



Sussex Gospel Partnership Training Day

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Session 1

The God who can't learn, be surprised or change his mind.

Why talk about things God Can't do?

Omnipotence isn't just "being able to do anything"

God is much much better than that

Isaiah 40:12ff:

What is God like...?

The Creator/Creature distinction

Exodus 3:14

"Aseity"

"Perfection"

The Puritan Edward Leigh put it like this:

“God is absolutely and simply perfect, because he hath all things which are to be desired for the chiefest felicity.”

God Can't Learn:

In the creature this is a defect, in the creator a sign of unimaginable greatness.

Psalm 139:

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there

your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were
written in your book before one of
them came to be. How precious to
me are your thoughts, God! How
vast is the sum of them! Were I to
count them, they would outnumber
the grains of sand— when I awake, I
am still with you.

If only you, God, would slay the
wicked! Away from me, you who
are bloodthirsty! They speak of you
with evil intent; your adversaries

misuse your name. Do I not hate
those who hate you, Lord, and
abhor those who are in rebellion
against you? I have nothing but
hatred for them;

I count them my enemies.

Search me, God, and know my
heart; test me and know my anxious
thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in
me, and lead me in the way
everlasting.

*“This world could not have been known to us unless it existed, but it
could not have existed unless it has been known to God.”*

Augustine City of God XI.10

God Can't Be Surprised:

God knows everything perfectly and his knowledge of the
future (from our perspective) is just like his knowledge of
what is past or present to us.

It is objected that if God knows the future then humans
aren't really free and therefore aren't responsible.

This does not seem to be a logical conclusion that
Scripture allows us to draw:

Gen 50:20

Acts 2:23

Knowledge of the future is a test of deity in Isaiah 44:6-8

God Can't change his mind:

He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.

1Samuel 15:29

What are the consequences of this for us?

Num 23:19

Ps 110:4 - quoted in Heb 2:20-22

God is better than you ever imagined!

Now think about Jesus:

Luke 2:52

Luke 2:40/1:80

Hebrews 5:8/9

Session 2:

The God who can't be seen or bear to look

God's invisibility:

Key New Testament Texts:

1 Timothy 1&6

Col 1:15

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation

Hebrews 11:27

...he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

"John says in the gospel, 'No one has at any time seen God,' clearly declaring to all who are able to understand, that there is no nature to which God is visible, not as if he were indeed visible by nature, and merely escaped or baffled the view of a frailer creature, but because he is by nature impossible to be seen."

Origen

Invisible by Nature:

What else tends to go with invisibility in Scripture?

Invisible for another reason:

1 Timothy 6

Exodus 33: 20-33

Isaiah 6

Which brings us to the another aspect of sight where God has an inability:

God can't bear to look on Evil

Habakkuk 1:13

*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.*

God's holiness is such that we cannot withstand his presence and he cannot stand ours.

See also for example 1John 1:5,6

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

Think about the plotline of the Bible. The basic question underlying the whole story is "how can a holy God live with a sinful people?"

Now think about Jesus:

Jesus dwelt with the ungodly:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

In Jesus the invisible God appeared:

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great:

He appeared in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

1 Tim 3:16

And he will appear again...

Session 3:

The God who can't change, suffer, be lonely or die

God's immutability

What is Change?

What that we've seen about God already would make you think that it's unlikely that he would change?

Ps 102:25ff:

*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

*They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.*

*You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

*The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.*

Isa 40: 7-8:

*The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the Lord blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Mal 3:6-7:

*For I the Lord do not change; therefore you,
O children of Jacob, are not consumed.*

James 1:17:

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from
above, coming down from the Father of lights with
whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

The “Blessed God”

*they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and
served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!
Amen. (Rom 1:25)*

The language of being supremely “blessed” (old English versions used the synonym “happy”) belongs only to God in the NT.

N.B. Mark 14:61 lit.

are you the Christ the son of the Blessed one?

The ancients were very much impressed by the need to uphold the blessedness of God in contrast to the cursedness and misery of a fallen creation. This was a sign of their commitment to God's transcendent greatness.

This is a God who cannot suffer, because "blessed" is part of the definition of who he is!

Isn't this just Greek Philosophy?

Isn't this impersonal?

God cannot be lonely:

John 20:31

Why is it so important to know the Son as Son?

What does Jesus reveal about the Father?

God Cannot Die

Think (again) about Exodus 3:14:

Consider Revelation 1:17-18

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one.”

Again we come to 1Tim 1 and 6

Now think about Jesus:

In Jesus the Living one died:

The impassible suffered:

Cyril of Alexandria ‘Dogmatic Letter’

‘We say that he ‘suffered and rose again’. We do not mean that God the Word suffered in his Deity...for the Deity is impassible because it is incorporeal, But the Body which had become his own body suffered these things, and therefore he himself is said to have suffered them for us. The impassible was in the body which suffered.’

Leo: Tome

While the distinctiveness of both natures was preserved, and both met in one Person...the inviolable [divine and impassible] was united to the passible, so that...the same 'Mediator'...might from the one element be capable of dying and also from the other be incapable. The Lord of the universe allowed his infinite majesty to be overshadowed, and took upon him the form of a servant; the impassible God did not disdain to be passible Man, and the immortal to be subject to the laws of death.

Epilogue:

The God who cannot deny the good, the truth, or himself

God Cannot be tempted by evil:

James 1:13

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

What is James saying here?

Why should it be a comfort to Christians who are struggling with temptation or suffering?

God Cannot Lie:

Truth vs Lies in Scripture

God's inability to lie makes us secure:

Titus 1:2

Hebrews 6:18

Consequences:

Holy/righteous lives are a benefit not a cost of the gospel

God is perfectly trustworthy

The searing majesty of God inspires:

- (1) Humility
- (2) Awe and Worship
- (3) Hatred and repentance of sin

Now think about Jesus:

In Jesus God was tempted:

Matthew 4: 1-11

Is any of this familiar from elsewhere in Scripture?

What are the implications for us?

The third incomparable grace of faith is this, that it unites the soul to Christ, as the wife to the husband; by which mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul are made one flesh. Now if they are one flesh, and if a true marriage--nay, by far the most perfect of all marriages--is accomplished between them (for human marriages are but feeble types of this one great marriage), then it follows that all they have becomes theirs in common, as well good things as evil things; so that whatsoever Christ possesses, that the believing soul may take to itself and boast of as its own, and whatever belongs to the soul, that Christ claims as his.

If we compare these possessions, we shall see how inestimable is the gain. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation; the soul is full of sin, death, and condemnation. Let faith step in, and then sin, death, and hell will belong to Christ, and grace, life, and salvation to the soul. For, if he is a husband, he must needs take to himself that which is his wife's, and, at the same time, impart to his wife that which is his...

For since Christ is God and man, and is such a person as neither has sinned, nor dies, nor is condemned,--nay, cannot sin, die, or be condemned; and since his righteousness, life, and salvation are invincible, eternal, and almighty; when, I say, such a person, by the wedding-ring of faith, takes a share in the sins, death, and hell of his wife, nay, makes them his own, and deals with them no otherwise than as if they were his, and as if he himself had sinned; and when he suffers, dies, and descends to hell, that he may overcome all things, since sin, death, and hell cannot swallow him up, they must needs be swallowed up by him in stupendous conflict. For his righteousness rises above the sins of all men; his life is more powerful than all death; his salvation is more unconquerable than all hell.

Martin Luther - On the Freedom of a Christian

Hebrews 2:18

For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 4:15-16

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God Cannot Deny Himself:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.

1 Timothy 2:11-13

12 Things God Can't Do:

Learn

Be Surprised

Change his mind

Be Seen

Look on Evil

Change

Suffer

Be lonely

Die

Be Tempted

Lie

Deny Himself