

[00:00:02.320] - Ben Best, Co-host

Welcome to *Defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

[00:00:12.130] - Ben Best, Co-host

Because the Triune God has graciously revealed himself, he is knowable. But because he is infinite, there's always more to him than finite creatures can comprehend. Dr. Ronni Kurtz explains and explores the profound and often overlooked doctrine of incomprehensibility in his book, *Light Unapproachable: Divine Incomprehensibility and the Task of Theology*. In this episode, he and Dr. Keith Plummer discuss the biblical basis of the doctrine, its historical development, and why its contemplation should elicit worship, foster humility, and produce joy-filled hope. Let's join their conversation now.

[00:00:52.920] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Hi. This is Keith with a brief announcement before the conversation. Considerable time often passes between the recording of an episode and when it's published. In that time, a lot can happen. That's the case here. You'll hear me introduce Ronni as an assistant professor of theology at Cedarville University. On the morning I'm recording this, I learned that Ronni has accepted a position teaching systematic theology at Midwest Seminary. We wish him well and are confident he will serve his students and the body of Christ well in that role. Now, here's my conversation with Dr. Ronni Kurtz.

[00:01:32.440] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Dr. Ronni Kurtz is my guest today. He is an assistant professor of theology at Cedarville University and the author of *No Shadow of Turning* and *Fruitful Theology*, as well as co-author of *Proclaiming the Triune God*. We're going to talk about his latest volume, *Light Unapproachable: Divine Incomprehensibility and the Task of Theology*, published by IVP Academic. Ronni, I have been looking forward to this. Thanks so much for making the time.

[00:02:01.260] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Absolutely, man. I appreciate being with you and getting some face time with you and hopping on the call to chat about the new book. I appreciate you having me.

[00:02:09.410] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Sure. Well, I was really looking forward to the release of this one when I first learned of it because it is a topic that we don't hear all that much about. It is, as you get into in the book, it's a really hope-filled doctrine when we comprehend it. Tell us a little bit about the title. Obviously, you're referring to one of the descriptions that the apostle Paul uses in the end of first Timothy 6, that he says that God dwells in unapproachable light. Why did you select that for a book about divine incomprehensibility?

[00:02:46.310] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yeah, absolutely. I wanted to a point in the book that comes up, I don't know, three, four, maybe five times that actually is pretty important in some of the things that I say is that we know that God is incomprehensible because he's told us so, that divine incomprehensibility is a revealed doctrine, not merely a doctrine based from theological reasoning, but based in the biblical data itself. We can see it pretty clearly in this particular passage. There are other passages that explicitly declare this doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. But 1 Timothy 6, as I thought about the doctrine, it's just the one that kept coming up in my mind as a pinnacle text, if you know, about the doctrine. John Chrysostom, a figure who is pretty prevalent in the book, who gave a number of sermons to this doctrine, he often made the point that it's not only that God's essence is incomprehensible, it's that you couldn't even approach it. It's not merely uncomprehended. It's that you can't even approach this. There is an emphasis on incomprehensibility there that I found both striking and beautiful.

[00:04:01.720] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. One of the quotations from Chrysostom that you included that I made particular note of, he said, "Paul did not say who is an unapproachable light, but who dwells in unapproachable light." And then you add, "Chrysostom gives Paul's reasoning for this word choice. Why? So that you may learn that if the dwelling is unapproachable, much more so is the God who dwells in it."

[00:04:30.550] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz
Exactly.

[00:04:31.370] - Dr. Keith Plummer
That blew my mind.

[00:04:33.930] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz
Yeah, Chrysostom did that to me a number of times throughout this. I have a double life in a way in the sense of I have a deep love for the academy, but I also have a deep love for the local church. Chrysostom, for those of us who have that dual love, who really do love books and studying and writing, but also who just love real, regular, everyday God's people who have that dual love, Chrysostom is such a joy to read. He will do that, even in that quote that you pulled, a great example of he will do doctrinal exposition in a way that is truly soul-shaping and affection-stirring. I just had such a fun time spending a good number of weeks with him in his portion of the book.

[00:05:18.210] - Dr. Keith Plummer
Well, that love for learning and the church and that pastoral consideration really comes out in everything that I have read from you and heard. I think I heard this, recently, you said "theology is beauty-hunting."

[00:05:38.310] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz
I did. Yeah, I say it often, actually.

[00:05:40.710] - Dr. Keith Plummer
And I thought that is really a good way of thinking about the task of theology, because it is, and it comes out in this book, as we'll talk about, you do get into some deep waters in terms of theological reasoning. But there's always this return to the awe, the delight, the wonder, the beauty of God that we do behold partially in this doctrine.

[00:06:12.560] - Dr. Keith Plummer
So let's talk a little bit about, because I would imagine that some might hear this divine incomprehensibility and think immediately, well, that seems somewhat at odds with our claim that we can know God. So when we say that God is incomprehensible, what is it that you mean when you use the term? How has it been traditionally articulated? And how is that consistent with the knowability of God?

[00:06:39.700] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz
Yes, absolutely. I love this question, and I think there's a lot of places we could go. Let me start with giving maybe a more academic, if you will, definition of incomprehensibility. It's the one I give in the book. And then after I read this little paragraph, I'll give you an example that I use for my students. That's a little more lower shelf. Here's how I define it in the book. I say, "Divine incomprehensibility affirms that God, the creator, is wholly other than his creatures. And the distinction between the two renders God out of the rational jurisdiction of the creature's theological and intellectual comprehension. In no way can the creature imagination comprehend the divine nature as it truly is. The finite will never circumscribe the infinite, and the creature mind will never surround all that is in God. Since then, God as God is out of reach for the mind of the creature, so too is God as God out of reach for the words and the names of the creature. Divine incomprehensibility, therefore, necessitates divine ineffability. As creature limits, combined with the otherness of God, means that we can neither fully know or name God as he is in say."

[00:07:50.510] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz
That's an academic way of getting at the notion of the doctrines of incomprehensibility in a corollary doctrine, ineffability. Incomprehensibility, I take to be an intellectual doctrine or an intellectual limitation, whereas ineffability is a linguistic limitation. So we can't fully know God as he is in himself nor name God as he is in himself. A way that I have found that's helpful for my students, and I really do need to get to this is probably the third interview now where I've said, I don't remember

where the original source was. I think the original source was James Dolezal, actually. I remember one time listening to James describe incomprehensibility, and he was getting at the Latin word, the that Latin word is based off of, which is, it gets to this notion "to surround." I tell my students often, pulling from this example, imagine a marble in the palm of your hand. If you have a marble in the palm of your hand and then close your fist, you have completely surrounded the marble. You have comprehended it. You have utterly surrounded it on all sides such that we can no longer see the marble. We only see the enclosed fist.

[00:08:53.180] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

The doctrine of incomprehensibility is a way of saying, We will never do this with God in no way, whether it's intellectually, whether it's linguistically, whether it's space, any measurement, we will never surround God such that we have enclosed him. The line from that little paragraph there that I really highlight with students a lot is, "that which is finite will never We will never circumscribe the infinite. We will never surround him on all sides." That's a basic definition of incomprehensibility. Now, of course, the doctrine has a myriad of implications for theological method. Okay, well, then what can we say or what can we know? That's what I get into in the substance of the book, but that's a working basic definition.

[00:09:34.950] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Now, for the part of your question where you asked, how does that relate to then the fact that the biblical text seems to demand us to know God? I think there's actually a lot of beauty here, and that's no surprise because I want to go beauty hunting with theology. But there's a lot of beauty here in a fact of the Christian faith that's easy to take for granted, which is this. God wants to be known. He doesn't need to be known. I believe that God is aseī or of himself and has no contingencies that need to be met. He is the plentitude of life. He's not lacking in any way if people didn't know him. So He doesn't need to be known, and yet out of the plentitude of his own life, he makes himself knowable.

[00:10:20.600] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

I often tell my students, if you open up your Bible, the story you will read, that unfolding narrative is a story of grace. It is a God who who comes after wayward sinners and reconciles them all the way home. The story of the Scripture, the story of the gospel is a story of grace. However, it's not just the narrative of the Bible, but the very existence of the Bible is grace. God didn't have to make himself known. And not only did he make himself known, he made himself known in a way that is very considerate of us creatures.

[00:10:56.270] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

I'm giving you a little bit of a long answer here, but I think it's helpful to use Exodus 33 as the example of what's at play here. I start the book off with Exodus 33. I often start my classes off with Exodus 33 because in this little pericope of 33-34, Moses is conversing with the Lord on Mount Sinai, and we get to this really audacious request for Moses when he says, "If I have found favor with you, then show me your glory." As readers might recall, the Lord responds and says, "You cannot see my face and live. So I will hide you in the cleft of the rock, put my hand over you, make my goodness pass before you, and I will remove my hand so you can see my back, but my face you shall not see, for man shall not see me and live." Well, that pericope in Exodus 33 is really helpful when we think about what's going on. When Moses asks, "Let me see you. Show me your glory." God doesn't say an unqualified, "Okay, here we go." That would have been very devastating for Moses. And yet God also doesn't say, "Absolutely not. You're a mere creature. How dare you ask that?" He doesn't give either of those. Rather, he accommodates the creaturely limitations of Moses and hides him in the cleft of the rock and then reveals his glory in a way that's fitting for Moses' creaturely-ness. In a similar way, he has done the same thing for us. He's provided a cleft, and it is out of the cleft of the rock that we do theology faithfully, where we know what we have in the revelation of what God has revealed to us is not the fullness of who he is, because we cannot take that in our creature limitation. And yet, he didn't say no to us. He still did reveal something. And so God is at the same time incomprehensible in the fullness of who he is and yet knowable, not because we are intellectually brilliant or because we have a way of getting around our limitations, but because God is kind and he's gracious to reveal himself in a way fitting for our creature finitude and limitation.

[00:13:03.810] - Dr. Keith Plummer

So somewhere in the book, you talk about the distinction between comprehensibility, the comprehension and apprehension, a distinction that has long been used. So the illustration that you use with your students is such that, the way I've put it is, we'll never get the arms of our minds around the totality of God because of his infinite being. But we can apprehend in terms of we can know true things about God. But in terms of this idea of accommodation, you spend a good deal of time explaining what that consists of in terms of analogy and the difference between analogical language of God as opposed to univocal or equivocal. Could you just say a little bit about that? How does the language, how does analogical does the logical language relate to this idea of accommodation and why is it necessary?

[00:14:04.880] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

I think there's two parts to this question that are really important. I view accommodation as God's language to us, whereas analogy is more our language back up. And so, accommodation is using Exodus 33, accommodation is that, get in the cleft so that I can reveal in a way that's considerate of you. So for example, an example of accommodation in God's revelation to us is the fact that he describes himself in remarkably creaturely-like terms. We read in the scriptures things like, I will protect you under my strong right arm. Well, guess what God doesn't have? A strong right arm or a right arm at all, or that our sin is a stench to the nostrils of God. Well, guess what God doesn't have? He doesn't have nostrils. So why does he use this language? And even in Exodus 33, he says, "I'll put my hand so you can see my back, but my face you shall not see." All three of those God does not have by virtue of his being incorporeal spirit. All of these are accommodations or maybe in a more appropriate term is their anthropomorphisms or God describing himself with creaturely-like terms. And so I give a chart. One of the things I like to do in my writings is make high-level theology as accessible as I can. Sometimes I think charts can help there, and sometimes they're less helpful. But I give one on what I call the anthros for my students, the five dollar theological words, anthropomorphism, anthropopathism, and anthropochronism. God revealing himself with creaturely-like parts, with creaturely-like passions, and with creaturely-like time or chronology. That's accommodation. That's God speaking down. Then when we, as creatures, seek to then articulate truths about God, we receive his accommodated language that is riddled with creaturely-like notions and names, and we, by virtue of analogy, can repeat some of them back. Happy to go as much or as little into analogy, equification, and univocism as you'd like, but the way that I view it as accommodation is God's speech down and analogy is our speech back up, such that what we say about God is meaningfully true, even if it doesn't capture the fullness of what he is. We want to make a distinction between the names we use for creaturely-like things and the names we use for the creator who spoke them into being.

[00:16:40.120] - Dr. Keith Plummer

I imagine that some in hearing of those anthros would, for the most part, not offer any resistance to the idea of anthropomorphisms. Of course, God doesn't have nostrils, he doesn't have eyes as we know it, and so forth. But it seems to be that a lot of the difficulty comes is when you start talking about anthropopathisms, particularly because the fear is that then all this language that is describing God in terms of being compassionate and this emotive language, you're taking that away. What would you say to someone who has that worry?

[00:17:27.500] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yeah, I think it's a legitimate worry, and one we ought not to brush away too quickly. Because one of the things I want to make sure we don't do is use theology to explain away the Bible. Rather, I want to use theological reasoning to illuminate what God has revealed in the Scripture as our final authority in all things pertaining to life and godliness. I take this critique or this charge quite seriously. Even sometimes I feel like it can be leveraged from some instances or places. But I do for my students who raise this question, I want to make sure I do it justice. An example of the biblical text that I like to take them to to help them see how helpful a tool like anthropopathism can be is 1 Samuel 15. So 1 Samuel 15 is a helpful instance because you seem to have blatantly contradicting statements at play when God is talking about the reign of Saul because he says in the same chapter, 1 Samuel 15, that "I regret making Saul king." In that very chapter, he says, "I am not a man that I would have regret." Okay, which one is it? Do you regret making Saul king or do you have no regrets? You have some decisions to

make when you come across texts like that. Assuming that, for me at least, I don't find satisfactory the answer that, well, it's just a contradiction in the text and therefore the text isn't perfect, etc. That's not my view. I'm not going to go through that particular answer. What I need to do then is decide which of these is literal and which of these is figurative. I think anthropopathism helps us understand both the biblical exegetical evidence and helps us understand some of what we should consider from the text from a theological reasoning perspective. For example, if Malachi 3:6 is true that God does not change, therefore you, children of Jacob, are not consumed, well, that would entail that he wouldn't move from having regret to not having regret or not having regret to having regret. And so by virtue of trying to make sense of individual texts themselves from an exegetical standpoint and trying to make sense of the consistency of God's revelation from a theological standpoint, you arrive at this notion of anthropopathism as a really helpful tool in being faithful readers of the Scripture.

[00:19:56.310] - Dr. Keith Plummer

You've mentioned the creator-creature distinction, and in a portion of the book, you deal with several misconceptions of incomprehensibility. One of them is that somehow the incomprehensibility of God is properly grounded in our sinfulness and/or our size. Yes. What is wrong with grounding that doctrine on either of those?

[00:20:33.690] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yes, I really think this is a helpful question, so thanks for asking it. I have found that locating doctrine is a really helpful exercise in actually understanding and getting at some needed nuances of articulating any particular teaching. When I was working on the doctrine of incomprehensibility, one thing I really wanted to work on in the book was why? Why is God incomprehensible? Is it based off of another doctrine or where could we locate it? There's a lot of answers you could give when answering the question, why is God incomprehensible? I do think sin and size come into play. However, the more I thought about it and more I reflected on the doctrine, I don't think they're sufficient. Here's what I mean by these two improper locations and then the proper location. The two improper locations, sin and size, the proper location, creator-creature distinction. What I want to make sure readers understand and my students understand is God is not incomprehensible just because we have a sinful, broken mind. That is true. We do have that. The fall of our first parent, the fact that we are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, does mean that we have broken minds, which makes theological contemplation all the more hard. It does impact our ability to reason toward the truth. Yet, we can think of non-fallen beings who still could not comprehend God. Namely, the example I give in the book is Adam and Eve in a prelapsarian state and then angels. All parties non-fallen who, I would still argue do not have a utter comprehension of the divine essence. I don't think sin is a sufficient location for the doctrine of incomprehensibility. It does impact us, but it's not a sufficient location.

[00:22:25.810] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Then size. This is an interesting one, and I actually wish I would have devoted a little more time the book to it because size, there is a sense in which we can talk about an incomprehensibility of size. For example, if I asked my four-year-old daughter to draw a map of all of the stars in the sky, well, she can't do that. The reason is because it's an incomprehensible scope. There's too many. The size difference between my four-year-old daughter and the stars in the sky is too big. There is a sense, even when John says towards the end of his gospel, "I suppose if all that Jesus had done were written down, I suppose that there wouldn't be enough books in the world to contain them." There's a notion in which John is actually confessing an incomprehensibility there, but it's an incomprehensibility of size, meaning Jesus has done so many good things. We can never get our mind around it. That is a real category that I want to retrieve and think about, an incomprehensibility of size. Yet when it comes to THE doctrine of incomprehensibility, I want to make sure that size is not the primary place we root the doctrine, as if the difference between us and God is one of degree, as if the difference between the creator and the creature is a size difference. To have even size difference, you have to have some measurable units. I believe God is a God who is beyond measure, who is a God without measure. There is no way in which we could quantify divinity height, depth, width, those kinds of chronology, those kinds of measurement language is simply not going to work with an infinite being. So the difference between us as creatures, those who are spoken into being, and God, the one who speaks into being, isn't one merely of size like my daughter and the stars. Rather, it's one of being, it's one of kind.

[00:24:24.520] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

God isn't just bigger by degree. He's altogether different in kind, such that what makes him incomprehensible is not that he's just so much bigger than me, but rather that I'm the creature and he's the creator, and we are of different kinds. That bridge, and by the way, that's really going to impact what you say about incomprehensibility even in heaven. Because if that's where you locate the doctrine, I don't think the doctrine goes away in heaven. In fact, a lot of beauty in that statement. Even with eyes to see the Lord in a way that we can't imagine right now and an eternity to look, we still won't get to the bottom of his beauty. I still think he'll be incomprincible because the creative creature distinction isn't rendered in heaven. That's still present. That's what I mean to say sin and size are meaningful categories, but I don't think at the end of the day, there are proper locations for the doctrine.

[00:25:18.430] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Sometimes in trying to illustrate this concept to students, I use the analogy of the, "You must be this tall to ride this ride at the amusement park." And I'm trying to get them to see it's not just a matter of God is this tall. It's because that is, as you said, that's just a matter of degree. But we're talking about a qualitative difference. And particularly, I think we do that with ethics. It's as though there is this standard of goodness that both God and we must conform to in order for either one of us to be considered good as though there's something outside of God rather than he is the standard. So that's helpful.

[00:26:03.030] - Dr. Keith Plummer

You enter into a discussion of a number of potential objections. You've said already that you think that divine incomprehensibility is epistemological, where divine ineffability is linguistic. And one of the things that you deal with is the misperception or maybe even the accusation that somehow there is an incompatibility between these two. Because if you're going to say, well, God is ineffable, but he's also incomprehensible, it seems as though you may be refuting yourself. Why is that not a problem?

[00:26:42.590] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yeah, it's not leveraged against the doctrine too often, but you will see it in the literature. I footnote some specific examples where some scholars will say that ineffability, at least, and then incomprehensibility, sometimes. That ineffability is a self-referential incoherent doctrine. Because if you say God is ineffable, either you're saying something about him or you are not. If you are not, then there's babble. And if you are, then he's not ineffable. The same leverage or the same argument could be used against incomprehensibility, which would go something like this. If you say that God is incomprehensible, you are comprehending something about him. So either you aren't comprehending, which is then you have ignorance, or you are comprehending and he's not incomprehensible. I don't think these work. I understand the logic in the argument against both incomprehensibility and ineffability. I don't think they work because we aren't reasoning ourselves into these positions. These doctrines, incomprehensibility and ineffability, are revealed doctrines. We know God is incomprehensible because he's told us so. So it's not that in saying God is ineffable, I am speaking his essence rather, or I am speaking something univocal about him. Rather, I am speaking the words that he has told me about himself. And so if God reveals that he's ineffable, reveals that he's incomprehensible, I do think you have a break from any self-referential incoherence because we are laying hold of God who has told us so.

[00:28:21.390] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's take a break here. On the other side of it, I'd like to talk a little bit about some of the development of the doctrine historically, which you devote two chapters to, and then like to talk a little bit more about posture.

[00:28:38.870] - Ben Best, Co-host

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[00:29:11.140] - Ben Best, Co-host

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[00:29:32.030] - Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back with Dr. Ronni Kurtz, and we're talking about his book, *Light Unapproachable: Divine Incomprehensibility and the Task of Theology*. It is a blend of biblical systematic, historic theology. And one of the areas we've already talked about Chrysostom and the writing and thinking that he did on the doctrine, you say that the fourth century was a period where he and others really took this to heart in dealing with some things. Could you just tell us briefly what were some of or maybe what was a primary issue that made this doctrine come to the fore as it did.

[00:30:17.260] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Absolutely, yes. The fourth century really is, if you're going to study the doctrine of incomprehensibility, there are other centuries. The 11th and 12th, obviously, are going to be pretty important. But the fourth century, if you want to study this doctrine, that's where you're just going to have to spend most of your time. The good news is the fourth century has some really amazing thinkers, and the Lord was kind to us in the future of the church to give us so many great examples in the past. You have, as most people know who are familiar with the fourth and fifth century, you have these Christological, Trinitarian discussions going on, even as early as Nicaea, even earlier than Nicaea. But as the Trinitarian dialogue continues and you have Nicaea in 325, and then the further ecumen of councils after that, you have, and this is very common even today, you have what begins as a particular teaching that gets more and more extreme versions of it. A rather extreme version of Arianism is a heresy that comes onto the scene that goes under a lot of names. Unominism is probably what most people know it by. Heterousia is another one. If you have the You have pro-niceans confessing homoacea or same substance. You have Arians professing homoyousia or similar substance. You have Unomians who go as far as to confess something like heteroacea, which is an altogether different substance. The substance in view here is the substance of the son and the father. So that eunomians or those who would hold to a heteroacea are going to say, no, actually, we want to go further than Arius. We want to say not only is the son's substance removed from the substance of the father, it's not even like the substance of the Father. The primary reason they wanted to argue that is because the Father's substance is an unbegotten substance. So that if the Father is unbegotten, and that's true of his very essence, then the Son can't share in that essence because he has some begottenness. What you would end up having is that the primary focus in the fourth century is a debate about the way that divine simplicity, the eternal relations of origin, and the substance of the Father and the Son all come together in theological reasoning. And yet, while that's the primary debate, trinitarianism, et cetera, and comprehensibility comes up because Because Eunomius starts to, and those who follow him, Eunomius starts to back his way into a comprehensible God by virtue of saying, God is comprehensible in so much as we can comprehend this word unbegotten.

[00:32:59.230] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

And so ingenerate or unbegotten, that word becomes quite important in the fourth century dialogues. If any readers are interested in the historical development, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz has just done so much incredible work on this subject, and he appears probably a dozen times in different footnotes. You could just follow the footnotes in my work to find his best stuff. But he's done so much work in helping see how incomprehensibility becomes almost in a sideways way, a really serious conversation. Then you have the Cappadocians, then, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nicea, Gregory of Nazianzus, along with John Chrysostom and others say, "Woah woah woah. Am I hearing you right? Are you saying that in so much as we can comprehend this word unbegotten, we can comprehend God?" They are just remarkably not okay with that. The amount ink they spend, confronting that idea is pretty remarkable. I mean, obviously, you have *Against Eunomius* and *contra Eunomius* by the brothers, Basil and Gregory, and then Gregory, Gregory of Nazianzus is going to pick it up as well. Then John Chrysostom, the Catholic University of America, published his series of homilies titled *On the Incomprehensibility of God*, which is a series of 12 sermons, the first five of which he directly is

preaching against eunomians in his own congregation. So that fourth century, I don't want to say that incomprehensibility was the main point of the argument. I really think Trinity is. However, incomprehensibility comes up and gets sustained attention and focus in the fourth century in ways that it just doesn't really after the fourth century. In a lot of ways, in a lot of reasons, because of how much work was done in the fourth century, they really gave us a gift doing a lot of the heavy lifting, a lot of the biblical reasoning and theological reasoning, such that we didn't really have to do that as much in later centuries.

[00:35:06.320] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Also want to draw a listener's attention to a chapter that you contributed to the book *On Classical Trinitarianism*, edited by Matthew Barrett, where you did a chapter on the doctrine of incomprehensibility as it relates to Trinitarian matters.

[00:35:23.410] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yeah, thanks for that. I was pleased to contribute to that volume. What a wonderful cast of authors Dr. Barrett brought together in that particular volume. The quote I really wanted to highlight in that chapter is that beautiful quote that "We can know that the sun is generated, we cannot know how, and that must remain in holy silence." And so that idea of holy silence really resonated with me as I worked on the book. It was fun to write that chapter.

[00:35:49.750] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. And I find such solace in statements like that. There are things that we affirm, that we confess. But we are not in any way expected to, if what we confess is true, to be able to exhaustively understand how these things are.

[00:36:14.250] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yes.

[00:36:17.400] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, what I have appreciated about your work, as I have read it, is a number of things. You've said you do your best to take high-end theology to make it accessible. But it is also apparent that you're concerned that we are shaped and formed by these truths. It's not just an intellectual exercise. And what really drew my attention to *Fruitful Theology* is there you were looking at how it is that doctrines of theology are related to the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit, to which we are called. Your book is subtitled "Divine Incomprehensibility and the Task of Theology." And that task also is not just in terms of methodology, but posture. And you include a chapter on the implications of this doctrine for the appropriate posture of Christian theologians. What is it that is most of concern to you there?

[00:37:25.230] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Well, thanks for your kind words about *Fruitful Theology* and my work in general, Keith. I have told others that I think you're an amazing example of what it would look like to pursue theology in the life of the mind in a way that -

[00:37:37.190] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Thank you.

[00:37:37.780] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

- fruit of the spirit. So thank you for that. I have said before that if someone categorized this book as a long-form argument for theological humility, I wouldn't really be disappointed or upset about that. Obviously, there's a lot more at play in the book than just humility. But what a shame it would have been for me to write a book about the otherness of God and then not get to a place where we recognize what a seat of benefit we sit in, that he has made himself knowable, that the one who doesn't merely have beauty but is the ground of all that is beautiful has spoken in a way that we won't comprehend but can apprehend that which is beautiful. And as I worked on the implications, so really the first half of the book is what is the doctrine? The second half of the book is how does the doctrine impact how we think? So I have that implication of ontology that we talked about, the implication of language that we've mentioned, and then finally, the book ends with an implication of posture. One of

the things that I want to do in this chapter, there's really a couple of ideas at play here. I often will, in my own classes, talk about why Exodus 33, and other passages like it, might lead you to believe that the theological enterprise is hopeless. What we're after is the contemplation of God and all things in relation to God, and yet this is the God who if you see him, you will die. That might lead to a hopelessness of like, why does this even matter? I don't want my students to feel hopeless because I don't think God wants us to feel hopeless. He has revealed himself and has done so effectively. I don't want hopelessness, but I do want humility. What Exodus 33 and other passages that bolster a doctrine like incomprehensibility do teach us is that theology is possible, but only because God has willed it so. In fact, we have this in the biblical text explicitly in Hebrews 6:3, when it talks about whoever wrote the Book of Hebrews instructs us, Hey, we ought to be moving from the elementary doctrines of Christ onto maturity. And there's a really easy clause to miss in Hebrews 6 because the author says, We should move from these elementary doctrines, enlists a few of them, like the resurrection of the dead, laying on of hands, washing, etc. Then so he calls those the elementary doctrines and says, We need to move on from those onto full maturity. The small clause that's easy to miss is the author says, "and this we will do if God permits." I want to take that claim as seriously as I can, where I recognize the first step to a proper Christian theology is one in which we place ourselves before God as radical receivers who would never even be able to enter this arena or begin this journey if he didn't permit, which is why prayer will always be the first step of a properly Christian theology. I want to recategorize humility as a mere virtue, as if we had other options and we just put on humility. Instead, argue, no, it's ontologically necessary. You couldn't even do this if God didn't speak in a way that was fitting for creatures. This is where Calvin has that famous quote where in talking about the doctrine of accommodation, he compares it to nurses lisping. The way we might render it in modern English is baby talking. I tell my students all the time, just think about how ridiculous it sounds that a pursuit of theology would make someone arrogant. It's like, okay, well, you understand more baby talk than I do. Congratulations. It puts it into perspective of God has to speak in a way fitting for our finitude and limits that we could even do this. I want to calibrate then in my theological efforts and think of myself as a receiver of accommodated glory, not a creator of intellectual brilliance. That's not what I'm doing. Rather, I'm trying to, as faithfully as I can, receive from my Lord what he has willed me to know. I want to, as faithfully as I can, do justice to considering and contemplating that revelation, which is what I think theology is. That theologically informed humility is deeper than merely be humble. It's deeper than that. I go about that chapter with a few other things in mind. I talk about theology in first, second, third person, and why one is a more beautiful than the other. I talk about prayer and the role of theology. And then ultimately this idea of the *theologia viatorum*, that we're doing theology as pilgrims in the world, and it will always be incomplete until we receive the vision of the blessed in the afterlife when our faith becomes sight. That honestly, I tell people, if you only get to read one chapter, it's hard for me because it's either chapter 6 or 7. Chapter 6 is the one for intellectual stimulation. Chapter 7 is, in my view, the large "so what?" of the book, which is the chapter on posture.

[00:43:08.180] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes, you write, and some of this you just included, "Given the theological tasks, reliance on accommodated divine revelation, we do not pursue Christian theology as those who are creators of intellectual brilliance, but instead as those who are radical receivers of divine speech and human words and of the person of Christ incarnate."

[00:43:30.820] - Dr. Keith Plummer

I have to tell you, it took everything within me to read the book straight through because I wanted to get to seven. Because you say this is where you're going. And having read some of your other stuff, I wanted to get there, but I exercised self-control, by the grace of God, and I read straight through. But when I got to seven, it didn't disappoint. I was so appreciative of what you were doing there. You mentioned this theological despair. You also talk about another what you call a ditch that we want to avoid. I think you were just relating that to what you call theological idolatry.

[00:44:14.170] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yes. The basic idea of the ditch is there is that I don't want to be so confident in my theology that I feel as if I've captured God in some way. And yet, I don't want to be so worrisome about my theology that I feel like I can't meaningfully talk about him. Those are both ditches that I want to avoid that I

think a nuanced understanding of incomprehensibility helps us avoid.

[00:44:36.210] - Dr. Keith Plummer

I said toward the beginning of our conversation that this is a hope-giving doctrine. One of the things that you said, this was a quotation that I was so blessed by, is this, "There is a profound blessing flowing from incomprehensibility, as well since the otherness of this God means the glorious well of Christian theology will never run dry. Contemplating God's beauty will never be exhausted." Could you just say a little bit more about that? Because I think oftentimes, even amongst Christians, when we think about the idea of eternity, people say, Oh, well, that might be boring.

[00:45:24.300] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yes.

[00:45:25.060] - Dr. Keith Plummer

And I think that that really reveals an inferior doctrine of God himself. But I find it so exhilarating to think that there's always going to be more of God to know and to experience so that we can never say, been there, done that.

[00:45:51.010] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yes.

[00:45:51.840] - Dr. Keith Plummer

So talk a bit about the hope that this doctrine should give us. Yes. Well, it's going to be hard for me not to preach here. This is something I care about a bit. You've set me up so well. I care a lot about this, and I really think there's a lot of payoff for careful thinking. Parts of the book that might feel more like a sludge, like the implication of ontology, where I'm talking about critical distinction versus sin and size, that might not feel like it has a lot of payoff, but I really think it does. Because if God is incomprehensible because he's wholly other, because he's speaker and we are speech, he is creator and we are creature, he is the one who spoke all things into being, and we are the ones who are spoken into being. If that's true, which I think it is, that is not erased when we make it across the Jordan. As we do theologia viatorum, as we do theology as pilgrims along the way, even when that along the way-ness becomes doing theology at home, doing theology in the kingdom after we've crossed the Jordan, even there in that location, when we're no longer exilic, when the already's and the not yet's collide, we're still creatures. glorified creatures, of course, but still creatures. He's still creator. I'm convinced that the Beatific vision is amongst the most beautiful doctrines in the Christian faith, that we will have a sight of God that beatifies or makes happy, makes the deepest places of our soul glad. What's amazing about incomprehensibility as it relates to eschatology is I don't think incomprehensibility goes away, but I do think your ability to apprehend is remarkably enhanced by virtue of the beatific vision. Even these things like sin, sin is not the proper location of the doctrine of incomprehensibility, but it does hurt our theological reasoning, and that will be gone. We have now no sin clouding in our mind. We now have eyes to see that which we could never behold in the theologia viatorum, as theology of pilgrims. And yet, even with the eyes to behold and the eternity to behold, we still won't get to the bottom, which in my mind is the ultimate. To draw readers back to C. S. Lewis's, maybe his best line ever, the further up, further in. The ultimate, further up, further in. It is keep behold, keep exploring, keep finding more beauty. There will be more and more and more. You will never get to the end of the kingdom. You'll never get to the end of the beauty of the Lord. So we marching further up, further in in ways that we can't even think about marching right now. With all of the shackles taken away, we'll be able to comprehend him in a way that's unfathomable right now. And yet even then, he'll still be bottomlessly glorious.

[00:48:45.150] - Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the things I tell my students often is, I don't know what your favorite thing about God is. What perfection stirs your soul the most? Is it his love? Is it his justice? Is it his mercy, his goodness? Is it his beauty? I don't know what it is for you. Whatever it is, you'll never get to the bottom of it. You could live a thousand generations. You could live an infinite generations. In fact, I think you will. Even in contemplating for an infinite number of generations, that thing that you love about the Lord, you will never run dry of new material to worship him over.

[00:49:20.730] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, that is soul-stirring and joy-giving and hope-giving. Good place to close our discussion. You mentioned Lewis, and something that I think about is that he said that the devotional books never really did it for him, but that if he picked up a good book of theology, that that was what really moved him. I want to commend your book because it's certainly academic theology, but it's accessible, but I maybe will create a genre, academic devotional theology.

[00:49:58.590] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Amen.

[00:49:59.250] - Dr. Keith Plummer

This is a real, real treasure. It is *Light Unapproachable: Divine Incomprehensibility and the Task of Theology* by Dr. Ronni Kurtz. If people want to follow you, do you have any presence online or anything that they might look for you at?

[00:50:19.640] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

I'm on the normal Twitter, Instagram, what have you. I'm actually probably most active on Goodreads because I'm a nerd. I don't have a real heavy online life, but I am on there and post every three or four days or so.

[00:50:34.630] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay. And is there anything in the works?

[00:50:37.470] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Yes, I'm actually working right now. I have a book due in August, so you can be praying for me. It's on theological discipleship in the local church. There's not a settled title right now, but the idea is I'm working through some key doctrines of the Christian faith, showing how we can move from the doctrine into delight. That's the hope of that. The next project.

[00:51:01.500] - Dr. Keith Plummer

That sounds excellent. This is the pleasure that I thought it was going to be, Ronni. I really am grateful for your taking the time. I'm grateful for your scholarship and for your heart for God and his people. Thank you again. Thank you again for being with us.

[00:51:16.120] - Dr. Ronni Kurtz

Well, thank you, Keith. I think you're a great example of so many of the things I'm after in my work. Thanks for your kindness. You're consistently encouraging, and it means more than you know. So thanks for having me.

[00:51:27.710] - Dr. Keith Plummer

Thank you.

[00:51:30.880] - Ben Best, Co-host

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