

CHAPTER 1

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I AM

GOD'S CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY

Who is God? What is God like? Our understanding of God shapes not only our faith, but our entire approach to life, our values and priorities. Unfortunately, many have a distorted view of God and this has led to many of the problems that we have in society, the church, and our personal lives. Rather than getting to know the loving and holy God revealed in the Scriptures, false notions of God have infiltrated our thinking from other religions, philosophy, media, and family traditions. These incorrect views of God hinder us from fully surrendering ourselves to him and being as effective in sharing his love with others. The intent of this study is to help us recover a biblical understanding of the character and personality of God so that we can love, trust and serve him in a more faithful, fruitful, and fulfilling way.

CHAPTER 1 – GOD’S CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY

Thomas Aquinas called theology the “queen of sciences.” But the study of theology—the study of God—was gradually sidelined and now finds no place in the contemporary curriculum. Alexander Pope captured the spirit of our modern age:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.

I have come to disagree with Mr. Pope. Focusing first on “Man” can get you into trouble. When I was college, it was fashionable to have an identity crisis. Leaving family, rejecting friends, staying in school or dropping out—any behavior was fair game as long as it contributed to the task of “finding” yourself. Not what it was cracked up to be, looking for yourself led to a descent down the rabbit hole, into a terrifyingly confused “Wonderland” filled with smiling Cheshire cats, Mad Hatters, and insane queens shouting “off with your head.”

Knowing God is what makes sense of life. Missing God leads to disaster. In his classic book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer writes:

The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded as it were with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.¹

In contrast to Mr. Pope, the famous first question of the Westminster Confession asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The wonderful answer is “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

Prior to my conversion, I had the impression that the study of theology was arid, intellectual, dry, and boring. I couldn’t have been more wrong. The pursuit of the knowledge of God has introduced me to great people, great authors, great ministries, and great thoughts.

Ever since then I have been on a journey to learn as much as I can about this God who called me. I am a pastor, but I didn’t go to seminary in order to enter the ministry. (During those first days of my Christian walk, I would lie in bed awake, fearful that God might require me to be a minister or a missionary.) I went for theological study because I wanted to learn more about God.

Frankly, it is good to know God. It’s how we learn to make sense of the world and especially of our selves. Protestant Reformer John Calvin wrote, “Our wisdom ... consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”² He continues, “By the knowledge of God, I understand that by which we not only conceive that there is some God, but also apprehend what it is for our interest.”³

So how do we get to know this God so that we can enjoy him? As Christians we believe that God has not left us to wander in the dark. Daily, moment by moment, all that he has created points to and speaks of him. As David wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God ... even if there are no words, they continually speak of him” (Ps. 19:1, 3). Part of the satisfaction of studying about God is learning to experience the fullness of his presence. The knowledge of God is all around us if only we could see it. Gerard Manley Hopkins enthused, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

If we are to learn to hear silent declarations of creation, we need help. While the heavens declare the glory of God, they don’t declare his name, that is, his personality and character. The existence of multiple religions makes it clear that mankind can and has drawn many different conclusions about who God is and what he is like.

GOD IN THE BIBLE

If you want to know what a new acquaintance is like, it is wise to pay attention to what he or she tells you and to observe that person’s actions. This is what we have in the Bible: God’s self-revelation in which he speaks about himself and provides a record over generations and ages about how he acts.

The first five books of the Bible are attributed to Moses. Often called the Pentateuch (Greek for “Five Scrolls”) or the Torah (Hebrew for “Law”), they are the foundation for the entire Bible. Hebrew by birth, Egyptian by culture, royal by training, and desert shepherd by necessity, Moses was providentially shaped to be an agent of revelation, a prophet.

Imagine Moses’ first impression of God as he meets God in the flames of a burning bush. Light, heat, energy, power! God is more than a concept or an idea; he is a person, a shining presence who speaks as we meet him in the fabric of creation.

In the account of Exodus 3, the very first action required of Moses is that he must take his sandals off because he is standing on “holy ground” (v. 5). The holiness of God is a central thread woven throughout the Bible, exemplified again in Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai, the vision of the prophet Isaiah some seven hundred years later (Isa. 6:3), and the apostle John’s vision of heaven (Rev. 4:8).

Holiness is a mysterious concept that is hard to nail down. Words associated with it include: *unmixed, unpolluted, uncorrupted, separate, unique, just, righteous, sacred, precious, and honored*. Holiness was not just for the Old Testament. Jesus makes the holiness of God central, as the prayer he teaches us begins, “Our Father in heaven, holy is your name” (Matt. 6:9).

CHAPTER 1 – GOD’S CHARACTER & PERSONALITY

Meeting with God as the holy God, for Moses and for all ever since, is a life-changing experience. R.C. Sproul describes his first encounter with God. As college student, he was awakened and summoned from his bed in the middle of the night. At first he was overwhelmed with fear by a “foreboding presence.” As the fright subsided, he sensed a different “wave.”

It flooded my soul with unspeakable peace, a peace that brought instant rest and repose to my troubled spirit. At once I wanted to linger there. To say nothing. To do nothing. Simply to bask in the presence of God.

That moment was life transforming. Something deep in my spirit was being settled once for all. From this moment there could be no turning back; there could be no erasure of the indelible imprint of its power. I was alone with God. A holy God. An awesome God. A God who could fill me with terror in one second and fill with peace the next.⁴

It might be helpful to reflect on how God first got your attention. God is a God who steps into our world, interrupts us, and calls us to himself and his purposes. Clearly this is what we see in the ministry of Jesus as Jesus walks into the fishing sites of Peter, James, John, and Andrew by the sea of Galilee and says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:16, NRSV).

Immediately after declaring his holiness at the burning bush, God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:6). Look closely at this self-description of God. Growing up as a Hebrew in an Egyptian household, among people who worshiped many different gods, Moses’ view of God up to this point would have been influenced by a variety of sources. Unlike today, when the common question for many is “do I believe in God?” the question for Moses would have been “which god do I worship?”

You may not think that you face the same sort of question that Moses did. After all, we don’t live in a polytheistic society. But the “many gods” now masquerade as “belief systems” and “theological inclinations.” Liberal, conservative, secular, modern, Muslim, Mormon, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic—it’s everywhere! Each of us, consciously or unconsciously, makes choices about which god to worship.

God chose to make his character known to Moses by associating himself with certain people Moses knew about: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those stories, passed down through the generations of the Hebrews, told about a certain God who provided, protected, and blessed—the accounts we read in the book of Genesis. As God has chosen to make himself known by association, there are people in your life, sent by God, who provide important information about what God is like. Pay attention to them.

To Moses at the burning bush, God also reveals what he is like when he says, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people ... So I have come down to rescue them” (vv. 7–8). Like holiness, salvation is a theme that runs through the Bible. The Israelites’ exodus from Egypt shows us something significant about the character of God: he is a saving God. This stands in stark contrast to the gods of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, or Babylonians who were not especially interested in saving anybody. Saving Israel from slavery in Egypt by Moses, saving us from spiritual slavery to sin and Satan, God is not willing for his creation to become co-opted and corrupted and to be in a place of enduring pain and misery. Mary celebrates the saving character of God when the angel announces the coming birth of her son. “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:47).

I love the way the psalms celebrate the character of God.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made ... The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. (145:8–9, 13–14)

God is holy. God is the God of his ancestors. God is a saving God—these are important pieces of information for Moses. But there is more: Moses wants to know God’s name (v. 13). It’s the ultimate question, because we can’t claim to know anybody if we don’t know that person’s name. Think about brand names; they convey the importance of a name. Car, shoe, guitar are generic names. We know a great deal more when we know the brand name: BMW, Nike, Martin.

The name God provides is not generic; it is his brand. He is not just any god, he is “I AM WHO I AM” (v. 14). Commentators struggle to mine its meaning. “I Am the One Who Is” or “I Am the One Whom You Shall Know” are two of the proposed options. “I Am” is how God wants to be addressed.

C.S. Lewis’s portrayal of Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia portrays the wonder and thrill of hearing God name himself.

“Who are you?” asked Shasta.

“Myself,” said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again, “Myself,” loud and clear and gay: and then the third time “Myself,” whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it ...

... After one glance at the Lion’s face he slipped out of the saddle and fell at its feet. He couldn’t say anything but then he didn’t want to say anything.⁵

CHAPTER 1 – GOD’S CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY

God has revealed himself most completely through Jesus Christ. The first Christians came to the conclusion that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). That is, Jesus is the “visible God” and reliably embodies the character of God (Heb. 1:3). If you want to know God, pay close attention to Jesus, who he is, what he taught, what he did. Reflecting on God from the Old Testament to the New, the church through the ages discovered a complex being, a triune God, a Trinity of persons comprising one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What we take away from our theological reflection is that I have a Creator who provides for me, protects me, has purposes for me, and has a place for me in his world. In God I have a Savior who rescues me from the problems of the corrupted world. In God I have a Holy Spirit who indwells me: he provides insight, inspiration, encouragement, inspiration, and empowerment.

The God revealed in the Bible from the first lines of Genesis 1 is the Maker, the Craftsman, the Workman, the Governor, the Speaker ... How different from the unmoved mover of Greek philosophy or the “higher power” that stands and watches us from a distance. *Your God Is Too Small* is the title of a great little book written in the middle of the twentieth century. No matter who we are and at what stage of our spiritual journey, we can all say that the way we think about God isn’t big enough.

THE PURSUIT OF GOD

The desire to know and proclaim the knowledge of God is not only what the Bible is about. It is the subject of innumerable books—filling libraries. The mystery of God draws us. Consider Augustine’s take:

You awake us to delight in your praise; for you made us for yourself, and our heart is restless, until it rests in you.⁶

What, therefore, is my God? ... most secret and most truly present ... unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; ... always working, ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing ... You love, but without passion; jealous, yet free from care; repents without remorse; angry, yet remains serene.⁷

The Westminster Catechism, written in the seventeenth century to instruct children in the knowledge of God, succinctly and memorably asks the question and provides the answer.

Question: What is God?

Answer: God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Writing in the twentieth century, A.W. Tozer notes:

God is a Person, and in the deep of His mighty nature He thinks, wills, enjoys, feels, loves, desires and suffers as any other person may ... The continuous and unembarrassed interchange of love and thought between God and the soul of the redeemed man is the throbbing heart of New Testament religion.⁸

St. Anselm in the twelfth century said that study of God was “faith, seeking understanding.” The whole history of the church shows that knowing God is a journey of delight and desire. St. Bernard in the thirteenth century said it this way:

We taste thee, O thou Living Bread,
And long to feast upon thee still:
We drink of thee, the Fountainhead
And thirst our souls from thee to fill.

The knowledge of the triune God is not something we merely possess, but something that possesses us. Tozer challenges us to:

Come near to the holy men and women of the past and you will soon feel the heat of their desire after God. They mourned for Him, they prayed and wrestled and sought for Him day and night, in season and out, and when they had found Him the finding was all the sweeter for the long seeking.

The pursuit of the knowledge of God is not a duty or a drudge, but a journey filled with bright and shining light that leads to enjoyment and pleasure, now and for all eternity.

NOTES

¹J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 15.

²John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.1.1.

³Ibid., I.2.1.

⁴R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998), 5.

⁵C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (New York: Macmillan/Collier, 1970), 160.

⁶Augustine, *The Confessions of Augustine* I.1.

⁷Ibid., I.4.

⁸A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (SoHo Books 2011), 6.

⁹Ibid., 7.