

GETTING TO KNOW YOU, GOD

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1.

Is God a He, She or It?

The idea for this book comes from a great book by Mike Cope that provides many insights about knowing God more deeply and personally ("One Holy Hunger" - Hillcrest Publishing).

When you are praying to God, do you really know who you are praying to? Are you even sure that someone is there listening? Do you find that you are doing all the talking and when you stop, there is only silence? A silence that does not reassure you that someone has actually heard your prayer? Wouldn't it be nice if God would just say, "OK, I hear you, keep talking."

We understand that prayer is something that is powered by faith and done with the belief that the One we pray to hears, even if there is silence after we finish expressing our words of praise, thanksgiving and various requests. Even so, many who claim to be believers have a hard time imagining the One they are offering their prayers to.

We know, however, that children don't have this problem when they pray because their faith is so simple and straightforward it leaves no room for doubt. I would imagine that this is one of the reasons why Jesus said that our faith should be like that of children, uncluttered by adult hesitation and doubt that God is there to hear and answer our prayers.

Children tend to approach God as Father and see Him as good so they are content to speak to Him in a simple and confident manner. It is sad that as we grow older and influenced by a largely unbelieving world, our view of God changes, and we begin to have false ideas about Him. Unfortunately, these false ideas interfere with our prayer life. This book, therefore, is an attempt to improve our understanding of who God really is so that we better know the One we are praying to and what He desires from us, hence the title, "Getting to Know You, God."

If we succeed in this, it will accomplish several things. For example, our experience of joy and peace will increase because the Bible teaches us that knowing God is the essence of eternal life,

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.
- John 17:3

Jesus teaches us that the experience of "eternal life" is the ongoing process of knowing God more completely, and we don't have to wait until we get to heaven to begin gaining this knowledge, we can start now. Also, if we get to know God better, we will have greater confidence in facing death and dealing with all of the difficulties that accompany it. The more I know my God, the less I am afraid of leaving this world in order to be with Him.

Paul, the Apostle, writes with this type of confidence because he was a man who knew God intimately:

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Romans 8:38-39

Paul was a person who was confident in God. A man who truly knew God and thus could write these encouraging words to those who feared death because their knowledge of God was limited. Intimate knowledge of God produces confidence, and this assurance promotes a more

effective prayer life. What does James say concerning those who are confident in prayer?

The prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick
- James 5:15a

A strong faith is required for strong results. The way to build faith, therefore, is to get to know the God of the Bible more perfectly. The prayer in faith is the prayer offered with the belief that God is there, hears and is able to answer now as He has in the past. As already mentioned, this faith comes as we grow in our knowledge of the One that we pray to.

IS GOD A HE OR A SHE?

Let us begin this effort at knowing God by answering one of the more popular questions about Him, "Is God a he, she or an it?" This question is usually asked by individuals who are not familiar with the Bible. Recently, there have been efforts to eliminate all gender references to God in Scripture. This was a reaction to the patriarchal nature of the Bible and male dominated imagery it contained. Some feminist groups suggested that we should refer to God as She in order to redress the imbalance of the last 2000 years. For this reason, some modern editions of the Bible do not refer to God as a he. At times they refer to Him as She or use the term Mother-God or Father-God in an effort to blend together a homogeneous God that includes an equal measure of both male and female imagery.

Of course, this politically correct thinking and posturing does not take into account that references to God in the Bible are metaphors. For example, the Bible refers to Peter as a he because Peter was a man, no metaphor required here. But when the Bible refers to God as He, it is using a metaphor. Whether you use male or female references makes no difference, they are still metaphors that only describe, through imagery, part of God's character. The simple truth is that God is neither male nor female. God is pure spirit and is thus not human, let alone male or female. Jesus Himself says that God is Spirit (John 4:24). And therein lies the problem of knowing God. If He were human (male or female), we could more easily relate to Him. But because His nature is completely

different from ours, we have difficulty in knowing and understanding Him.

The Greeks had their panoply of gods who were part human and part supernatural. These gods, however, had very human characteristics: they wept, they were jealous, they married and cheated on their spouses. The God of the Bible, however, is not human so we should not attribute to Him weak and sinful human characteristics. He is not like us. We may be like Him in many ways, but He is not like us. For this reason God reveals Himself to us using terms and images that are taken from our frame of reference, not His.

For example, it would not help us to know God more deeply if He simply said that He is like the angels. Angels are spirit beings also and we cannot relate or know them any more than we know God, since their nature is also different than ours. Consequently, using them and only them as a reference would not be very helpful to us. What God does, therefore, is select people and things that belong to our world in order to describe what exists in another world, dimension and nature.

One of the dangers in attempting to know God from the things that He has created, however, is the human tendency to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator.

For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.
- Romans 1:25

The Apostle Paul warns against making a god out of things that represent or give us insight into God's nature. Oddly enough in today's society we are doing the reverse. We are trying to eliminate or replace the images that the Bible uses to describe God and are trying to replace them with symbols that suit us better and fulfill our political or humanistic agenda. In other words, we are not using the words, images and metaphors that the inspired writers have given us to describe God, but are replacing them with our own symbols and metaphors to describe God in ways that will fit current thinking.

The answer to this kind of tinkering with the Bible text is to realize that God, who not only chose to reveal Himself to man, but also the manner in which He would do so, should be the final arbiter of how He is described and perceived by those He has created. The first lines of the book of Hebrews address this very issue in proper context:

God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets and in many portions and in many ways.
- Hebrews 1:1

Notice carefully what the Hebrew writer is saying about God revealing Himself. God spoke (revealed) to various ones (the patriarchs and the prophets) in many portions and in many ways. In other words, God made Himself known in a variety of ways: to Moses, in the burning bush; to Isaiah, by a vision; He inspired others with images; to the Israelites with the use of fire/thunder/lightning on the mountain. He revealed Himself to different individuals and peoples in the way, manner and portion that was suitable for the time and effective for the idea that He wanted to convey to them.

For example, when God revealed Himself to Moses, He appeared as a burning bush that was not extinguished (Exodus 3:1-17) in order to show Moses that he was dealing with the "Eternal One." This was important for two reasons: first, Moses needed to understand that the One who appeared to Him was the same God who had made promises to his ancestors hundreds of years before. Secondly, God would send Moses to face a powerful king to demand the release of his people, and Moses needed to have confidence that the One who sent him was more powerful than the one he was sent to. Both of these requirements were fulfilled with His appearance as a fiery bush that nothing could extinguish.

Had God merely spoken to him in a dream, Moses could have doubted that the dream was real and contained specific instructions. A burning bush that did not burn out, seeing its flame, feeling its heat, and hearing a voice from it in broad daylight, this was hard to dismiss. For this reason, God chose different ways to reveal Himself to various people in order to convey specific messages. This is why the writer of Hebrews says that God spoke in many ways and in many portions. He then goes on to say:

In these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

- Hebrews 1:2

These "last days" refers to the time between Christ's first appearance (His birth, death and resurrection) and His next appearance (at the end of the world to judge the world). In this period of time God has chosen to reveal Himself through Jesus Christ. This is how He wants us to know Him. The point here is that we do not have a right to change the words or images that the Bible uses because the Spirit says that God has chosen to reveal Himself through Jesus Christ. This means that the words, images, metaphors and commandments that Jesus communicates are the ways that God has decided to reveal Himself to us who live in these "last days." Therefore, from the burning bush in Moses' day to the person of Jesus in the New Testament, God has revealed Himself using many different forms. Our task is not to elevate one form over the other, or change them to suit our particular social or political point of view, but to bring all of these biblical forms together so that we can better know the Spirit we call God. This is the first important step in the process of knowing God.

GOD AS AN "IT"

From the beginning God has used a variety of inanimate objects to demonstrate facets of His character. For example, in Exodus 3:2, He appears as a burning bush that was not destroyed. Why this way to reveal Himself? As I explained previously, to demonstrate His eternal and powerful nature to Moses. Later on, God would eventually send Moses to do great miracles so He begins by demonstrating His own power in the burning bush. The point for Moses to grasp was that if God could appear as a burning bush, He could also divide the Red Sea or provide water from a rock. The burning bush was a preview for all the things that God would eventually do through Moses as he led the children of Israel out of Egyptian slavery through the performance of incredible miracles.

In Psalm 28:7 David writes, "The Lord is my strength and my shield." In this and many other passages God is seen as a shield in order to demonstrate His protective nature. In Deuteronomy 32:4 it says "The

rock! His work is perfect." Here the metaphor for God is that He is like rock or boulder. This imagery conveys the idea that God is stable, foundational and unmovable. Of course, these images have limitations, but within context they describe quite graphically certain dimensions of God so that we can relate to Him not only on an intellectual level, but emotionally as well. I can imagine a huge boulder and in confidence say, "God is my rock." I can feel its weight and sturdiness, and because of this relate to it emotionally. This is one of the reasons that the Bible often uses objects to more fully describe God. Of course no one example, no one thing or metaphor can capture all of what God is, but these give us insight into parts of His character and will. It is left to us to put these together in order to make a more complete image of the God who wants us to know Him.

GOD AS A "WOMAN"

The idea that God is represented as female in the Bible is not unheard of, but it does make some feel uncomfortable because the majority of references speak of Him as male. There are, however, many references in the Bible to God as female. For example:

What was your mother? a lioness among lions!
- Ezekiel 19:2

Here, God is compared to a fierce and protective lioness in giving birth to Israel.

Before her pain came, she gave birth to a boy.
- Isaiah 66:7b

Here God is compared to a woman at the point of giving birth. The passage goes on to say that the child, Israel, was conceived, carried and delivered in a single day. A kind of a super-human woman if you wish. Nevertheless, the imagery of God here is female.

How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.
- Matthew 23:37b

In Matthew's passage the protective nature of a hen is compared to God's (Jesus is speaking) protective nature towards His children. Again, the imagery of God here is female in nature. The use of female imagery, therefore, is used throughout the Bible to describe various aspects of God's character and nature. What better way to convey protectiveness, tenderness and compassion than through the figure of a woman and a mother.

GOD AS A "MAN"

Even though there are more metaphors in the Bible showing God as a man, we need to remember that this does not mean that God is human or has a male nature (God is spirit). Some say that this use of male imagery was done because men were the ones who wrote the Bible and did so by imagining God as male. Peter refutes this notion when he writes:

20 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.
- II Peter 1:20-21

Peter, the inspired Apostle, teaches that God is the one who gave the writers the information which they recorded. The images and metaphors belong to God, not man. A man never decided which imagery to use, male, female or other. Human beings did not make the decision as to what would be contained in the Bible. Peter says that those who wrote were moved by the Spirit to do so. It was the Spirit of God that gave them what they were to write, and this includes the type of images and metaphors used to describe God. The major idea, beginning in the Old Testament, describes God as Father. This term in the Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) means chief, source or nourisher.

The Jews referred to God as Father and Lord, or Father and King, but it was Jesus who developed the idea of God as "Dad" or "Daddy." In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to God simply as Father or parent over 100 times. Paul, the Apostle, repeats this beautiful and comforting imagery in Romans 8:15-17 where he refers to God as Abba or daddy, which was a more intimate term. The metaphor of father describes one who is chief

but who is also provider, sustainer, leader, protector, comforter, teacher and friend. God is not a man but from the male nature God has drawn some inherent characteristics in order to convey yet another aspect of His complex person for us to know and to draw comfort from.

He is teaching us about Himself using human imagery because we understand this type of image. We understand ourselves as males and females, and we also understand references to our surroundings. God uses all of these sources in order to help us relate to One whose nature is pure spirit. We can refer to God as a He, not because God is male or prefers males, but because Jesus chose to confirm the Old Testament references to God as such and laid down ways we can address and interact with God which are proper and accurate according to His will. If Jesus refers to God as Father a hundred times but never as mother, then I can feel quite comfortable in referring to God as Father myself without feeling guilty or insensitive toward the feelings of my sisters in Christ. In addition to this, faithful women of God can refer to Him as Father as well without feeling that they are betraying their own sexuality. Why? Because we can both follow the lead of our Lord in the way we refer to God and know that we are doing what is biblically correct and thus acceptable to God which, in the end, is all that matters.

Of course, the most complete revelation of God comes, not through an image or a metaphor, but through a person. In the epistle to the Colossians Paul writes,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

- Colossians 1:15

Here Paul explains that in Jesus Christ all the imagery of the Bible finds its expression in a person. All the "it" and "he" and "she" images of the Old Testament come together into Christ. The protectiveness of the lioness and the tenderness of a mother, the strength of a father and the stability of a huge rock as well as all other metaphors are now expressed completely in Jesus Christ. All of the imagery is summarized in a male (Adam) because a male was the first created and the male (Jesus) will be the one through whom the second creation comes. This is what Paul alludes to in Romans:

For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

- Romans 5:19

The first man, Adam, fell and then one like Adam (Jesus) was resurrected. He will be the one who raises up those who fail because of Adam's sin. More importantly, the full nature of God is represented in human form because humans are made in the image and the likeness of God. Animals are not and objects are not, so we come back to the original question.

WHO ARE WE PRAYING TO?

We are praying to someone who is not human but can relate to human need and emotion because He took on a human nature and experienced life as we know it. He then returned to the spiritual dimension and position from whence He came. This is who God is. You see Him in Jesus because, as humans, this is the clearest view we can have of Him. What, therefore, does this mean for us?

To begin with, it means that God can relate to us. He can feel what we feel and thus understand all of our concerns, joys, and fears. We are, therefore, not wasting our time in prayer. Nevertheless, it remains difficult for us to relate to Him. He is so much more than we are and because of this we cannot take all of Him in. Interestingly enough, He can even relate to this feeling on our part because appearing on earth in the body of a man, Jesus Christ experienced the limiting nature of human life and death. Therefore, everything from birth to death that we raise up to Him in prayer, He can relate to because He also was born and ultimately died. For this reason, He understands every experience between these two points in anyone's life.

Secondly, it means that God does care. His intimate involvement with mankind throughout history, even to the point of becoming human Himself for a time, demonstrates that He does care and does hear our prayers. Why would He alter His divine nature to experience human living if He didn't care? This drastic, painful and humbling act on His part teaches us that we have a sympathetic and eager recipient of our prayers.

Finally, it means that God wants to help. The Bible shows how zealous God is for His people, how eager He is for sinners to come back to Him and how ready He is to punish those who harm His children. With God we have hope that our prayers will be answered and not grudgingly so.

When we confess our faith in God to others, therefore, let us remember to describe Him as the Bible does using the words, images, and metaphors that He Himself has provided in His Word so that we can know and describe, as accurately as possible, the One we believe, serve, love and offer our prayers to.

2.

The Character of God: Holiness

In this chapter I want to examine a common but incorrect idea about God's character that hinders us from knowing Him more perfectly.

GOD WANTS ME TO BE AFRAID OF HIM

It is unfortunate that so many people believe that God wants us to be afraid of Him. The confusion here is that we have a misunderstanding of God's position and how He uses His position. In every instance where we read in the Bible that a person comes into direct contact with God, that person is afraid. We see an example of this when Job, after seeing God, writes:

Behold I am insignificant; what can I reply to you? I lay my hand on my mouth.

- Job 40:4

⁵ I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; ⁶ Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes.

- Job 42:5-6

The Apostle John writes:

When I saw Him I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last.'

- Revelation 1:17

These men were afraid and overwhelmed at their meeting with God, but it wasn't a fear of violence or injustice that one feels when confronted by something evil and more powerful than we are. Direct contact with God for these men produced an awe generated by being in the presence of one so great and majestic that human composure was not possible. In actually seeing God they realized the difference between themselves and their creator. They could actually measure, to an extent, His greatness against their smallness and were humbled into reverence by the experience.

There are many words that are used to describe this greatness or majesty of God:

- the otherness of God
- the transcendence of God
- awe inspiring presence of God

The term that the Bible uses most often to describe God's essence, however, is the word "holy." In the Old Testament, God is often referred to as the "Holy One of Israel" (this term repeated 25 times in the book of Isaiah alone). Isaiah could say this with accuracy because he came face to face with God and described the experience of his vision: a vision where he caught a glimpse of God's holiness.

The prophet Isaiah served as counselor to several Jewish kings, but in 742 BC, after the death of King Uzziah, he entered into the temple to pray. While there he had a vision of another King, one who sat on a heavenly throne. In his description of the scene he said the following:

...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

- Isaiah 6:1

Isaiah writes that above the King hover angelic beings called Seraphs. In Isaiah's vision the angels have to use four of their six wings to protect themselves because God does not need protection. The prophet says that he hears them calling out to one another saying, "Holy, holy, holy." This is repeated three times to honor the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They proclaim, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." (Isaiah 6:3)

The experience also revealed to Isaiah his true condition as an impure and weak man when compared to the majestic beings in his vision. Only when a coal is taken from the altar and used to purify his lips is Isaiah able to stand before God and respond to His call for service.

This same image is repeated in the vision that John the Apostle had in describing his own presence in God's throne room.

⁶ and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. ⁷ The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

- Revelation 4:6-8

In these and other heavenly scenes God is described as holy, and man's natural reaction is fear, reverence, and awe (respect) in the presence of such majesty. This fear, however, was not terror, worry or panic. It was a healthy and respectful reverence for a being who was in every way greater than the people privileged to be before Him. Not greater for the purpose of harm (which is often the case with human sinful power), but greater for the purpose of encouraging reverence, obedience and love.

God's greatness should not inspire fear in us (unless we are called to judgment for sinful rebellion and disbelief). For those who seek God, His greatness should provoke a desire to serve and be like Him.

You shall be holy, for I am holy.
- I Peter 1:16

His holiness should motivate us to pursue holiness in our own lives.

IMITATING GOD IS THE BEST WAY TO KNOW HIM

The reason God wants us to be holy is that being like Him (by cultivating personal holiness) is the best way to really know Him. To view His holiness should not result in frightening us but rather encourage us to imitate Him. Of course, if we are to imitate Him in His holiness, we need to understand what His holiness is:

1. Separation

When the Bible talks about a "holy" day, for example, it means that this day has been set apart or designated for a special purpose. In a similar way, God's holiness implies that He is separate and special. He is separate from the creation in that He is not part of the creation but exists in another dimension. He is not human in nature (although man has similarities to God). In other words, He is not like us, we are in some ways like Him. God is not who or where we are.

God's holiness then is seen in His uniqueness and state apart from us and the world that we live in. To be holy, therefore, means that we are to be unique and separate from what is around us.

In our effort to be holy like God, therefore, we must also be unique and separate (separate in the sense that we are where He is). Many have tried to achieve this unique/separate goal by going off to a secret or quiet place and living a reclusive life devoted to contemplation and self-denial. Others have attempted to establish a state of holiness (separateness/uniqueness) by creating a manufactured environment of some kind, thinking that maintaining this "lifestyle" (whether it be an eighteenth century agrarian community or a closed commune overseen by a modern-day prophet) is the key to developing the holiness pleasing to God.

The way to be separate or holy, however, is to go to the place where God is, not create some sort of holy environment for ourselves. For example, if we want to go where God is:

- We must go to His Word – for He is there (John 1:1).
- We must go to our knees in prayer – because He listens to us there (I John 5:14).
- We must go to worship Him – because God is searching for those who will worship Him in sincerity (John 4:23).
- We must go into the battle against our own sins and the sins of the world – and when we do, we will find the Spirit of God waging war there (Romans 8:13).
- We must go into all the world and preach the gospel – because He promises that He will always be with us in this effort (Matthew 28:20).

A holy God is in these places and we find Him (imitate Him) when we separate ourselves from this world and go where He is and where He calls us to be.

A second distinct feature of God's holiness:

2. Absolute Purity

God is completely pure. This means that He does not and cannot sin. Sin is a problem that infects humans, not God.

Every thought, every intention, every action of God is pure from beginning to end. This purity is at times described in terms of "moral" perfection, but this is done to show how different God is from man. Even if there was no sin in existence, however, God's holiness would still be described in terms of purity.

A more accurate image is that of light. Isaiah referred to God as the "Light of Israel," in speaking of God's holiness (Isaiah 10:17). Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12). Paul says that the Lord dwells in "unapproachable light" (I Timothy 6:16). It is not that God reflects

light or needs light to be seen. Rather, He is the source of light, He gives off light, and not the dim kind of light created by a mixture of physical elements doomed to eventually burn itself out here in this world. His is the light of absolute reality, absolute truth and absolute power, and purity is what generates these.

Paul tells us to walk as "children of light" (Ephesians 5:8) and when we do, we tap into that reality, truth, and power. It is the glimpse of that light/purity that fills our dark minds and hearts with hope and reveals the true darkness of this world.

If our quest is to be like God, then this quest must include an effort at purity.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
- Matthew 5:8

Those who want to know God (especially in the context of His purity) never take sin lightly. Every sin is an affront to God and threatens our relationship with Him. Purity in our lives, therefore, means that we do not make excuses for our sins nor do we tolerate it within ourselves. Purity requires us to be at war with sin so that the blood of Jesus can continually purify us and allow us to stand in the presence of a holy God, a God of light (I John 1:7-9).

When God seems far away or when our relationship with Him seems dry and dark, the reason may be that we are not where He is or acting how He acts.

SUMMARY

It is unfortunate that people are afraid of God. That kind of fear is a sign that they may know that God is there, but they don't really know the God that is there. God does not want us to be afraid of Him. He wants us to know Him and be like Him which means that we are to be:

- set apart where He is
- pure and full of light as He is

With the gospel, it is possible to go from where we are to where He is, to put aside what we are and become what He is. In the heavenly vision, Isaiah was purified by a hot coal from the altar. In the New Testament, another image is used to signify the purification of the heart and life of the one who wants to remain in the presence and service of a holy and pure God. That imagery is the cleansing water of baptism (Acts 22:16).

Those who wish to know God and be like God begin by confessing their faith in Christ, repenting of their sins and are immersed in the water of baptism to wash away all the impurities of the soul. At this moment the purified sinner receives the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit who becomes the inward source of divine light that will not only create the holy life Christians are called on to live (no matter where one lives or what lifestyle one has) but will ultimately transport the believer into the dimension of heaven where God truly dwells (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:11; I Thessalonians 4:17).

3.

The God Who Knows

In his book, *One Holy Hunger*, Mike Cope talks about several myths or misconceptions that people have about God.

In this book we've tried to better understand God and, to this end, have reviewed a couple of the myths that actually hinder our deeper knowledge of and relationship with Him. For example, we have noted that God is Spirit but uses human and material images to help us relate to Him. In addition to this, we see His greatness in the qualities that He possesses. This knowledge should inspire us to be like Him, not to run away or be afraid of Him.

I also said that imitating God's holiness is the best way to grow in our knowledge of Him. In other words, the best way to know God is to imitate Him, and imitating His holiness required us to do two things:

1. Go where He is at (prayer, service, worship, etc.)
2. Act in the way that He acts – with purity.

Knowing God is the reward of the spiritual life we lead as Christians.

In this chapter, we will look at another misconception about God. The idea that God is only interested in judging and condemning us, and that Christian life is only about rules and regulations.

OMNISCIENCE

When I first became a Christian, the one quality of God's personality that really bothered me was His omniscience (the fact that He is all-knowing). I was happy to know that He was all-powerful, all-good and all-wise because these things could help me in times of need or trouble. However, the fact that He knew everything about me made me feel uncomfortable. He knew what I thought. He witnessed and judged every word that I spoke, and everything that I ever did, good or bad.

This idea of not being able to have anything secret can make a person paranoid and drive them to abandon God if they don't realize how God sees our exposed life every day. David, king of Israel, explored this idea of nakedness before God in Psalms 139 and he came to a comforting and encouraging observation as he examined the One who was examining him.

PSALMS 139

What is interesting about this particular psalm is that David goes from being closed to God, even running away from Him, to being fully open and accepting of God's complete presence in his life.

This psalm helps us to understand the phenomenon of God being continually with us and how that complete intimate knowledge affects a person.

¹ O Lord, You have searched me and known me.

- **Searched** – God does His searching through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26-27).
- **Known** – This penetrating look into our spirit by the all-wise Holy Spirit produces not only a casual acquaintanceship or a general idea of who we are, but a deep and intimate knowledge of who we really are, sometimes not even understood by ourselves.

In the following verses David explains the results of this kind of knowledge; you cannot hide from God and are naked before Him at all times.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You understand my thought from afar.

God is aware of us while we rest and knows what we think about, good or bad.

³ You scrutinize my path and my lying down,
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.

God knows what we do and where we go.

⁴ Even before there is a word on my tongue,
Behold, O Lord, You know it all.

God knows what we are going to say before it is said. He therefore knows the intent of what we say.

⁵ You have enclosed me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is too high, I cannot attain to it.

God surrounds a person both physically and spiritually. The intensity of this type of presence is too much for the writer here to grasp.

⁷ Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
¹⁰ Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,

And the light around me will be night,”

¹² Even the darkness is not dark to You,

And the night is as bright as the day.

Darkness and light are alike to You.

He tries to imagine a place or a condition where he could actually get away from God. His conclusion is that even the best hiding place (darkness) still cannot conceal him, because God is light and where He is, there is no darkness, and nothing is hidden from Him.

The author now realizes that he is virtually naked before God.

At this point the author begins to see that his condition of nakedness before God may not necessarily be a bad thing. Instead of being uncomfortable or frightened, he begins to appreciate this special quality that God has.

¹³ For You formed my inward parts;

You wove me in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴ I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from You,

When I was made in secret,

And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;

¹⁶ Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;

And in Your book were all written

The days that were ordained for me,

When as yet there was not one of them.

David realizes that it is this powerful knowledge that was at work in creating him.

- He recognizes that everything that exists does so because of God’s knowledge, and for this reason he can rejoice in everything (i.e. he can rejoice in the sun because God made it).
- He also recognizes that God knew from the beginning what David’s life would be and where his life would end. This brings

him comfort (i.e. if God is with you at birth and at death, you are never alone).

His attitude changes from, "I want to hide" to "Well, this isn't so bad" to "I praise God because He knows so much!"

¹⁷ How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
When I awake, I am still with You.

In his understanding of God's omnipresence David moves from appreciation to praise for God's knowledge that has made his present life possible and knows about his future life as well.

His feelings have gone through four stages: discomfort at having someone's knowledge "surround" him; appreciation of that knowledge; praise for such great knowledge; and the fourth and final stage, prayer and confidence based on that knowledge.

He now relies on this full knowledge and rejects the darkness in which he once tried to hide.

¹⁹ O that You would slay the wicked, O God;
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed

²⁰ For they speak against You wickedly,
And Your enemies take Your name in vain.

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

²² I hate them with the utmost hatred;
They have become my enemies.

David, confident that God knows him and how he feels, asks God to destroy his enemies. The idea not expressed here is that the enemies don't know God and refuse to acknowledge or be known by Him, therefore they deserved to be punished.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

The last stage sees David asking God to completely know him. This represents his full surrender. Before, he looked for ways to hide, places that could be kept secret, but once he realized that God's knowledge had always been there to create, preserve and protect, he opened his heart and invited God to search, know and examine him deeply. At this point he wants God's knowledge to heal him of his anxieties, sinfulness and infidelities.

His final plea is for God to take him by the hand and lead him to heaven because he is no longer afraid.

SUMMARY

Have we ever contemplated where we are in the process of being known by God? Are we still hiding things or living a double life pretending that God may not see or care about our secrets? Hopefully we've moved away from this immature stage of development and arrived at the point in our lives where we can rejoice, praise and have confidence in God because God knows:

- how we feel and why we feel this way
- what we need
- when to act
- how to solve our problems
- who we really are and yet still loves us

I pray that as we press on in Christian maturity, we not only have confidence that God knows us, but we consciously invite God in:

- to examine us in every way
- heal us of our sins and our weaknesses

- discipline us like sons and daughters
- change us for the better
- fill us with His love
- use us in His service
- help us to know Him in the way that He knows us

This total submission to the scrutiny of God is the final stage of our development in Christian maturity.

4. The God Who Listens

Have you ever wondered if God is really listening? I know that we believe, in our hearts, that God is there, and He wants us to pray, but how many times have you prayed and it seemed like nothing happened?

— The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.
- James 5:16b

Doesn't it seem that sometimes our prayers, no matter how fervent, how faithful, how righteous, come back to us empty? We pray and...

- the person we're praying for dies anyways
- the marriage that we're praying for falls apart anyways
- the company closes down anyways
- the illness continues anyways
- the direction that you're asking for doesn't appear and you make a costly mistake anyways

When these things happen, it becomes easy to doubt one of God's most wonderful qualities: His mercy towards us. When we are in this position

it is comforting to know that we are not alone, many people in the Bible felt this way.

JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

One example of a person who had this kind of doubt is Jeremiah, the inspired author of the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah wrote this “lament” after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587 BC. The small kingdom of Judah (where the city of Jerusalem was located) was forced to pay tribute to Babylon and its king who ruled as a world power at that time. Zedekiah, the king of Judah, decided to break his agreement with Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and stop his tribute. The Babylonians responded by surrounding the city of Jerusalem, laying siege to it for 18 months in order to starve the inhabitants into submission and eventually killed most of those remaining, destroyed the temple and burned the city to the ground.

In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah describes the scenes and feelings of the people during the siege.

¹ How lonely sits the city
That was full of people!
She has become like a widow
Who was once great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
Has become a forced laborer!

² She weeps bitterly in the night
And her tears are on her cheeks;
She has none to comfort her
Among all her lovers.
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
They have become her enemies.

³ Judah has gone into exile under affliction
And under harsh servitude;
She dwells among the nations,
But she has found no rest;
All her pursuers have overtaken her
In the midst of distress.
- Lamentations 1:1-3

In chapter 2 he describes God as the one who is doing this to Jerusalem (because He is allowing the Babylonians to successfully attack them). They have prayed for relief, and He has not answered.

How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion
With a cloud in His anger!
He has cast from heaven to earth
The glory of Israel,
And has not remembered His footstool
In the day of His anger.
- Lamentations 2:1

In this and other chapters, Jeremiah describes the terrible suffering experienced by the people: people dying of starvation, mothers killing and eating their own children, etc. (Lamentations 4:9-10).

He also describes his own feelings about God because of the things that have happened in Jerusalem. In chapter 3 he talks about the physical suffering (vs. 4); and the emotional trauma that he personally has experienced (vs. 13); and the spiritual despair that he feels because of what has taken place (vs. 16-18).

Here is a righteous man who has done God's will, who believes and has dedicated His life to serving the Lord, and for his trouble:

- His people die in the streets in a horrible way.
- His nation is taken over and destroyed by an ungodly people.
- His church (the temple) is desecrated.
- His own body and emotions are put through intense suffering.

All of this takes place despite his prayers to the contrary. In the middle of his crisis, Jeremiah rises up and expresses his continued belief that despite the pit of suffering that he is in at the moment, his God is a God of mercy and love.

²¹ This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope.

²² The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,

For His compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning;

Great is Your faithfulness.

²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,

"Therefore I have hope in Him."

- Lamentations 3:21-24

Jeremiah was beaten but not broken, down but not out because he understood three things about God and his relationship with Him in times of trouble.

1. God was sometimes silent, but He was never absent.

We are a generation that is used to speed, everything must move quickly or else we discard it. The reason for this is that we are subject to time (we only have so much of it) and so it is precious to us because we feel the "ticking" of the clock.

God is not subject to time. He moves and accomplishes His will with perfect timing, but is not distracted or pressured by time like we are. Because of this, we sometimes mistake God's silence for God's absence, His lack of action in our care for lack of love.

Even though God seemed to be silent in answering Jeremiah's prayers, Jeremiah knew from God's dealings with him and the Jewish nation throughout history that He was not absent.

When our lives are surrounded by troubles, our bodies and spirits wasted by constant trials, and our prayers seem to be falling on deaf ears - remember that God may be silent for the moment, but He is still God and is still there. This sentiment is expressed beautifully on a wall in Cologne, Germany, scrawled there during the insanity that was World War II, "I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining. I believe in love, even when I don't feel it. I believe in God, even when He is...silent."

2. When Jeremiah was beset with trouble, he needed to let God know.

Many times when we pray, we offer God solutions to our problems or complain about our problems instead of pouring out our problems before God through prayer.

Some people see the book of Lamentations as a man whining and complaining about tragedy. However, the book of Lamentations is the work of a man pouring out his heart and soul before God in times of trouble.

Human beings need to experience grief when trouble comes, and part of that experience is the emptying out of our hearts and souls of the pain, frustration, anger and fear that is generated by tragedy.

6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.

- 1 Peter 5:6-7

All of Jeremiah's weeping and review of his problems before God did not change the situation, but it did change Jeremiah.

Once he got the hurt out, Jeremiah was able to relate to His God again. Through this lamentation he gained a clearer perspective which enabled him to hope for a better tomorrow.

When we hurt, we need to let God know. Part of the healing process is produced through the action of emptying ourselves of the details and feelings associated with the problem and setting these down before a loving and merciful God.

3. Jeremiah understood that God had a purpose.

The people of Judah were being polluted by idols and corruption which were leading them away from God. This was jeopardizing God's plan of bringing the Messiah into the world through them. If they continued in their idolatry, they would eventually abandon God's word and the temple worship so necessary to give meaning to the work of the Savior

when He would come. Their actions were risking not only their salvation but the salvation of those coming after them. Had God not intervened, we, in our generation, would be lost as well!

The destruction and exile of the Jewish people of that time accomplished several important things:

1. It preserved a small group of Jews who remained faithful and were purified through their trials in exile.
2. It was during the exile that the synagogue system began and served the Jewish people so well as they travelled and settled in various foreign nations. It was this network of foreign synagogues that Paul used to establish the first churches in the Roman Empire six centuries later.
3. The Jewish people never again went into idolatry after this exile. This punishment taught them a lesson they would never forget.

Paul says:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

- Romans 8:28

The suffering that Jeremiah witnessed and felt was used by God to accomplish His purpose, and from this we obtain a better understanding of what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:28.

1. God uses all things for His purpose.
 - All things (that includes good and bad).
2. He uses them for His purpose, not ours.
 - We become discouraged because we cannot see the why or wherefore of our suffering, and God is not explaining it to us.

- Who, however, said that God always uses the events that cause us hurt to serve us? It says that He uses all things for His purpose and His purpose may not include us at the moment.
 - The Jews who suffered the loss of home and family, and died in exile did not know that their pain would serve others in the far future, but it did.
3. All things are used for good, for His purpose and in His good time.
- We want His purpose to serve us and to serve us right away.
 - However, God may use something in one century to serve the good of someone else in another century, place or culture.
 - Walking by faith requires that we endure the trials in our lives even when we do not see how and for whom God will use them. *"You have taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?" Psalms 56:8*
 - It should be enough that we know that God has His plan and that He weaves every event (good and bad) into it for His glory and our ultimate good - which is salvation.

When my life seems to be out of control, my hopes in ashes and my nights never-ending, it is comforting to realize that it is not wasted. God can and will fit my life, and all of its good and bad, into His purpose.

SUMMARY

In "grief support" classes that I teach, I always tell my group to not be surprised when trouble comes. Trouble always comes, you just never know when it does.

Sometimes when trouble comes and it seems that all you have heard and learned about God does not ring very true because your trouble seems, for the moment, greater than your God, remember:

1. **God is sometimes silent, but He is never absent.** Do not mistake His silence for lack of love, or the ability to act.
2. **You need to unburden your heart before God if you are to heal.** Sometimes we cannot fix what is broken or done. Fervent prayer to God, however, is always a medicine to the heart.
3. **God has a purpose.** It is not so much that God has a purpose for your life, but that God has an overall purpose, and your life will fit into His purpose if you offer it to Him in faith.

I encourage you to keep trusting and praying to God even when you cannot hear or see Him working in your life. Also, consciously offer the life you do have (in whatever shape it's in) to God for His purpose. He does not expect a perfect life, He has already received one of those from Jesus Christ. He wants your life in whatever condition it's in so He can use it in the way he sees fit.

5.

The God Who is Able

If you remember correctly, the stated purpose of this book was to help us get a better grip or feeling about who God really is; not just head knowledge, religious rules, or church traditions, but getting to know God from both our intellect and heart so He can be present in every aspect of our lives.

With this in mind let us review several aspects of His character and being:

1. God is spirit but uses male and female as well as material objects to reveal Himself to us. However, the most accurate revelation of Himself appears in the person of Jesus.
2. We learned that the best way of knowing Him is to imitate Him, and the way to imitate Him is:
 - a) To separate ourselves often for spiritual things like prayer, worship, service, and study of the Word.
 - b) To separate ourselves from impurity in thought, word, and deed.
3. We studied Psalms 139 and saw that our relationship with God is a two-way street. He knows us inside/out and He wants us to know Him as well.

4. Finally, we learned three important things about God, especially when we are in trouble:

a) God is sometimes silent, but He is never absent.

- i. Just because our prayers are not answered does not mean they are not heard.
- ii. Just because God does not provide us with reasonable explanations for our troubles does not mean that there aren't any.
- iii. Do not mistake God's silence for a lack of love or caring.

b) When we are in trouble, we need to let God know about it.

- i. Sometimes we need to get the hurt out before we can go on with life.
- ii. God encourages us to pour out our hearts and souls before Him in order to relieve us of worry and pain.
- iii. He does not say He will answer, the promise is that He will listen.

c) God has His purpose.

- i. God uses all things (good and bad) for His own purpose, which is good.
- ii. He uses events in our lives, but not always to serve us and not always to serve us now.
- iii. It is not, "God has a plan for my life," but rather, "God has His plan and my life fits into His plan."

In this last chapter I would like to add one final thought about God and His relationship with us when we are in trouble, and that is: our God is able.

OUR GOD IS ABLE

Do you know why our prayers are not always effective, why sometimes we stay in the same fear, the same mess, the same sin month in and month out? I think these things happen because we know about God, but we don't actually believe what we know about God.

A good example of this is in Numbers 11 where the Israelites were complaining about their diet of manna and longed for the food they had back in Egypt (especially meat). In this account:

- Moses pleads with the Lord knowing that the Lord can do something.
- In verses 19-20 God tells Moses that He will supply them meat not only for a meal, but for an entire month.
- Moses' response in verses 21-22 demonstrates that He knew God, but did not believe what He knew about Him.
- Moses acknowledged elsewhere that God was all-powerful and he worshiped Him as such, but now that God said what He would do, Moses doubted what he knew.

Look at God's answer to Moses in verse 23:

The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not."

God challenged Moses to believe what He knew about Him.

We spend a lifetime storing up information about God through Sunday school, retreats, Bible reading and church attendance, but when trouble comes we refuse to believe what we have learned about this God we say we know so well.

The result is that we pray with knowledge that God hears, but without the conviction that He can and will do something.

HE IS ABLE, ARE WE WILLING?

Mike Cope, in his book, *One Holy Hunger*, says that the answer to this dilemma of knowledge and faith is to understand that:

- God is able if we are willing.
- He provides the power if we provide the willingness to believe.
- With every increment of faith, God reveals another measure of His power.

Paul talks about this connection in Ephesians 1:18-19.

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might.

In this verse Paul prays that God give the Ephesian Christians enlightenment so they will be able to understand two things:

1. The blessings that await those who are Christians (resurrection, glorification, exaltation).
2. The power that is available to guarantee those blessings (God's unlimited power).

Note that at the end of verse 19 he says that these revelations are made to those who believe. This is why people who do not believe in God, do not see Him; He is hidden from them because of disbelief. What is so plain to others escapes their notice because they are completely ignorant of Him or they refuse to believe what they do know.

Regardless of the reason, the net result is the same: blindness. But the opposite is also true, if we are willing to believe what we know, that belief will translate into greater knowledge which will, in turn, produce greater faith. The net result will not only be greater knowledge, but the

blessings that come with a greater knowledge of God (i.e. peace, confidence, joy, power, love, hope, etc.).

WHAT TO BELIEVE

When we read the Bible, and especially the passages where God is doing great things, it seems that He is always doing something for somebody else.

I think our problem is that we sometimes lack the willingness to believe that this great, all-powerful, all-knowing God will do something just for us!

In order to build both our knowledge and our faith I want to share with you two things that God can and will do for you:

1. He can deal with anything you bring Him.

He can deal successfully with all your hopes, fears, illnesses, failures, sins, doubts, plans, activities, and troubles. Think back over all you know about God, was there ever a problem or situation where God did not answer or did not know how to answer? What, therefore, makes your problem so special or difficult for Him?

None of the people God dealt with ever expected Him to answer their prayer in the way that He did. For example, Moses wanted to lead an insurrection and ended up leading sheep for 40 years. Paul wanted to preach to the Gentiles and ended up in prison.

Do any of us doubt that God knows what He is doing, that He cares or is not sure of succeeding in His overall plan even if His plan is not our plan, His timing not our timing? Let's keep on believing, even when our prayers are not answered in the way we wanted and at the time we expected.

Perhaps what God wants is our faith and continued prayers in the face of great odds. Many times these accomplish His purpose without our knowledge. In the end, however, it is His will that counts and not ours.

2. He can save you.

In baseball, the relief pitcher is called in to “save” the game because he is the one who will try to maintain the lead so the batters on his team can secure more runs. If the team is too far behind, however, they won’t bother using the relief pitcher and will save him for another day.

Our God is the ultimate reliever. We are never too far behind in the game of life for Him to be called in to win the battle. The only thing that keeps Him out of play is our refusal to call on Him in faith; faith to believe, not just that He will play, but faith to believe that He will win for us.

SUMMARY

In the last few chapters of this short book, we have learned several things about God in order to know Him better.

If you remember anything about Him, remember that He is able if we are willing. With this in mind I ask you to consider the following: are you willing to believe that God is able to forgive you of any sin you have ever committed? Are you willing to believe that God is able to take you back even if you have denied Him and been unfaithful? Are you willing to believe that God is able to comfort your hurt, give you direction, steady your emotions, or do what it takes to help you through one more day? If you are willing to believe, then God is able to do these and greater things for you (Luke 8:50).

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