



## 1. GOD CAN'T LEARN

**“M**y God is so big, so strong and so mighty there’s nothing that he cannot do.”

It’s too easy to ruin this beloved children’s song. One friend of mine is in the habit of singing, “My dog is so big, so strong and so mighty there’s nothing that he cannot do (woof woof)”. That friend has a lot to answer for (and a disappointingly small dog)—once you’ve heard his version it’s hard not to sing it by mistake.

If no one has ever ruined that song for you before, then, I’m sorry—but it gets worse. We might be used to singing that there’s *nothing* that God cannot do and shouting, “That’s true”. Except, well... it’s not exactly true. And it’s good that it’s not true—because the God who *can’t* do things is much greater than the God who is genuinely capable of anything.

This might come as a surprise, because being able to do anything seems like part of the most basic definition of

who God is. After all, one of the theological terms we use to describe God is “omnipotent”. That word is basically two Latin words stuck together: the word for power, strength or ability (*potentia*) and the word for “all” (*omnis*). So “omnipotent” means having all power, which can easily be expressed as “being able to do anything”.

That’s a perfectly good explanation, but it’s not very precise. The limits of this explanation are highlighted by a hypothetical question that sceptics sometimes ask: “Can God make a rock that’s too heavy for him to lift?” If you answer “no” then there’s something God can’t do—so he’s not omnipotent. On the other hand, if you answer “yes” then God’s not omnipotent either, because there is at least the possibility of something he can’t do. “So,” says the sceptic, “your omnipotent God cannot exist”. Which is true, if by omnipotent you mean “God can do anything” with absolutely no exceptions. But it doesn’t mean that.

After all, the Bible itself contains the phrase “God cannot”. In 2 Timothy 2:13 we read that God “cannot disown himself”. We’ll save the significance of that one for the very end of the book, but for now it simply proves that there is at least one thing that God can’t do. So all that effort in coming up with a question about a rock in the hope that God won’t be able to lift it turns out to be a waste of time. Neither the Bible nor the Christian tradition has ever really claimed that “there’s nothing that he cannot do” in that absolute sense.

“Sure,” you might be thinking to yourself, “but that’s cheating. Those things don’t count.” After all, denying God is the mark of a fool in Scripture (Psalm 14:1), and who wants a foolish God? To say that God cannot deny his own existence—or that he cannot lie, or that he cannot be tempted by evil—is a *good* thing. In the words of Anselm, the tenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury:

*He who is capable of these things is capable of what is not for his good, and of what he ought not to do; and the more capable of them he is, the more power have adversity and perversity against him; and the less has he himself against these.*

Which is really a way of saying that some sorts of ability are really just weaknesses. To be unable to do wrong is a strength even if it is expressed as an inability.

But there are also things God can’t do that we tend to think of as good things to be able to do. Take, for example, the theme of this chapter: God cannot learn. How is that a good thing? After all, if “Nick cannot learn” had been written on my school report, I wouldn’t have been keen to take it home to my parents. But thinking about why it is that God cannot learn can actually help us to see his glory more clearly.

Try thinking of it like this: imagine a water barrel, like you might find in a garden or allotment. If we were told that this barrel cannot hold any more water than it currently does, we could imagine lots of possible reasons for that. It might already be completely full, so that it is physically

impossible to add any further liquid: there is simply no space. It might be split, such that any new water will just spill out. Or there might be a blockage in the only opening to the container and that stops any more water getting in.

If you think about the brain as being like that barrel, and information as water, we can think of similar reasons why someone might not be able to learn. When I was at school, sometimes my brain just felt crammed full and it couldn't accept any more information. It was at capacity. Once I banged my head so hard in the playground that for a while I didn't even know what day it was—information kept leaking away. Much of the time I was so busy thinking about sport that I wasn't paying attention and the information couldn't get in, like with the blocked drainpipe. In each of those cases, my inability to learn came from my limitations. But when we say that God can't learn, it's not for any of those reasons.

Let's stay with the idea of a water barrel. Try to imagine one much too big to fit in your garden. In fact, imagine that this barrel already contains all the water in the world—more than that, it contains all the water in the universe. In this case, it is impossible for that barrel to get any fuller—not because of any limitation in its capacity to hold water, but because there simply isn't any more water to add. That is what we mean when we say that God cannot learn. It's not because of a lack of power on his part but because there is no conceivable kind of knowledge or piece of data that he does not already possess.

In Psalm 139, David presents us with a breathtaking account of God's intimate knowledge of him. Before you read on, I would encourage you to read Psalm 139 slowly, with three questions in mind: What does God know? How does he know this? What effect does that have on David?

With that done, let's walk through the psalm together:

<sup>1</sup> *You have searched me, LORD,  
and you know me.*

<sup>2</sup> *You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

<sup>3</sup> *You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways. (v 1-3)*

The theme of the psalm is stated in verse one: "You have searched me, LORD, and you know me". The focus is God's knowledge—specifically his knowledge of the writer, King David.

It all starts fairly innocuously, with the kind of knowledge that any moderately competent private detective could expect to have of their mark: "You know when I sit and when I rise".

The next phrase sounds a little more intrusive: "You perceive my thoughts from afar". Even so, this isn't totally beyond normal human experience. Most of us can tell something of someone else's emotional state by observing their facial expressions and body language, particularly when we know them well. So "you perceive my thoughts from afar" speaks perhaps of a high degree

of understanding of someone, and even a deep intimate knowledge.

Verse 3 takes us back into the domain of the private investigator: “You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways”. Still, it’s pretty impressive to have this sort of knowledge of all eight billion human beings on the planet. That’s an unimaginable amount of data (although not beyond the realms of Google’s ambitions). But even then, we’re still thinking in terms of the sort of knowledge that we possess, just on a gigantic scale. What’s coming next puts God’s knowledge in a different category altogether...

<sup>4</sup> *Before a word is on my tongue  
you, LORD, know it completely.*

<sup>5</sup> *You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.*

<sup>6</sup> *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain. (v 4-6)*

Suddenly we are transported to another dimension, an entirely different mode of knowledge. God, according to verse 4, not only knows what *is* but what *will be*. David picks up the theme again in verses 15-16:

<sup>15</sup> *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.*

<sup>16</sup> *Your eyes saw my unformed body;*

*all the days ordained for me were written in your  
book  
before one of them came to be. (v 15-16)*

Even before there was a David to know, God knew him. More extraordinary than that even, God knew *everything*—David’s whole life was an open book to God even before he drew breath (v 15).

Just think about that for a moment. God knows the whole you, perfectly, from beginning to end, for the whole of your life. He’s not getting to know you. He’s not making memories, or building up a file on you. He knows it all already—even your future—in every detail.

Our minds naturally rebel against this sort of picture of God. We struggle to fit it with our perception of the nature of time. We raise questions about our freedom, imagining that if this were true it would remove all sense of responsibility for our actions. We will come back to some of these things in future chapters (pun intended I suppose), but for now that is not our focus. We have asked the psalmist, “What does God know?” and the answer has come back as “everything”. But in the process, the psalmist has redefined “everything” to include things that we don’t really consider knowable.

That doesn’t just mean the future; God also sees the heart. When David says that the Lord knows David’s words “completely” (v 4), I take it to mean that God understands every possible nuance of David’s communication. Beyond

the meaning of the words themselves or the tone of voice in which they're said, God perceives the *roots* of the words in David's heart and mind before the thought even comes into his head.

As we think about this, our second question comes into play: "How does God know this?" How can anyone have access to this kind of knowledge? It's so beyond our experience that it seems kind of... unlikely.

This might be because we tend to think of God as a bigger version of ourselves, sitting up in heaven receiving and managing information in much the same ways that we do. Some of our knowledge comes to us intuitively, but most of what we know—what day it is, what cows smell like, where the supermarket is—comes through experience. So, we imagine that God knows things in much the same way. We picture him receiving sense data—sounds, smells, sights and so on—and then processing that information.

Granted, we acknowledge that God must have some supernatural "senses" in addition to our own. Anyone who has ever prayed silently presumably believes that God can read their thoughts. They are right, he can—but not in exactly the way that we imagine. We think of God "hearing" the voice in our heads and so we think of the content of our thoughts as something that God receives via some means or other.

But this doesn't account for how God is able to know David's words before they are on his tongue (v 4). David's



future self is known to God in ways that are unknown, and unknowable, to David. This goes beyond “hearing” or predicting David’s inner monologue. Which brings us back to the question: How does God know this?!

We get the answer in verse 13. In the previous verses, David explores the possibilities for concealment offered by the height, depth and breadth of geography (“If I go up to the heavens ... if I make my bed in the depths ... if I settle on the far side of the sea”, v 8-9) and the removal of sense data (“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me’”, v 11). None of these can prevent God’s knowledge, however, as he is there wherever David goes (v 8) and “even the darkness will not be dark” to him (v 12). At the end of this futile search for cover David finally answers our question, signalling it with the word “For”. Here’s the reason God knows all he knows in the way that he knows it, independently of sense data:

<sup>13</sup> *For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

<sup>14</sup> *I praise you because I am fearfully and  
wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.*

<sup>15</sup> *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.*

<sup>16</sup> *Your eyes saw my unformed body;*

*all the days ordained for me were  
written in your book  
before one of them came to be. (v 13-16)*

How can God know? He knows by creation. Which is to say that he knows things in exactly the opposite way than we do. The great African theologian Augustine expressed this brilliantly in *The City of God*:

*The world could not have been known to us unless it existed. It could not have existed unless it had been known to God.*<sup>4</sup>

This, ultimately, is why God cannot learn. He knows all of reality by making it, and so there is no information that he does not already have. This includes every motion of every molecule, every atom, every subatomic particle, throughout the universe from its beginning to its end, and all the interactions and effects between all those moving pieces. He knows them perfectly and instantly and does not rely on their existence for him to know them. God is not like you. He is unimaginably great.

All this means that we will never understand God entirely from God's point of view. We are dealing with a God who is beyond our comprehension. As creatures made in God's image, our minds are uniquely fitted to know and

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "The City of God," in *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, First Series (Christian Literature Company, 1887), p 211.

understand him—yet when even the greatest minds try to grasp his greatness, they reach a point where they have to give up and worship instead.

This is where our answer to that third question is important: What effect does this have on David? In short, David is utterly overwhelmed by God:

*<sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!*

*<sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand –  
when I awake, I am still with you. (v 17-18)*

Try to imagine counting all the grains of sand in just one teaspoon of the stuff. Now imagine how many teaspoons it would take to fill just one sandpit. Then consider how much sand there is on just one beach. Then repeat for just one desert. When, like David, we contemplate the overwhelming majesty of God's mind, we have no option but to worship.

True worship is to treat something or someone as the very highest good—and, on the flip side, to consider whatever opposes that good as evil and threatening. We all know what it feels like to get defensive over someone we love when we see them being targeted by someone else. That's something like what is going on in verses 19-22:

*<sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked!  
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!*

*<sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent;*

*your adversaries misuse your name.*

<sup>21</sup> *Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,  
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?*

<sup>22</sup> *I have nothing but hatred for them;  
I count them my enemies. (v 19-20)*

David is so in awe of God that he sees all reality as revolving around him. From this standpoint, David can't help but align himself with God's view of sin. He sees it as an assault on all that is good; he sees it for the empty, dark embrace of evil that it is. And he is repulsed. In that moment, he sees God's righteous judgment as the only thing that can bring release.

For some of us, these verses look too much like the ugly self-righteous judgmentalism that has characterised the church in its most unattractive moments. For David, though, his call for judgment on the wicked results in self-reflection. In seeing sin for what it is, he sees his own sin for what it is and yearns for cleansing:

<sup>23</sup> *Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

<sup>24</sup> *See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting. (v 23-24)*

In Psalm 139 David models a pattern that should be evident in the life of every believer: that of looking to God's goodness, recognising the horror of sin in our own hearts, and admitting our need for divine remedy. Viewed from this side of the cross, it becomes even more pointed. The

broken body of the Son of God speaks more eloquently than any other image of God's horror at sin. It reminds us that the judgment that David calls for would rightly have fallen on us, save for the intervention of Jesus who bore it in himself. The judgmental Christian knows neither himself nor the gospel very well.

Consider the flip side of this for a moment. The God who cannot learn already knows the depths of your heart. There is literally nothing that has ever been hidden from him, and nothing *could* ever be hidden from him. So the deepest recesses of your heart, the dark places which you try to conceal and hide from yourself and others, are an open book to the God who made you. In her brilliant book *Confronting Christianity*, Rebecca McLaughlin observes that "all our [human] relationships hinge, to some extent, on hiding".<sup>5</sup> Amazingly, there is one relationship where this is not so. The "you" Jesus died for is not the sanitized "Sunday best" version of you: Jesus died for "you", warts and all. There is nothing new that he could learn about you that would put him off. God really knows you and, knowing you, he really loves you. What a glorious freedom to know that you are known completely, and still loved. What a relief!

And that leads us to another answer to the question, "What effect does God's knowledge have on David?" that we skipped over. In verse 18, reflecting on the immensity

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<sup>5</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Crossway, 2019), p 213.

of God's knowledge of him, David says, "When I awake, I am still with you".

How does David react to knowing God in this way?

You've got it. He sleeps.