story of Jonah is one, and then Balaam's donkey. The angel said if she wouldn't have stopped *I surely would have killed you*. This is an extension of God's . . .

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that would be a subjunctive conditional as well.

END DISCUSSION

I think we've already begun to see how provocative and interesting this attribute of God can be. Indeed, the omniscience of God is one of the most discussed of the attributes of God. When we meet together next time we will begin to unfold the richness of this doctrine.¹¹

⁹ 39:56

¹⁰ cf. Matthew 11:20-22

¹¹ Total Running Time: 41:52 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)