

Episode 232

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. So Gwen, who's the associate editor here at Got Questions Ministries and also our volunteer coordinator, and Nelson, the director of video content, are going to be joining me for this new series that we're going to be doing on the attributes of God. We're going to be covering all the major attributes, ones you're familiar with, maybe ones you're not so familiar with.

Shea Houdmann

Today we're going to be covering two of them we think are pretty closely related. And first is the holiness of God, and second, the incomprehensibility of God. The holiness of God is something that is throughout Scripture, it's something, a term that everyone's familiar with, but maybe not in terms of what does it actually mean that God is holy, and how does that actually impact us, and to what degree is this an attribute of God that we can emulate in our lives. So Gwen, to start us off, what does it mean that God is holy?

Gwen Sellers

So that God is holy basically means He is set apart. So this refers to God's otherness. But when we're talking about God being holy, a lot of people refer to this as kind of the most essential attribute of God. He's completely other. So we'll talk about this later in the podcast, but His holiness is something that we are in fact commanded to emulate, but we'll never be as separate as God.

Gwen Sellers

So some of the verses I like about holiness are Exodus 15:11-13, and this is Moses' song of gratitude and worship after God has taken the Israelites out of Egypt. It says, Who is like you oh Lord among the Gods. Who is like like you, majestic in holiness. Awesome in glorious deeds. Doing wonders. You stretched out your right hand. The earth swallowed them. You have led and your steadfastness love the people whom you have redeemed. You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

Gwen Sellers

So we see there, it's just this, who is like God? He's so other, He's so different. He does these magnanimous things. And then He leads His people to His holy separate abode, but it's not just for the Israelites. In Psalm 96, we read, Ascribe to the Lord oh families of peoples. Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name. Bring an offering and come into His courts. Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. Tremble before Him all the earth. So I know for me, when I think of the holiness of

God, it causes me to stand in awe and to want to worship. Nelson, how do you interact with the holiness of God?

Nelson Domingues

The holiness of God is, it's just an incredible attribute when you think about the otherness of God, completely separate, right? That's what holy means. It means to be completely separate. And there's no other attribute in scripture where you see the angels cry out three times, right? As in scripture does, holy, holy, holy. It doesn't say love, love, love, or justice, justice, justice, or wrath, wrath, wrath. It says holy, and it emphasizes that attribute nearly on another level because God is completely other, right? Who compares to God? Who is like God? And we know that in God, there is no darkness at all.

Nelson Domingues

In scripture, He's described as pure light, completely absent of darkness. In scripture, light is truth and goodness. In scripture, the darkness refers to sin and wrongdoing and things like that, evil. And so as you think about God, He's completely pure. And our minds can't even comprehend that. We're going to talk about the incomprehensibility of God in a bit, but yeah, when I think about God being holy, I think of the saints and forefathers who, when presented in the presence of God, couldn't even say a word. Their being, just them being in His presence caused them to fall face down on the ground, remembering just how unholy they were. Their mouths had profaned Him. They've said evil things. Their clothes were dirty. They've done evil things as well. And so we understand that God is completely other, on a completely separate plane than us. And so His holiness is far beyond our comprehension. And so when we think about it, yeah, it means completely separate, completely good, completely righteous and distinct than all others.

Shea Houdmann

So yeah, Nelson, that's a great point. When I think about the holiness of God and how, in a sense, it connects to all the other attributes, God's love is set apart. It is otherly in comparison to our love. God's righteousness is justice. Everything about God is set apart. It's perfect. There's no flaw in it. And the holiness of God impacts everything, just like the love of God impacts all of His attributes. So they're not separate. And I think as we continue this conversation throughout this series, we'll see how the attributes of God are connected to one another. But the holiness of God, to me, is sort of the foundation. The fact that God is set apart impacts everything. It's a quality of God that nothing about us, nothing about even creation, even when it was perfect, it was still not holy in the same sense that God is holy. And that's both a comfort and also a challenge.

Shea Houdmann

In Scripture, there are many commands in Scripture to be holy as God is holy. One of my favorite verses, the beginning of 1 Corinthians, it uses the two terms related to holiness. It says, to the saints who are called to be holy. And those two words are actually the same word. So to the holy ones who are called to be holy. So because of our relationship with Christ, we are holy in God's sight, but we're also called to be holy in terms of to live up to the reality of who we are in Christ practically in our lives. So Nelson, when you think about holiness in terms of how it impacts you practically, what are some of the things that come to mind?

Nelson Domingues

Because God is holy, it helps me to understand why he hates sin and evil so much and why he distances himself and can't have it near him. It's why heaven's exclusive to those who've been redeemed from the blood of Jesus Christ, who've been washed clean, whose sins are washed and forgotten away. Because of God's holiness, if we were sinful, even just the smallest amount of sin, even just any sin at all, we couldn't even stand in his presence because he is so separate and distinct that he can't even be in the presence. Or would he want to be in the presence of someone sinful like myself, apart from being washed from the blood of Jesus Christ? And so it reminds me why all sin is an affront to God's character.

Nelson Domingues

A lot of times I think we like to categorize our sins as this one's not so bad and this one's a lot worse or they sin a lot worse than I do. And I think when we realize that all sin, no matter from what we might call the smallest to the largest at all, is still a distinction. It's all unholy and that can't be brought into the presence of God and we shouldn't be comfortable with living in sin. That isn't to say of course that Christians don't sin. We fail and we falter all the time, but we are redeemed in Jesus Christ and he doesn't see our sins anymore. He sees us as his son in his righteousness and that's the only way we can be in God's presence is because of the righteousness that Jesus Christ has given to us and that makes me see the value of the cross. It wasn't just an act of love. It wasn't just a display that he cared for me that deeply. It was to prepare me and make me holy to be prepared to be in his presence as well.

Gwen Sellers

Well, I think that's one of the ways that holiness is kind of one of those things that it sparks fear of, wow, like God is so separate and so holy that I can't be in his presence. But yeah, but also this deep gratitude of, but he's invited me in and I love that in Jesus, like the cross isn't just about, okay, I've forgiven your sin now do a better job. It's I'm actually reconciling you to myself. I'm

making you new. I'm giving you the Holy Spirit and like equipping you to live this life that I've called you to live by the design I gave you. So it's not like we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and now I have to live holy to please this big scary God. It's part of God's otherness is that he does make us holy, like both in the reality, like declaring us to be holy and then helps us live it out. And I love that he invites us into being a reflection of who he is to the rest of the world. Like we are called to be set apart from the worldly ways as a light to who he is so that others can know him.

Gwen Sellers

And some great passages about this are in Exodus 19, when God is calling Israel, you know, it's if you will obey me, you will be my special people, my treasured possession. But then we see that again in First Peter. So this is First Peter 2:9-10. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you are not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. So it's like holiness is the thing that makes God other than us, but also the thing that he invites us into so that we can be like other also, which is just so cool.

Shea Houdmann

So, Gwen, that's an excellent segue. And we didn't even talk about this ahead of time into a question I just saw in the questions system on Sunday, I believe someone asked the question. So in scripture, two different occasions, Jesus says, go and sin no more. And then a couple of places in scripture, God says, be holy as I am holy. Well, ultimately, you know that this side of eternity, that's not possible. So why would God give us a goal or tell us to be sinless, to be holy when that's actually not possible? So how would you respond to that question?

Gwen Sellers

Yeah, that's an interesting question. In some ways, so that kind of reminds me of the like 1 John 1:8 through 2:6 is kind of like, don't sin if you're following Jesus, you shouldn't be. But then also recognizes that you're going to, but and he's already forgiven you. So like you have an advocate who's forgiving.

Gwen Sellers

So in a lot of ways, I think it just points to the grander redemptive narrative. Like we know we're living in that in between moment where the promised Savior has come and we have been restored, like that's justification. We've been declared holy. And right now we're in this progressive sanctification where we're learning how to live it out. And we have a new nature, but we also still have a sin nature. And so we're constantly having to

put that old sin nature to death and put on the newness that we actually are. But one day we are going to be with Jesus and there won't be any sin. So in some ways, I wonder if Jesus is pointing to like, here's the bigger reality. Here's where this is all heading. So live in that reality and kind of in as much as you are able. And then he's taking care of the rest of it. Nelson, how would you respond to that question?

Nelson Domingues

Yeah, I think Paul struggled with the same thing. Or, you know, I do the things I don't want to do and the things I want to do, I don't do. And he struggles with sin. The Apostle Paul, right, who wrote a majority of the New Testament. And so we know that Christians inevitably fall short of the goal of complete holiness. But yet that doesn't make us cease from striving to do it. God has set the ultimate. He is the standard of holiness. And he's empowered us through the Holy Spirit to live in light of that reality. And yet, while we fail and fall. He still offers his forgiveness and encouragement.

Nelson Domingues

It's just like when a little child is learning to walk, we don't get mad that the child stumbles or that he falls. We understand that that's part of their nature. That's part of their upbringing. And we know that in time they will run, right, and leap and jump. And that's the same way it's going to be for us in eternity when we cross to be with Christ. It's going to be an amazing experience to not have to fight the sin nature in a sense, not to be able to live in a world, heaven, where our sin is a continuity to dragging us down, where our body is desiring things that we shouldn't desire. So, yeah, sin is there. It's always going to be there. But I am glad that Christ doesn't look at me in my sin. He looks at me through the righteousness of Christ. And that gives me confidence. And yet his standard shows me that I keep on striving to do what he's asking me to do. And I do that out of love, not out of fear. I do out of love for him.

Gwen Sellers

Well, I love that confidence piece because it isn't, you know, so we know that we're going to sin, but we don't just well, you know, like I'm going to mess up and that's fine because there is that God is holy. So there is that sense of fear and there is that I need to repent and I need to put my sin to death. But yeah, there's that confidence knowing that nothing changes like I'm secure in Christ. And so I can fully fight to put things to death knowing that it doesn't ultimately depend on me. So it's kind of this weird tension of. Work as hard as you can, knowing that none of it depends on you, and it's actually the Holy Spirit working.

Shea Houdmann

And when I've been asked that question in the past, someone expressed it like it's discouraging me. Why would God give us a command that we can't actually reach? And I'm like, to me, it's not discouraging because, again, we know we have the grace, we have the mercy, we have the forgiveness of God. That doesn't mean we don't strive for it like what you were saying, Nelson.

Shea Houdmann

The best analogy I could think of would be like a sports team. So let's say Major League Baseball. There's 162 games in the regular season. That's a lot of games. The very best teams of all time will lose 50 games in a season. But they try to win every single game. Yet they know they're not going to. They know they're going to lose games. They know they're going to make mistakes. But that doesn't stop them from striving for perfection. So, I mean, what would you want Jesus to say to us? Like, go and sin less? I mean, that would be the alternative command. It's like, no, we are to strive for holiness. That is to be our goal. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, we're empowered that we can accomplish far more on the path to holiness than we think we can. Anytime that we fail, ultimately we're not taking advantage of the resources that God has made available to us. So that's still the goal. Failing to reach that goal should be a motivating factor, not a, well, I'm never going to live up to it this time, therefore why even try? And so I think that's the wrong attitude. Yet it's something a lot of people struggle with. And truly, I've seen that question many, many times in the history of God questions.

Shea Houdmann

So let's transition on to the incomprehensibility of God, because I think they're closely related. I mean, ultimately, the holiness of God, we understand it to an extent, but since the holiness points to God being so utterly different from anything else, we can't perfectly understand it. And we can understand the love of God, the justice of God. We understand what a perfect version of those things look like, but holiness is different. So with incomprehensibility, ultimately, Nelson, why don't you take this one? What does it mean that we cannot perfectly or fully understand God?

Nelson Domingues

Yeah, God's incomprehensibility of God, first to us not being able to ever fully know him. And that should relieve us. We should be relieved that we can't ever fully know God, because could you imagine a God that can fully understand every nuance, every bit, every character, every part? I mean, there are parts in this world, there are parts of nature, of the weather patterns that we still don't know things about, but yet we could know about them. But God, he is so much greater, grander, right? He's holy, holy, holy. It would be

impossible. He's like an endless book that we can never reach the end as we read it. Or an endless book, a great novel that a synopsis will never do justice for us to know truly who he is.

Nelson Domingues

That doesn't mean we can't know him, because certainly he reveals himself in Jesus Christ and reveals himself in Scripture and in many other ways. But to know incomprehensibility of God strictly deals with the idea and the doctrine, really, that God can't be fully known because we are finite. We can't simply, we don't have the capacity ever to fully comprehend the majesty, the gloriousness, the holiness, who God is. Even in heaven, when we get there, we'll have all of eternity to discover every day new truths about our wonderful, loving creator. And those truths will never run out. We'll never run dry. The things talk about God and his majesty and of who he is and what he's able to do and what he has done. We will spend eternity trying to comprehend the greatness of the great I am. And so this doctrine is one, I think, of peace and some comfort.

Nelson Domingues

I don't want to be able to fit God in a box. I don't think anyone should. And I think for those people who are weary or are discouraged or who think I can't, I don't understand Christianity because I don't understand God. Good. You shouldn't, that shouldn't draw you away just because you can't understand everything about him. Like people constantly think I can't understand his love and his wrath. I don't understand election or other doctrines and things like that. I don't understand these things. Well, sometimes things like the Trinity, you know, some of these things are beyond our comprehension to fully understand. And we need to be okay in understanding that again, we're human, we're finite. Truly, we can never understand who God is completely. We can understand a great deal of him and we can grow and learn more every single day, even throughout eternity, but we'll never exhaust the knowledge.

Gwen Sellers

I love that you said this is one that brings us peace, because I totally agree that, I mean, that we can understand God in part, but like, obviously we need that and he's given us so much. But yeah, if we could fully wrap our minds around all of who God is, then I feel like he wouldn't be very much of a God and I wouldn't need him. I would still pretty much be on my own. So knowing, wow, like God is beyond my full understanding does help me trust him more.

Gwen Sellers

And I love what you said, like an endless book. I mean, there's also just something so exciting and enticing about that, right?

Like there's always more, there's always a deeper layer. And I love that about really about the Bible, especially like there's so much just there on the surface. But then the deeper and deeper you go, like you get these connections and it's weaving together. And that's God just taking you deeper and deeper. I think there's a verse like the secret things are for the Lord. Oh, well, but then something about there's something of like drawing stuff out is kind of like is our joy of getting to to go deep into those and search those out. And yet also still know that there are secret things like we're not going to fully understand everything. So we keep we keep trying and we keep diving in. But we also come to a place of knowing, you know, I don't totally get it. And that's OK. And we can rest in that.

Shea Houdmann

So, Gwen, what would be, I don't know, maybe a couple of areas of theology where we have got questions have found that people fight and fight and fight. And they really they want to come up with the perfect system that perfectly explains something that ultimately it'd be far more valuable just to humbly accept God's incomprehensibility.

Gwen Sellers

Yeah, well, this is some of our pre-conversation. So, you know, I think the Trinity is one that like nobody's ever going to get. But I think everybody's pretty comfortable with that. But Calvinism and Arminianism, there's just something about people just want one system to be right and one system to be wrong and to like stuff everything into those systems. And to me, it just doesn't make any sense. Like no one system is going to fully encapsulate all of it. Like there's paradox when we talk about, you know, God's sovereignty and human free will. Like, you know, the Bible kind of says both. How does that work? I don't really know. But you can't just toss one or the other. So, yeah. So for me, it's the Calvinism, Arminianism thing is sometimes like you just got to give it up. Like they're helpful systems, but they aren't the be all end all. What does the Bible actually say? And don't try to stuff it into something.

Nelson Domingues

And I heard you referring to before, I have it here in my notes, Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29, the secret things belong to the Lord, our God, but the things are revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we may do all the words of this law, meaning that God revealed we can't know all of who God is and there are secret things, but there are many things he has revealed to us in his law and his word and the things that we will cherish and our children will cherish for ongoing generations and generations because he's chosen to reveal those things to us.

Nelson Domingues

Augustine said, if you understood him, it would not be God. And I really love the idea of, again, you can't fit God in some sort of box and we have to be OK with not knowing and things not being completely comprehensible. And it's not that we're going to be lazy. I mean, we study and there are scholars far brighter than I who still struggle with knowing some different doctrines and still struggle with certain truths of scripture, not that they struggle with their faith, but they struggle in comprehending it. And I think that's OK.

Nelson Domingues

I think they would do a disservice if they could just easily say, well, here's all the steps and tricks of the Bible. I can understand everything completely and fully. And here's the do's and the don'ts, the rights and the wrongs. And I think preachers and teachers do a disservice to their students and to their congregants when they can lay down the law and lay down the doctrines without any qualm, without any caveat, not that we shouldn't teach truth and we should stand upon truth. And there are certain truths that we'll stand upon, like the Trinity, right? We can't explain it fully, but of course we preach it with fervor and with fire and with truth. But we can't teach its finite details. We can't teach every single nuance about it. And that needs to be stated and that needs to be OK with everyone who's learning and listening.

Gwen Sellers

Well, I love a few things that you pulled out there of it would be laziness to just give up. And yet there's OK, but I'm not going to arrive at putting God in a box. And I think that's that great balance of one way to love God with our minds is to search him out, like is to try to understand. And yet we do so knowing I'm never really going to arrive, like he's never going to fit in a box. And so that's maybe that's the drawing in loving God with our hearts part, too, of he's worthy of my worship. Like I can't just encapsulate him with my mind.

Shea Houdmann

I've heard the phrase that if you can perfectly understand your God, then your God is too small. I think that really reflects what both of you have already pointed out, that is it truly a God if a human being can perfectly or fully understand? And it's not the God of the Bible.

Shea Houdmann

And when I think of like a passage in the Bible, the most talks about the incomprehensibility of God. For me, it's Romans chapter 11, verses 33 to 36, which reads, Oh, the depth of the riches of 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.

Shea Houdmann

So, yes, we are to try to understand God. There are scriptures filled with examples of know God, to know his teachings, know his commands, to obey them, to teach them to others. So clearly we are to strive to know and understand God. But with that also comes a humility that he is infinite. We are finite. He is eternal. We are created. He is omnipotent. We are not. All these things. We can understand certain parts of God, aspects of God, characteristics of God. But we can never, will never perfectly understand.

Shea Houdmann

A lot of people get this idea that, oh, when I get in heaven, then I'll perfectly understand everything about God and his ways. I think we'll understand him better than we do now. We won't have sin holding us back. We'll be able to see him in all of his glory. But still, we will still be a finite being trying to understand an infinite being. So I don't think we'll ever perfectly understand God. And I think we need to be OK with that.

Shea Houdmann

I love Gwen what you said about Calvinism and Arminianism or the Trinity. You even say the deity and humanity of Christ. These are things I would love to be able to perfectly understand how those work. But I had to come to a point in my life because at one point I was one of those Calvinists or Arminians who wanted to come up with a system that perfectly explained everything, coming to the point where like, you know, I don't understand this and I'm OK with that. And so many times, very personal or practical or counseling related questions we'll receive will be something along the lines of, I can't understand why God did this or why God allowed this. And it's like, no, we come in, we try to, here are some principles. Here's comfort. Here's why you should still trust God. But we don't have to perfectly understand God and everything He does in order to trust Him. I think it's a very important way to distinguish the things.

Shea Houdmann

Trust me, no one loves studying theology more than me. No one loves trying to help people understand God and His Word more than me and the rest of the team at Got Questions. But we have to remember to draw the line to the point where thinking that we can perfectly understand everything about Him and what He does. So in closing to both of you, what for you is a good way that we actually apply the incomprehensibility of God to our day-to-day lives as followers of Christ?

Nelson Domingues

One of the errors of Job's friends when they were trying to comfort him was to assume that they knew God enough to say that they knew exactly what God was doing, how He was acting in Job's life, what the consequences were for,

the things he needed to change. And they assumed that knowledge based on some of it, based on good truth and some of it not. But we see later on when God questions Job, He basically puts man in this place like, who are you to tell me? Who are you to search the depths? Do you know all these different things? And it goes on a laundry list of, you can't comprehend this. You can't comprehend that. You have no idea how this is this way. You have no idea why that is that way.

Nelson Domingues

And for me, it gives me a sense of pause when I'm dealing with individuals or going through something or myself to take time to understand what's going on and to be OK sometimes with saying, I don't know why God allowed this in your life. I can't give you a good answer for why this terrible thing happened or why this thing didn't happen for you. But I know God in the sense where He reveals Himself to us. I know that what He's doing, He loves us and cares for us. And we need to depend on that, on His holiness, on His incomprehensibility. No matter what day to day things happen in our own life, we need to trust that the things that we cannot comprehend in Christ, in God, they don't pull us away from Him. It doesn't make Him any less than who He is. It's just the fact that we can't understand it, but we can trust in God who is in charge and controlling all of it. And it brings me a comfort to know that, to say, I don't know why, but I know God.

Gwen Sellers

Yeah, I think for me, similar in some ways in terms of that humility piece of I'm not going to know everything, so kind of having that posture of openness to be willing to learn. And I think, you know, practically within the church that helps with that idea of theological triage, you know, like if somebody disagrees with me, maybe they're right, maybe we're both wrong. I mean, you know, so kind of that putting things in their proper perspective and being willing to learn, I think it does help me stand in awe of God and even deeper gratitude for the things that I do understand and the things that He does reveal and those things we can really just hang our hat on that we know, OK, well, this is sure.

Gwen Sellers

I also love that to me, God's incomprehensibility is also an invitation to relationship and to deeper. So in Ephesians 1, Paul prays, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the

working of His great might, that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at the right hand in the heavenly places and on and on and on. But kind of this idea of God gave us His Holy Spirit so that we could understand. So there's this, OK, God is incomprehensible. But also, He invites us in and He gives us understanding. So I think that too, also helps me be humble of OK if I'm going to be able to understand something like I need God to do it. It's not just my brain that's going to figure it out, there's some spiritual knowledge here that I need.

Nelson Domingues

The Psalmist was OK it. He praised God, Psalm 145:3, great is the Lord. Greatly to be praised. His greatness is uncertain, incomprehensible. I think that's an attribute worthy of our praise. One that brings a lot of comfort.

Shea Houdmann

Once again Nelson just stole what I was going to say so trying to think if there was piggyback on that but no, people look at the incomprehensibility of God as something that's bad, and scripture presents it as something that is good. That the fact that we can't understand God should help us to both be in awe of Him more than we are, to recognize His holiness is set apartness more than we do. And also to trust Him that even if I don't see how you are going to work this out, but I'm going to trust you. I don't understand why you are doing this but I am going to trust you. So I think scripture presents the incomprehensibility of God as a good thing. A very good thing. We need to remember that. I think that's a great application for me even as someone who we answer questions for a living. This is God's calling on our lives is to help people find answers. We even need to be reminded that we don't have all the answers. God's word has everything we need to know but it doesn't have everything we want to know. So living in the intention I think is important incomprehensibility of God is powerful reminder of that.

Shea Houdmann

Gwen, Nelson, thank you for joining me today in this conversation. Truly enjoyed it. Looking forward to this series as we go through the attributes of God together. This has been the Got Questions podcast on what is the holiness of God and what is incomprehensibility of God? Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.