



# KNOWING & DOING

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## Who Is God? Part 1

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**I**n the West today, and in America especially, we live in a time when humanity is large and God is small. Man is the measure of all things. It has not always been this way, of course, but this is the reality of our day, a reality that exerts a pervasive and powerful influence on us.

The greatest need of every true believer (and nonbeliever) today is the recovery of a right view of God. From this flows everything else. As A. W. Tozer said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>1</sup> This is so, says Tozer, because, “We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

We don’t have to look far to see a quintessentially American example of this today. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, widespread among millennials, is a view of God they seem to have picked up from their baby-boomer parents. Its main tenets are as follows: (1) A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth; (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions; (3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem; (5) Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>3</sup>

This reductionist and narcissistic view of God is very comfortable and easy to live with. It makes no real demands, has no cost, and allows one to live as one pleases with no concern about one’s sin and accountability to God and therefore no concern about forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This recently invented god is certainly not the God of the Bible, and it has the extremely serious effect of keeping people from the true God and the salvation He offers in Christ. This is only one of many substitute gods on offer in the American “marketplace of religion.”

It is not too much to say that the lack of the knowledge of the true God lies at the root of the problems that beset our personal lives, the church, and the culture. In this article, I would like to briefly describe the picture that God has given us of Himself, His Son and His creation. I will follow the gradual progression and form of God’s self-revelation found in Scripture. In an article of this size, I can only sketch some of the main contours of God’s attributes and hope that you will be inspired to seek broader and deeper understanding in some of the good books that are readily available.<sup>4</sup>

### Our Approach to Learning Who God Is

As we seek to learn more about God, we need humility. It is good to remind ourselves that our Creator is infinite and we are finite. That means He is ultimately *incomprehensible*, in the sense that although we can indeed know Him personally, we can never fully comprehend Him. He says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, / neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. / For as the heavens are higher than the earth, / so are my ways higher

than your ways / and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9).<sup>5</sup> God doesn’t tell us everything we might *want* to know about Him (we cannot handle it); but He does tell us everything we *need* to know. He does this by accommodating Himself to our finite limitations. With that we must be grateful and content.

The Bible nowhere attempts to prove the existence of God. Rather, it begins with the simple, majestic declaration that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). This implies that God has infinite knowledge, understanding, and power. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, it shows God to be an all-knowing, all-wise, and all-powerful Creator, who is sovereign over His creation.

This fundamental starting point of God’s revelation of Himself is what we must embrace if we are to know God, and we do so by faith. The Bible says it is “by faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Heb. 11:3). Faith is essential, because “whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6). This is not blind faith, nor is it a leap into the dark. Rather, it is a leap into the light, the light of evidence, for God’s creation bears His fingerprints. The psalmist says,

*The heavens declare the glory of God  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out through all the earth and their words  
to the end of the world  
(Ps. 19:1–4).*

Drawing on this, the apostle Paul says that God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world” (Rom. 1:20). This evidence is obvious to every human being, giving an awareness that there is a God. That awareness may be strong or weak, bright or dim. It can be suppressed by willful choice, or it can be embraced by faith.



## **God Reveals Himself as Spiritual, Personal and Good**

The God of the Bible is a spiritual being (John 4:24) and does not have a physical body, though on rare occasions He has manifested Himself in physical form to interact with human beings. These manifestations are considered by many theologians to be appearances of the pre-incarnate Christ. God is also a personal being, and He is loving, good, and gracious to His people. Unlike the impersonal god of pantheism, God cares deeply for His people and is actively involved in their lives. His relationship with Adam and Eve displays this love. The rich, abundant blessings He confers on them in the Garden of Eden demonstrate His goodness. His grace is seen in forgiving their horrendous sin and sparing them from immediate death and destruction. It is also shown in the way He tempers justice with mercy in their punishment. The fact of punishment alerts us that God takes sin very seriously and that righteousness and justice are also among His attributes.

## **God Reveals Himself as Redemptive**

As people multiplied on the earth and became utterly corrupt, God’s righteousness and justice are seen again: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). Humankind had become so irreversibly wicked that total destruction

was the only option left. The ensuing flood graphically illustrates that there are limits to God's mercy and that persistent, unrepented sin and deliberate rejection of God's gracious warnings can bring catastrophic judgment on a massive scale. Yet even in judgment, God showed mercy where He could. We read that "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God." And "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Gen. 6:8–9). He was spared, along with his family.

As God's redemptive work in the world progressed. His personal, gracious love was powerfully demonstrated in His choosing the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be the ancestors of Israel, a special people with a unique destiny. Through provision, protection, and extraordinary promises of blessing, God revealed His grace and love and future plans to them. His grace continues to unfold as He reveals Himself to one of their descendants, Moses.



### God Reveals Himself as Holy and Self-Existent

At the burning bush God commissions Moses to deliver His people, Israel, from Egyptian bondage, and at the same time reveals His holiness. God said to Moses, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3:4–5). In this encounter, God accentuates His holiness, the most emphasized of His characteristics and one of the central themes of the Scriptures. It is one that we know little of today.

The essence of God's holiness is

*His separateness, i.e., His uniqueness, His distinction as the Wholly Other, the One who cannot be confused with the gods devised by men (Ex. 15:11), the One who stands apart from and above the creation. Secondly the holiness of God denotes His moral perfection, His absolute freedom from blemish of any kind.<sup>6</sup>*

Because of God's holiness, even the ground in His presence was holy, that is, set apart, separated from normal use to divine use, which required Moses to remove his sandals. People and material things that are set apart and devoted to God are also designated as holy. Moses' encounter with God's blazing holiness made a profound impact on him, one that would powerfully shape his life and produce a deep, lasting humility in him. So much so that we are told "the man Moses was very meek, more than all the people who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). The impact of God's holiness was lasting

and is still seen when, near the end of Moses' life, he exclaims, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? / Who is like you, majestic in holiness, / awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Exod. 15:11).

God emphasized His holiness not just to Moses, but through him to the entire nation of Israel. He did this by giving laws, statutes, and precepts, in which everything is in some way connected to holiness. He commanded, "You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (Lev. 20:26). Because God is morally pure, these requirements include human moral and ethical behavior, including

truthfulness, fair dealing, and sexual purity. The response God sought from His covenant people is summed up by Moses in what is called the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4). The concrete expression of this wholehearted love was obedience to God’s commands. God’s call for holiness continues throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament, where it is emphasized by Jesus, Paul, Peter, and others. Peter sums it up well: “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:14–16). The seriousness of the call to holiness is highlighted by the writer to the Hebrews, who says with simple directness, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

As his encounter with God continued, Moses asked to know God’s name in order to answer the Israelites when they asked. In response, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And say to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod. 3:14). This mysterious, enigmatic response was in fact God’s personal name, which He had not disclosed, even to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Hebrew it is represented by the four consonants YHWH and comes from a verb meaning “to be.” It represents the idea of self-existent being and could also be translated “the One Who Is.” God does not depend on anyone or anything for His existence. He needs nothing and is entirely self-sufficient.

## God Reveals Himself as Eternal

Moses also comes to understand that the God of Israel, YHWH, is eternal. He had no beginning and will never have an end. He is not bound by time, which he created, but rather exists outside of time. From God’s vantage point of “the eternal present,” He sees the end of things from the very beginning. Many years later, Moses would pen the words “Before the mountains were brought forth, / or ever you had formed the earth and the world, / from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps. 90:2). And in his final blessing to Israel, he assured them, “The eternal God is your dwelling place, / and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut. 33:27).

## God Reveals His Glory and Grace

Moses’ growing relationship with God inspired in him (as it should in us) a deep desire to know God even better and led him to pray, “Please show me your glory.” God’s holy, awe-inspiring response is the high point in His self-revelation in the Old Testament. This new revelation “proclaimed that God is love, but that kind of love in which mercy, grace, long-suffering, goodness, and truth are united with holiness and justice.”<sup>7</sup> God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name.” But “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live,” therefore “I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:18–23). The Lord then passed before Moses, proclaiming His name and saying,

*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation (Exod. 34:5–7).*

This became the classic description of God in the Old Testament, reappearing over the centuries in other passages such as Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; and Joel 2:13. It is also the view of God the Father held by the writers of the New Testament and has enduring value for God’s people, so we will examine it more closely.

Of the specific Hebrew words with which God describes Himself, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Keil and Delitzsch note:

*here grace, mercy, and goodness are placed in the front. And accordingly all the words which the language contained to express the idea of grace in its varied manifestations to the sinner, are crowded together here, to reveal the fact that in His inmost being God is love. But in order that grace may not be perverted by sinners into a ground of wantonness, justice is not wanting even here with its solemn threatenings, although it only follows mercy, to show that mercy is mightier than wrath, and that holy love does not punish til sinners despise the riches of the goodness, patience, and long-suffering of God.*<sup>8</sup>

Let's examine what these words mean:

- *Merciful*, or compassionate,<sup>9</sup> meaning that He “genuinely cares about humans and holds toward them a tender attitude of concern and mercy.”<sup>10</sup>

- *Gracious*, meaning He “does things for people they do not deserve and goes beyond what might be expected to grant truly kind favor toward people, favor of which they are not necessarily worthy.”<sup>11</sup>

- *Slow to anger*, meaning He is “ready, and disposed, to pardon, but that He patiently waits for those who have sinned, and invites them to repentance by His long-suffering...as if He would abstain from severity did not man's wickedness compel Him to execute punishment on his sins.”<sup>12</sup>

- *Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*, translates the Hebrew word *hesed*, and “connotes long-term, reliable loyalty of one member of a covenant relationship to another. However fickle and unreliable humans may be in their relationship to God, he is nothing of the sort but can be counted on in every situation and at all times to be completely faithful to his promises for his people.”<sup>13</sup>

- *Keeping steadfast love for thousands*, means certainly thousands of persons, but more likely thousands of generations and assures that He will not forsake His people as long as they do not abandon Him and give themselves over to evil that demands punishment.

- *Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*, means that His forgiveness encompasses the full range of human sin and “thus the greatness of His clemency is set forth, inasmuch as He not only pardons light offences, but the very grossest sins; and again, remits not only sin in one case, but is propitious to sinners by whom He has been a hundred times offended. Hence, therefore, appears the extent of His goodness, since He blots out an infinite mass of iniquities.”<sup>14</sup>

- *Who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation* applies to those who would presume upon God's mercy and stubbornly persist in the wickedness of their forefathers in disregard of God's law: “After God has spoken of His mercy, He adds an exception, viz., that the iniquity is by no means pardoned, which is accompanied by obstinacy...The words, therefore, may be properly paraphrased thus: Although God is pitiful and even ready to pardon, yet He does not therefore spare the despisers, but is a severe avenger of their impiety.”<sup>15</sup>

The eventual fate of the rebellious nation of Judah is an example of how God, who is merciful, gracious, abounding in love, and slow to anger, is compelled to bring judgment against those who stubbornly persist in the wickedness of their forefathers and reject His compassion, patience, and repeated overtures of mercy:

*The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy (2 Chron. 36:15–16).*

Like the flood, this is another illustration of the fact that there is a limit to God's mercy. Finally, God unleashed His wrath and brought against them the Chaldeans, who captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, killed many people, and took the rest into exile in Babylon for seventy years. From this catastrophic event, we can see that God's *wrath* is not arbitrary and capricious or an expression of bad temper such as humans often display. Rather, it is the visceral reaction of a holy God against persistent and outrageous moral evil.

Much more remains to be said about who God is, and in part 2 of this article we will explore those things further, including additional major attributes as well as His Trinitarian life, and how we can come to know Him through His Son, Jesus the Messiah, and be transformed by His Holy Spirit.

Until then, let us remember that no matter how well we may know God, there is always more. And let us press on to better know this great, glorious, and awesome God of holy love, who is a redeemer, father, and shepherd to His people. He has loved us with an everlasting love and has drawn us to Himself and continues faithfully to love and care for us and desires fellowship with us (Jer. 31:3; John 6:44). And He invites all who do not yet personally know Him turn to Him and to experience His holy love through faith in His Son and Savior, Jesus the Messiah: “Turn to me and be saved, / all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:22).

*Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD” (Jer. 9:23–24). ■■*

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There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good  
when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him.

*C.S. Lewis*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (1961; repr., San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-163.

<sup>4</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973); R.T. France, *The Living God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970); Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*.

<sup>5</sup> All Scripture quotations in this article are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–1988), s.v. “Holiness, Holy” (E.F. Harrison).

<sup>7</sup> Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1:478.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> This is how the NIV and NASB translate the Hebrew word.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 2:715.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin and Charles Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 3:386.

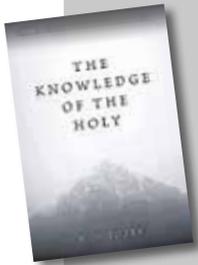
<sup>13</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 715–16.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin and Bingham, *Commentaries*, 3:387.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3:388.



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## RECOMMENDED READING

*A.W. Tozer, **The Knowledge of the Holy** (HarperOne, 2009)*

*A modern classic of Christian testimony and devotion, **The Knowledge of the Holy** shows us how we can rejuvenate our prayer life, meditate more reverently, understand God more deeply, and experience God's presence in our daily lives.*

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