

What is God like?

Tony Gray

Salt and Light Ministries

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Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow – as when a basic defect in the fuel system of the Challenger space craft cost the lives of seven brave astronauts.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs

Introduction

Questions, Questions...

Every parent knows the scene: junior kneels on his bed looking out of the window at the star-spangled sky; Dad sits beside him. It is one of those special moments of wonder shared by parent and child.

Into the serene moment comes THE QUESTION: “Dad, why do the stars twinkle?” A rapid recall of school science lessons yields small result, but junior hasn’t waited anyway. THE MIND is at work: “Dad, why did God make the stars?” Ah, now this surely has to do with helping sailors find their way across the oceans, doesn’t it? But the next question will no doubt be “How?” and Dad’s not too sure about that! Or is it simply that a totally black sky would be incredibly dull? Too late anyway! The next question is already out: “Dad, what’s God like?” Evidently Dad’s not too good on Physics or Philosophy so let’s try Theology! But Dad is ready for this one - a quick glance at the watch and “My! Look at the time. We’ll talk about that some other time - it’s time you were asleep and I must help Mum with the washing up!”

What *is* it about children? Questions, questions and more questions. Questions that probe our ignorance, our lack of asking questions, our loss of any sense of wonder. What was it Jesus said? “Unless you become like a child ...”

For a child the world still holds mystery. For adults the mystery is gone - except for rare moments. Perhaps you remember an incredible sequence of film in a Wildlife documentary on killer whales hurling themselves up the

beach? Or listening to the heartbeat of your unborn child? Or gazing in wonder at the new-born's tiny fingers? Where has the mystery gone?

Our sense of awe and wonder is swallowed up by busyness and the machines that rule our lives - until, perhaps briefly, a child's encounter with the mystery of God and his universe awakens something in us. What *is* God like? What do I *mean* by 'God'? What time was that sports programme on TV tonight?

In this little book I want to encourage you to re-discover the sense of mystery - to ask again a child's questions and grapple with the wonder of God and our relationship with him. We *need* to ask questions. The depth and reality of any relationship grows with knowledge and understanding. God *wants* us to know him. He hides only so that we can seek him the harder. He is there to be known by those who want to know.

We know things by thinking and talking about them. We can know God too, by thinking and talking about him. That's what 'theology' is. The Greek word *theologia* meant 'talking about God'. So this may be your first attempt at Theology. I trust you really do enjoy it!

Chapter 1

How can we know?

We can only know anything at all about God because God *wants* to be known. When he created us, he gave us powers of observation and the ability to think about our experiences and organise our thoughts. So he provides the evidence for us to come to a knowledge of him and to enjoy relationship with him. We can know God, firstly because he is willing to make himself known, and secondly because he has given us the capacity to know him.

To describe the way in which God makes himself known we use the word *revelation*. It is God who takes the initiative - he *reveals* himself. He does this in various ways which we are able to observe and then organise into a pattern of thinking. It is these thoughts which make up our *theology* or *worldview*. In a sense *everybody* has a theology, a way of thinking about God, Man and the Universe. The atheist says there is no God. The pantheist says everything is God. The humanist says Man is God, and so on. The Christian says there is a God, who is separate from what he has made, who created Man, and human beings are accountable to him. But we still have to answer the question “What is God *like*?”

We will come back to that word ‘like’ a bit further on. First we must take a closer look at this idea of ‘revelation’. God presents us with two kinds of evidence. The first kind is called *general revelation* and the second kind is called *special revelation*.

General revelation

When the apostle Paul, writing to the Roman Christians, wanted to make the point that everybody is accountable to God for sin he said: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20) What he is saying is this: God may be invisible, but he has put enough evidence into the *created world* for us to come to a knowledge of his existence and his power. Because people blind themselves to the evidence they are not excused from being accountable to him. Part of the mystery of the stars and the wonders of creation is to draw us to God. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands,” says the Psalmist (Psalm 19:1).

Another way in which God makes himself known is in *history* - in his dealings with nations. In one of his remarkable speeches to a pagan audience recorded in the Acts of the Apostles Paul declares: “From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. *God did this so that men should seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him ...*” (Acts 17:26-27, my italics) It is not only in the history of Israel that God’s hand is in evidence, but in all the nations, as the Old Testament prophets were aware. (See, for example, Isaiah 45:1-7.)

The third way in which God reveals himself in this general way is through *conscience*. All people have some in-born sense of right and wrong. Nobody knows quite how it works, but clearly God put it there! Paul deals with this, again in his letter to the Christians at Rome: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law (of Moses), do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves ... since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” (Romans 2:14-15) Of course, knowing what is right is not the same as having the ability to *do* what is right, which is exactly what Paul goes on to argue!

So these three evidences - creation, history, and conscience - generally available to all, point like signposts toward God, but cannot in themselves bring us to the destination. When we are on a journey the first signposts to

the place we are going appear a long way before we actually get there! So God has given us even more specific and precise clues to bring us to knowledge of himself.

Special revelation

Besides the three general ways we have examined, God has also revealed himself in more specific and special ways. Each one of these would need a whole book to themselves, but we can only deal with them briefly.

Miracles and prophecy

Through these God encounters the life of an individual or a nation in a direct way. For instance Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians encouraging them to seek the gift of prophecy and tells them: “But if an unbeliever ... comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’ ” (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). He has experienced a special revelation from God.

Many examples of people ‘seeing’ God through a miracle could be given, but let one suffice. When blind Bartimaeus was healed by Jesus, we read that he “followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.” (Luke 18:43) God had been ‘seen’! The person and work of Christ.

Jesus is the very heart of God’s revelation of his personal nature. He is, in the words of Paul, “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), or as the writer to the Hebrews expresses it, “the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3). That is why Jesus could say, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) Indeed, he is the only way into fellowship with the Father God. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

The Bible as the Word of God

The Bible is God’s special revelation written down for us. It is the way God has chosen to reveal his heart and mind by recording people’s experiences of him and his word to them, so that this knowledge can be available to all.

Paul reminded Timothy, for example, of how he had “known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” (2 Timothy 3:15)

The operation of the Holy Spirit

The Spirit is God’s agent who interacts with us to put us into contact with God’s mind and heart. Paul tells his Corinthian friends that it is “by the Spirit” that God’s plans are revealed, because only the Spirit “knows the thoughts of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

These are the channels through which God’s revelation comes. These are the cables into which we must be linked to receive God’s more personal messages.

What about ‘like’?

We promised to return to that word ‘like’. What is God *like*? When we talk about God we have to use *words*, and the trouble with all words is that they do not always carry the same message to the hearer as the speaker intended. How often have we had to say, “But that’s not what I *meant!*” because someone has misunderstood what we tried to say. Words are not easy tools to use. This is because all words convey a *likeness* not a *reality*. If I say - or write - *cake*, you may feel hungry but no cake will appear. You will have all kinds of thoughts about cakes which may or may not correspond with my ideas or experiences of cakes! Fortunately our ideas will be close enough for understanding. But what happens when we talk about ‘fatherhood’ or ‘justice’, let alone ‘holiness’! It becomes harder for our ideas of such things to correspond. So when we talk about ‘God’, we must recognise the difficulty of finding likenesses which match in our different understandings. But that’s the excitement of theology! And anyway, God will always be bigger than we can imagine or express! That’s why the Bible is full of the most wonderful images and pictures of God riding on the clouds or shaking the mountains. It is also why Jesus used parables - the Kingdom of God is *like* ...

So now we know *how* we know, let’s start to consider *what* we know. Let’s ask a child’s question: “What is God made of?”

Summary:

- The process by which God makes himself known to us is called *revelation*.
- There are two kinds of revelation: *general* and *special* revelation.
- General revelation comes through: *nature, history* and *conscience*.
- Special revelation comes through: miracles and prophecy; the person and work of Jesus; the Bible as the Word of God; the operation of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2

What is God made of?

This is a difficult place to start, but it is the heart of our discussion. The problem is that we are physical, material beings made of water and various chemicals that form flesh and blood. We live in a material universe and our lives revolve around the maintenance of that material. We can cope with non-material *concepts*, such as thoughts or feelings, but we struggle with non-material *beings*. This is particularly true for those of us brought up in Western scientific and technological societies. But God will not fit neatly into those sorts of categories.

God is spirit

Let's start by looking at the *essence* of God - what makes him *God* and not just a super-being based on a human model (like the gods of ancient Greece and Rome for instance). God in his essential being is *spirit* - that is to say *non-material* and *incorporeal* (not having a body). We must leave aside the incarnation - the taking of a human body by the Eternal Son at a point in history - for the moment. We are thinking for now about the eternal, essential nature of God in his Godness. In his conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria, Jesus makes an important statement: "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24) God is a spiritual 'substance', he is infinite spirit. When Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection and they think he is a ghost, he says to them: "It is I myself! Touch me and see; *a ghost does not have flesh and bones*, as you see I have." (Luke 24:39, my italics) Here the word translated 'ghost' is the same word as

‘spirit’. Jesus is saying that a spirit does not have a bodily form or substance, and God is spirit.

So what does the Bible mean when it talks about God’s *hand* at work or his *arm* stretched out, or of God *sitting* on a throne? Well, these are ‘*like*’ words, words taken from our familiar world to help us understand - picture words, images to give us something to work with. Otherwise we would have no words to describe God at all!

The invisible God

God’s essential spirit nature means that he is *invisible*. He cannot be seen in his essential being by human eyes. That is one reason why the Eternal Son took a human form - so that we could see a perfect image of God the Father without being burned to ashes! In 1 Timothy 6:15-16 Paul speaks of God as he “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see.” John also tells us that “No-one has ever seen God” but goes on to say that Jesus has made him known (John 1:18).

But doesn’t the Bible talk about people *seeing* God? Yes it does! On a number of occasions in the Old Testament people encounter God in a visible way. For instance in Genesis 32:30 Jacob declares, “ ... I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” Also Isaiah testifies “I saw the Lord ...” (Isaiah 6:1). These visible appearances are called *theophanies* (Greek for appearances of God). Sometimes the one who appears is called The Angel of the LORD, a Messenger who is also called The LORD or God. For instance, in Judges 6:11-23 note that ‘The angel of the LORD’ in verse 11 is referred to as ‘The LORD’ in verse 14. The best way of understanding this apparent contradiction of people *seeing* the *invisible* God is to take these appearances as being the person of the Eternal Son appearing in human form long before the incarnation itself. These were temporary expressions, whereas the incarnation was a permanent fusion of the divine and the human in the person of the Lord Jesus. John gives weight to this when, in speaking of Isaiah’s experience, he says: “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” after quoting from Isaiah chapter 6 (John 12:41). This is all part of the mystery of the Word who “was with God and was God” and who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1 and 14). John

goes on to say “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father ...” (v14).

The Living God

The Old Testament writers refer many times to God as the *living* God, in contrast to the dumb, blind and lifeless idols of the surrounding nations. Jeremiah, for instance, in a passage declaring the folly of idol worship, concludes: “But the LORD is the true God; he is *the living God*, the eternal King.” (Jeremiah 10:10) In Joshua 3:10, as the people are about to enter the Land of Promise, Joshua reminds them that it is *the living God* who goes before them. Psalm 84:2 records the writer’s yearning for intimacy with *the living God*. Paul refers to the New Testament disciples as “the church of *the living God*” (1 Timothy 3:15), and in Revelation 7:2 we read of an angel who carries “the seal of *the living God*.”

This repeated emphasis not only draws a clear distinction between God and idols. It also reminds us that God is the Creator of all things, the source and support of all life, of every living thing. He is the source of power and activity - a God who *does things!* He is a God who interacts with his creation - distinct from it, but intimately involved with it, for it is an extension of his own life. This is especially true of mankind into whose lifeless initial form God breathed his own life-breath (Genesis 2:7). The richness and depth of God’s life is reflected in the myriad forms of life he has created as an overflow of his own vibrant life. To know God is to experience *living!* Jesus came to ‘plug us in’ to the life of God - “I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10) - a ‘better than the average’ life, as the Greek has it!

God is Someone!

This invisible, spirit God, bursting with life-energy is a *personal being*. When Moses wanted to know the name of the God who was calling him, he was told “I AM WHO I AM” and he was to tell his people that it was I AM who was sending Moses to them (Exodus 3:14). God is not simply a someone among other someones, he is the source of all someones, the Person who gives identity to all other persons.

The personhood of God means that he *thinks, feels and wills* as other persons do. It means that he *communicates* as other persons do. He hears and sees, he knows grief, anger and compassion. He enjoys fellowship and intimacy (he calls Abraham his *friend*). In fact, he is actually three persons in one being - but the idea of the Trinity is too big for this little book! God is not an *It* or a *Presence* or a *Force*. God is Someone.

The personhood of God is expressed especially in the relational word *Father*. This word does not have to do with maleness as such, for God does not need a partner to produce offspring - he is the source of *all* life. But Fatherhood is in his very being and all human fatherhood is a pale reflection of what God is as provider, protector, discipliner, friend and guide. When the apostle Paul is praying for the Ephesian Christians he addresses his request to “the Father from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” (3:14-15)

In the Old Testament, God is the Father of the nation: “Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?” (Deuteronomy 32:6) “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.” (Isaiah 64:8). In the gospels Jesus constantly enrages the Jewish religious leaders by referring to God as “my own Father”. He then grants the disciples the privilege of this same intimate relationship: “When you pray, say ‘Father ...’ ” (Luke 11:2). It is into this wonderful and special relationship that we are brought by the Holy Spirit: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’.” (Galatians 4:6)

So we are called into relationship with an invisible, living Person we can know as Father. He may not be made of flesh and blood and we can't see him with our eyes, but we can know and love him - Jesus has made that gloriously possible!

Summary:

- The *essence* of God's being is *spirit*. This means God is *invisible; living; personal*.
- God expresses his personhood through the relational term *Father*.

Chapter 3

How big is God?

Think for a moment of one of those beautifully clear nights when the sky is full of stars and you get a neck ache looking up in wonder. Think for a moment of the unbelievable distances that the astronomers tell us separate those stars from our small planet. Think for a moment of looking out on the vast ocean and imagine its unfathomable dark depths and its waves breaking on distant shores. Now consider the thought that God is infinitely bigger than any and all of these awesome things. He brought them all into being, their continuing existence is dependent on him - the Bible speaks of God rolling up the heavens like a robe (Hebrews 1:12), and treading on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8), and of measuring the waters in his hand (Isaiah 40:12).

Immensity

When wise King Solomon was dedicating the Temple he had built for God in Jerusalem, he asked in wonder, “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1Kings 8:27) Sadly the people came to believe they could contain God in his temple, just like some idol of the other nations. Three hundred years later we find God challenging this belittling of his being, through the prophet Jeremiah: “ ‘Am I only a God nearby’, declares the LORD, ‘and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 23:23-24)

The thought of God filling heaven and earth and beyond is mind boggling! There is no concept of ‘bigness’ of space that can describe God’s *immensity*. God is infinite in relation to space. He is too big to measure. He sprinkles the stars in the heavens, measuring off their positions by hands-breadths; he weighs the mountains on his scales; he weighs the islands as specks of dust; the nations - races that have come and gone, empires that have risen and fallen, all the pomp and splendour of human achievement - all are like drops in a bucket! Read Isaiah 40:12-26 and let your imagination go! God is **BIG!**

Self-sufficiency

But how does God sustain himself and his immensity? Well, here we talk about God’s *self-sufficiency* or *self-existence*. This doesn’t mean God grows his own vegetables of course! It means that God’s existence is not dependent on anything outside of himself. God doesn’t *need anything or anyone* outside of himself to maintain his existence. We human beings need food and water, sleep and protection, and sexual reproduction to continue the human kind. These *instincts* are a necessary part of our human existence. But God has no need of any of these. As the medieval thinker and theologian Thomas Aquinas memorably put it, “He is the First Cause, Himself uncaused.” God was not produced or caused by any other agency. He simply *is*. The Bible begins with the fundamental statement “In the beginning God ...” (Genesis 1:1). All other life comes from him - he alone has *source-life*.

The Lord Jesus expressed it this way: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.” (John 5:26) The wonderful thing is that the Son shares this *eternal* life with us! Again Jesus blew the minds - and the fuses - of the religious Jews when he claimed, in John 8:58, “before Abraham was born, I Am!” There was no question in their minds that he was claiming to have the very life of God, for they responded by trying to stone him (the penalty for blasphemy). When God told Moses his name he said, “I Am Who I Am”, a phrase translated in the Greek version of the Old Testament as “I Am the Being One”.

God, then, is such a vast source of limitless life-energy that he has no need of anything outside of himself to sustain his existence. The apostle Paul

tried to explain this to the philosophers of Athens. Using an altar dedicated “To the Unknown God” as his starting point he declared “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, *as if he needed anything*, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” (Acts 17:24-25, my italics)

God himself declares in Revelation 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega (the A and the Z), who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” All else that exists is contained within the boundaries of God’s being. God is *not* Everything nor is *Everything* God. That idea is called *Pantheism* and has no place in our Christian worldview. God is separate from all that he has created, and he sustains it all by his mighty power. He is the source of all life. Yet he is intimately acquainted with his creation and closely involved with it.

Eternality

The Bible frequently reminds us that God has a totally different relationship to time from us. Psalm 90:2, for instance, says: “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” We have enough trouble with *time* - it hassles us, controls our lives, confuses our minds and bodies when we travel across time-zones, and constantly hurries us on! But how to cope with the idea of *timelessness*? Eternity is not just unimaginable length of time - it is what comes before and after time.

God’s *eternality* means that God is infinite in relation to time. God is free from the *succession* of time. For God all our time - past, present and future - is his *now*. Past, present and future are relevant to God only in terms of his communicating with us in ways we can understand. We can only think in terms of *already happened, happening now, going to happen*. God thinks only of *happening now*. In case your brain is boiling at this point, let me try an illustration! It was the birthday of the small son of friends of ours; I saw him in the morning and greeted him, “Happy Birthday, Johnny!” “But it’s not my birthday yet!” came the reply. From my adult perspective the whole day was birthday, but from his child’s perspective it was not his birthday until the party at tea time! From God’s perspective all of time is his Day, from

our perspective it is a succession of events we call history and we're waiting for the party at the end!

In Genesis 21:33 we read of Abraham calling upon the name of the LORD "the Eternal God". Yet the incredible thing is that this God-outside-of-time constantly interacts with us time-bound beings, ultimately in Christ embracing our in-time state in order to impart to us eternal life. The prophet Isaiah said, "This is what the high and lofty one says - he who lives for ever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit ...' " (Isaiah 57:15). This is the mystery of the incarnation - Almighty God abiding with his people, the Eternal One in time, the Self-sufficient One in a human frame, the Immense One in the smallness of humanity! And all this for our salvation.

Summary:

- The greatness of God's being is expressed in terms of his: *immensity*; *self-sufficiency*; *eternality*.

Chapter 4

How strong is God?

Children love to compare the merits of their parents. I remember once overhearing a conversation between my younger son - he would have been about six at the time - and a friend of his. The friend stated proudly that his Dad was forty. “Oh!” said my son, “My Dad’s older than your Dad, my Dad’s eighty-four!” Age is a mystery to children, as eternity is to us. This comparison of age was not flattering, but I was glad the talk did not go on to whose Dad was stronger - I knew the friend’s dad!

But what of our Father in the heavens. What can we say of *his* strength? There is, of course, no comparison possible. The mighty acts of God recorded in the Bible are simply beyond any human comparison. *Our* Dad is stronger than any one else’s! From the earliest events of Biblical history God introduces himself as “God Almighty” - see for example Genesis 17:1. In the last book of the Bible God is worshipped by the heavenly beings as “the Lord God Almighty” - see Revelation 4:8. And in a host of ways in between God shows himself to be truly *all mighty*.

All powerful

God is all-powerful and able to do whatever he wills. Theologians - the intellectual ones, that is! - talk about God’s *omnipotence*. That is, God’s all-powerfulness, from the Latin words for *all* and *power*. Job recognised this quality in God. After he had been stunned into silence by God’s questions and declaration of his majesty and power, Job stops all his complaining and meekly says: “I know that you can do all things ...” (Job 42:2).

The Lord Jesus also testifies of the Father, "... with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26) There really is nothing outside the range of God's ability. The prophet Jeremiah struggled at times to understand God's ways, but had no doubt about God's power: "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17) A few verses later God himself poses the question to his long-suffering servant, "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" (verse 27).

It is not too difficult to grasp that God *has* all power. What is not so easy - as Jeremiah discovered - is to understand the way God *uses*, or sometimes *doesn't use*, his power. The Bible gives us some clues to help us. For instance, the troubled prophet Habakkuk rightly observes that God cannot "look on evil" (Habakkuk 1:13). That is, God cannot be 'hands on', as it were, involved with evil. That left Habakkuk, however, with the problem of how God could use the iniquitous Babylonians to his own ends. God assures him that the Babylonians will be dealt with in due course. God, after all, is not *causing* the Babylonians to be evil, he is simply *using* their evil to achieve *his* purposes.

Paul, in the introduction to his letter to Titus reminds us that "God...does not lie." (1:2) In other words God cannot indulge in deceit of any kind. James echoes this thought in his letter when he tells us that "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone ..." (James 1:13). These observations help us to see that God has all power, but that he only uses that power in harmony with his own nature. He cannot and will not use his power in any way that denies his holy and just nature.

In 2 Timothy 2:13, the apostle Paul is probably quoting from an early hymn when he underlines the faithfulness of God with these words: "... if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown (or deny) himself." *We* may act deceitfully and without integrity by denying in speech or action our allegiance to God, but *he* will never act in a way that would deny his revealed and stated character and purpose. He cannot use his God-power to deny his God-nature. He will not use his power for absurd, self-contradictory or evil ends. His *will* has authority over his power. Yes, God *can* do anything, but he cannot do *anything!* He cannot do what denies his nature, character and purpose.

All knowing

What helps God use his power rightly (where we so often use *our* power wrongly!) is that God *knows everything!* This quality is known as God's *omniscience* - from the Latin words for *all* and *knowledge*. God has all knowledge. We act out of partial knowledge - how often have you said something like, "If only I had *known* ... I wouldn't have said/done that!" God only ever acts out of all knowledge and perfect understanding. So God's strength and power are never used arbitrarily - but always to good purpose. God knows everything so God knows what to do, how and when, in order to achieve the best results for his glory and our good. We *don't* know everything, so we often don't understand why God does or doesn't do certain things. We have to trust Father - remember Jesus' words: "... unless you change and become like little children ..." (Matthew 18:3).

God has infinite knowledge. He knows all there is to know. He knows all things completely. He knows all things all at the same moment. He knows all things as they really are. The Psalmist speaks of this all-embracing knowledge in Psalm 139:1-4: "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD." These words are as challenging as they are comforting! The apostle Paul finds the thought of God's infinite knowledge so awesome that he breaks out in praise as he writes to the Roman Christians: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:33)

This total knowledge is the basis of God's judgements. No human judge or jury can possibly know *all* the facts relevant to a case; so all human judgement is flawed for lack of knowledge. God's judgements are not limited in this way. Knowing everything he can make true judgements. The writer to the Hebrews recognises this as he says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13) When God finally calls all men to account it will be on the basis of his perfect knowledge and understanding - of every cause and motive. There will be no escaping this piercing knowing. As the Psalmist discovered there is no distance or darkness

that can hide anyone from the knowing of God (Psalm 139:7-12). So too, we know that God will bring about justice for his own people - this is the basis of the prophetic hope of God's people.

A remarkable thing we discover is that God's knowledge not only covers all that *is* but also all that *might have been* - he knows all the possibilities. In Matthew 11:20-24 is an interesting passage in which Jesus is denouncing some of the towns of Galilee because of their failure to repent when he taught in them and demonstrated the Kingdom through his working of miracles. He compares the towns to Tyre and Sidon and even Sodom, ancient cities upon whom God's judgement had fallen. He declares that if these ancient cities had seen his miracles and heard the revelation he brought, then they *would have repented*. In fact, he says their judgement at the end will be less severe than that for Bethsaida, Korazin and Capernaum! In other words he says that God knows all the answers to the "What if ..." questions we ask. What if someone had not heard the gospel properly before they died? What if someone had been born to a different family? What about the generations that never had an opportunity to hear the gospel and repent? God knows all the answers and judges accordingly.

To cap it all, God not only knows all that has been, all that is and all that might have been, he also knows what is to come! He knows the future. The prophet Isaiah sums this up when he records God's words: "... I am God and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." (Isaiah 46:10). This knowing by God of the future is the basis of predictive prophecy. God tells his prophets what is going to happen because he knows it is going to happen, because he is in control of all that happens anyway!

How this knowledge of God relates to human freedom of decision and activity is not at all easy, and better minds than yours and mine have debated it for many centuries. What is clear in this relationship is that God's foreknowing of events does not remove the responsibility from those who carry out those events. Destiny and responsibility are equal realities working in tension with each other. To our minds this is what we call a *paradox* - an apparently self-contradictory statement. Our Christian faith is full of paradox. The greatest is the incarnation - God and Man in the same person! But to

keep to our subject, God's knowledge and predestining of events in no way devolves people of responsibility for their actions.

Consider the Pharaoh of Egypt in Moses' day. We read in Exodus 4:21 that when Moses returns to Egypt and shows him God's power, God "will harden his heart" with the result that he will not let the people go. Then Moses is to tell Pharaoh that, because he will not let the people go, God will kill his firstborn son. That seems tough on Pharaoh - but remember God knows everything, even Pharaoh's secret heart and motives, and God acts in accordance with this knowledge.

In the New Testament we see the case of Judas. In John 17:12 Jesus says of his disciples, "None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction ..." He had indeed known from the outset who would betray him (see John 13:11); but this knowledge in no way excused Judas, nor took away his guilt.

Or consider the words of Peter to those of his generation who had brought about Jesus' death. "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by *God's set purpose and foreknowledge*; and *you*, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." (Acts 2:22-23, my italics). A few days later Peter accuses them once again, "*You* disowned the Holy and Righteous One ... *You* killed the author of life ..." (Acts 3:14-15, my italics). And he then commands them to repent. God planned it all in his complete knowing, but they are still held responsible.

Finally, look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:7. Jesus has commented on the dreadful judgement that will come upon those who cause children to sin. He goes on to say, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" Dreadful and awful things do indeed come in life - rape, forced prostitution, abuse and murder; they do come, but God's plans and purpose somehow take them all in and justice will prevail and those responsible will be held to account. That is our confidence and our hope - because God knows *all* things.

Everywhere present

Our knowledge is limited because *we* are limited to being in one place at one time and only able to observe what is happening then and there. (Even TV and the Internet of the computer world cannot give us access to all that is happening everywhere at a given moment!) But God is not limited in that way - he is *omnipresent* - all present, existing everywhere at the same moment. This is not to be mistaken for *Pantheism* - that is the belief that God is the same as nature, that all things are a part of God. That way of thinking lies behind the New Age Movement and is quite distinct from the Bible's teaching, which assures us that God is clearly *separate* from all nature (in fact he created it), but nevertheless intimately involved with it. There is no part of the universe where God *isn't* - except perhaps Hell, whatever exactly that is (that would take another book!). God is in all creation but is in no way limited by it. There is no place to go to escape him, and no place where he cannot lay his loving hand upon us - see Psalm 139:7-10 again. In Isaiah 66:1 God declares, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool" - so what made them think they could shut him up in a temple?

There is an exciting picture of this 'everywhereness' of God in Ezekiel 1. The prophet has been taken into exile along with many of God's people. They are lamenting that they have been abandoned by God, for they believe God's power and influence stopped at the border of their land: "How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" they ask (Psalm 137:4). Then, right there in Babylon, Ezekiel has an awesome vision of the throne of God and its all-whirring wheels and all-seeing eyes. God's throne is mobile! He sees them and is ruling over them right where they are! He is not shut up in the Temple in Jerusalem, he is there in Babylon.

God can be everywhere at the same time because he is so BIG, as we saw earlier. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" he asks (Jeremiah 23:24). Such a God cannot be contained in a temple, a cathedral, a church or any such structure. Nor can he be contained in our little minds and imaginings. He is ALL-POWERFUL, ALL-KNOWING and ALL-PRESENT!

Summary:

- God's capabilities are expressed in terms of his: *omnipotence* (he is all-powerful); *omniscience* (he is all-knowing); *omnipresence* (he is all-present).

Chapter 5

Does God control Everything?

One of the most frequent titles for God in the Bible is “Sovereign LORD”. This is how the NIV translators chose to represent in English the Hebrew use of two words together, both meaning Lord: *adonai* is the *title* ‘Lord’, while *Yahweh* is God’s *personal name*, represented as LORD. Since ‘the Lord LORD’ sounds a little awkward in English they translated the phrase as *Sovereign LORD*. So Jeremiah exclaims, “Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” (Jeremiah 32:17) There is nothing beyond God’s control. There is no-one higher than he. He is supreme ruler of the universe. King David gives expression to this truth in one of the greatest praise prayers in the Old Testament: “Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.” (1 Chronicles 29:10-13) It would be difficult to say it more comprehensively than that! God is sovereign - he rules over all.

Now this doesn’t mean that God *makes* happen all that happens - that would be to reduce God to a sort of personalised *Fate*. What it does mean is that *nothing, absolutely nothing*, is beyond God’s control or overruling influence. Consider the story of Job. God doesn’t *make* all those terrible things happen to Job, but God *is* totally in control from start to finish. Read

the book! We don't understand why God allows evil so much room at times; Job didn't, and God never explained things to Job! But we do know that our God is in charge. Not evil people. Not a mean fate. Not Evolution. Not aliens from another galaxy. Not our genes. Not an impersonal Destiny. **GOD IS IN CONTROL.**

He does as he wills

God's sovereignty means that ultimately all things will submit to *his* will and serve *his* purpose. In Daniel 4:35 Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king of Babylon, restored from a period of madness, acknowledges the Most High God and says of him: "He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'"

Similarly Job, in the turmoil of his suffering and questioning of God, declares of him, "But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases." (Job 23:13) At this point Job's recognition of God's sovereign rights is grudging and bitter, because God will not answer his complaint of the seeming injustice of his sufferings. After God displays his incredible power to him, however, Job repents of his attitude and acknowledges, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted." (Job 42:2)

We can submit quietly to the dealings of God, even when we don't understand them, or we can fight and complain. Either way, he will have his way in the end. It is his right as our Creator and Father. But God does not deal with us in an arbitrary or capricious way. What he does is directed always to an end purpose - his plan to reconcile all things in heaven and earth to himself through Christ (Colossians 1:20). This is the goal of history. The events of our lives, and indeed the events that shape whole nations and peoples, are not meaningless or random. History has a purpose and a direction, and all things - even the most evil, the most painful, the most perplexing things - will ultimately serve his redeeming purpose. God is the God of history. God's desire and purpose is to save and to reconcile, and he patiently endures the evil ways of men and women as he directs history to his end. "I make known

the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” (Isaiah 46:10)

He does not change

Our Christian hope, of resurrection and eternal life, rests on the stated purposes of God. If God were like us humans, we would never be able to trust his word. We are fickle and inconsistent. Sometimes we mean well, but circumstances change and, well, things just don't happen as we intended. But we can trust God's word and we can know he will perform because he does not change. We speak of this quality of absolute consistency as God's *immutability*.

In Numbers 23:19 the pagan prophet Balaam, called in by Balak the king of Moab to curse the people of Israel, instead finds himself as the mouthpiece of God and declares, “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?” Much later in Israel's history the prophet called Malachi reminds the people that the only reason they are not destroyed is because God is faithful to his word: “I the LORD do not change. So you, descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.” (Malachi 3:6) God will be loyal to his covenant with his people come what may; they may be fickle and faithless, but he will be constant.

God's word is dependable because God's nature and character are unchanging. James, in his letter (1:17), puts it like this: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” God does not change with regard to his character, his power, his plans or his promises. “The word of our God stands forever” declares Isaiah (40:8).

So what do we make of statements in the Bible about God changing his mind? For instance, in Exodus 32:14 we read how God listened to Moses' prayer and “relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.” This brings us back to the mystery of the relationship between a sovereign God and people fully accountable for their actions. God responds to believing and responsible prayer. There is no inconsistency here. Moses' appeal is for God to remain true to his promises to their forefathers. The

people are still punished for their wilful disobedience, but they are not totally destroyed. God remains true to his character. What is at stake here is *Moses'* integrity. When God tests Moses with the offer of starting again through Moses' descendants, Moses rejects this as it would compromise God's reputation. God responds to Moses' loyalty.

The same principle is spelled out in an important encounter which the prophet Jeremiah had with God in the Potter's house (Jeremiah 18:1-12). God shows him that Israel and Judah - indeed any nation - is to God like clay in the potter's hand. He moulds it one way, but if the clay is unyielding and not malleable in his hands, he moulds it into a different shape. The potter does not change, but he responds to the 'feel' of the clay. So God tells the prophet that if any nation which God threatens to destroy repents, then he will relent and not destroy it. Equally, if a nation that God has blessed turns to evil, then God will reconsider the good he had intended for it. God responds to the 'feel' of the nation in his hands. The changing is on the part of the nation. God remains faithful to his character.

So we have confidence that God will never change in his character, plans and purposes. He only changes in his dealings with changeable men, in order to remain true to his own character. A fire will warm and comfort you if you keep a safe distance. The same fire will burn and hurt you if you stick your hand in it. The fire does not change - it is simply true to its nature. The change in your response to the fire is what makes the difference. Respect it and it will 'bless' you; abuse it and it will 'punish' you! Remember the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, *for our God is a consuming fire.*" (Hebrews 12:28-29, my italics)

He seeks his own Glory

The idea of God as a blazing fire leads us to the thought of God's glory - the resplendent majesty of his nature; the beauty and magnificence of his being. God will perform all he promises not, ultimately, for our sake but for the glory of his name. He reveals to Isaiah that the destiny of Israel in judgement and redemption is not for Israel's sake, but "For my own sake, for

my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.” (Isaiah 48:11) The end of all things is the glory of God. The Glory of God is something awesome. When people experienced it in the manifestation of his presence they were overwhelmed - at the dedication of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35); at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1-4); Isaiah’s vision of the throne (Isaiah 6:3-5); Ezekiel’s vision of the majesty (Ezekiel 1:4-28); John’s vision of the risen, reigning Christ (Revelation 1:9-18).

The Glory of God - his majesty, his splendour, his reputation - that is the ultimate motive that keeps God in perfect control of everything. It is only as we also adopt his glory as our real goal in life that we will live on the highest plane of our being, in harmony with the purposes of God. Let’s not speak lightly of the Glory; but rather, in reverence and fear, honour it with all our lives.

Summary:

- God is *sovereign*; he is ultimately in control of everything. He *does as he wills*.
- God does not change (he is *immutable*).
- God seeks *his own glory*.

Chapter 6

What sort of Person is God?

So far we have looked at the nature and capabilities of God. It is as if someone has asked the question, “What is so-and-so like?” - and the answer comes, “Oh, he’s six feet tall, well-built, with fair hair and blue eyes, speaks three languages, is a champion cross-country runner and is as strong as an ox!” “No!” comes back the reply. “I mean, what is he *like*, what sort of person is he? What’s his *character* like?” So then, what is God’s character like?

He is holy

We tend to think of holiness in a rather negative way, as the absence of sin. In reality, especially when we consider *God’s* holiness, we must think in very positive terms. In the Old Testament particularly, holiness is the attribute by which God wanted to be especially known. In Leviticus 11:44 God explains to the Israelites why all the sacrifices and priestly duties laid down in that book are necessary: “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.” In Psalm 22:3 David records how he cries out to God to help him and finds confidence as he confesses: “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One ...” Isaiah’s favourite title for God is “The Holy One of Israel”; and Ezekiel states time and again that God’s great acts of redemption and judgement are so that the nations may know that he is the LORD, the Holy One (see Ezekiel 39:7 for example). In the New Testament Jesus is seen as the Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3:14); and of course the Spirit is ever and again the “*Holy Spirit*”.

Behind the word ‘holy’ lies the basic idea of *separation*; God is separate from and exalted above all his creatures. He is also separated from all moral evil and sin. As the prophet Habakkuk testifies, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil ...” (Habakkuk 1:13). God is holy in his very being, not just in his willing and doing. God is absolutely pure and beyond the possibility of evil in any form. Thus holiness is God’s primary characteristic. Every other aspect of God’s character and all of God’s activities are controlled by his holiness. God *cannot* love in an impure way; he *cannot* judge unjustly; he *cannot* use his power to evil ends. All his motives and acts are regulated by his holiness.

God’s government, his kingship, is based on his holiness. When Isaiah had his awesome vision of God on his throne, he heard the angels crying out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Isaiah 6:3) Similarly, when John has his vision of the throne of God he hears the angelic beings declaring “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” (Revelation 4:8) All God’s dealings with mankind are related to his holiness - that is why we dare approach him only on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus having atoned for our sin (see Hebrews 10:19-22) - else we would be burned up in the fire of his absolute purity. We can no more approach the throne of God unprotected by the life-blood of Jesus than we can look into the midday sun without permanently damaging our eyes.

We do well to remember always that we have to relate with a holy God, who has not ceased to be holy because he has loved us and become our Father. Rather, in that wonderful relationship, he calls us up to be holy as he is holy. Peter reminds the New Testament believers that the command to be holy is as true for them as it was for the nation of Israel: “But just as he who called you as holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:16) Indeed, the name given to the early believers by the apostle Paul is ‘saints’ - the Greek word means ‘holy ones’ (*sancti* in Latin).

He is righteous and just

Despite what popular ‘science’ tries to tell us, we do not live in a simply mechanical universe at the mercy of the random influence of evolution; nor do we live in a ‘clockwork’ universe, created by God, ‘wound up’ and then left to its own devices. Our Biblical worldview demands that we understand that we live in a universe governed by moral principles which flow out of the moral character of God. God has instituted a *moral government* into the world, which governs the life of mankind and his relationship to the rest of creation. This is why ecological and environmental issues *must* be of concern to Christians - though this is too wide an issue to develop here. God’s righteousness and justice govern the affairs of *all the earth*, not just the things related to our salvation and the life of the Church.

Human responsibility and accountability are real because God is righteous and just and makes just and righteous demands upon his creatures. God’s righteousness and justice are the standard for his, and of all proper, government. I think this is what Paul means in Romans 13:1 when he says: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” Government - in home, church, workplace and state - is important to God. It is there to administer *his* justice, and *he* will call it to account if it does not! Any just act is pleasing to God, whether it is carried out by a believer or a non-believer - and conversely any unjust act *displeases* him whoever is responsible.

The justice of God means that *all* God’s acts are just, whatever they may seem from our human perspective. “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” So declares the great prophetic song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:4). It doesn’t always feel that way to us, and sometimes we echo Job’s anguished cry, “Why *me*, Lord?” But if we really believe that God is just, we must acknowledge that this is true in everything and every situation, even the most painful and puzzling ones - as Job himself would come to admit. The Psalmist too affirms, “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep.” (Psalm 36:6)

The justice of God will find its perfect human expression in the Messianic King who will come to rule the nations in God's name. Psalm 72:2 says of him: "He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice." The prophets refer again and again to this final demonstration of God's justice in redemption of the righteous and judgement upon the wicked through the reign of Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the descendant of David with divine authority. This is, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul tells the philosophers of Athens: "For he (God) has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:31)

God's justice demands that sin must be punished, so what chance do you and I stand? None, were it not for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus when he met the penalty of death passed upon us, taking our punishment so that we could be acquitted and freed from the threat of eternal death. Look at Romans 3:21-26 for Paul's full statement of this incredible truth. God's justice cannot, will not be denied. The wicked who have not availed themselves of salvation through faith according to God's gracious offer, will be destroyed. The righteous through faith - there is no other adequate righteousness - will inherit eternal life. The apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonian Christians, encourages them to stand firm in trial. For all that they are enduring, he tells them, "is evidence that God's judgement is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled ..." (2 Thess 1:5-7). God is just. Our faith and our hope rest on it.

He is true

God is ultimate reality. Everything about him is true - reliable, trustworthy, of the utmost integrity. Everything which comes from God conforms to reality. There is no deception, no hidden motives, no half-truth coming from him. Because God is truth, he speaks truth and is faithful. The Psalmist affirms: "For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does." (33:4) In his wonderful prayer, recorded in John 17, the Lord Jesus asks of the Father for his disciples: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (verse 17)

The ultimate expression of God's truth in his dealings with mankind is in the person of Jesus himself. He is the embodiment of truth, of reality. There is no final reality outside of him. All that men deem true will prove false and illusory. Only Christ, and those who are incorporated into him by grace through faith, will experience ultimate reality. In John 14:6 Jesus makes a definitive and exclusive claim: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." There is no way into the heart and presence of the True God other than through the Truth incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is holy; he is righteous and just; he is true. Those qualities seem to set him so far away from us - but there is more to his character yet to bring us closer to his heart.

Summary:

- God's character is: *holy; righteous and just; true and faithful.*

Chapter 7

How does God feel about People?

The various aspects of God's nature and character that we have considered so far inspire a sense of awe and wonder, perhaps even some fear that this is the kind of God we are in relationship with. But this is a healthy fear - this fear of the Lord. It does us no harm to recollect that the God we love and serve is holy, just and true and dwells in unimaginable splendour; that his majesty, power and authority are immense and absolute; that we could not know him at all apart from Jesus, and that we can only approach him because of Jesus' redeeming sacrifice. But God has revealed other sides of his character too, which give us the confidence to reach out to him as our Father in the heavens.

He is Good

In Mark 10:18 Jesus challenges the words of the rich young man who had addressed him as "Good Teacher ...". Jesus, challenging him to think about the implications of his words, responds, "Why do you call me good? No-one is good - except God alone." There is only one who can truly be called good and that is God himself - he is the ultimate expression of goodness. He is a good God. That could not be said of many other so-called gods - like those of the Greeks and Romans who were prey to the same weaknesses and passions as humans. It could not be said of the capricious deities of Israel's neighbours in Old Testament days. The Psalmist rejoices in the fact that "the LORD is good and his love endures for ever, his faithfulness continues through

all generations.” (Psalm 100:5) God’s goodness is expressed in a number of ways.

Goodness expressed in love

We can best understand God’s love not as a sentiment or feeling, but as the desire to communicate with mankind, to share himself in fellowship with us. God has chosen to love us - not because we deserve his love or can do anything to earn it, but because he has chosen to love us. This was the experience of Israel whom God chose as his special nation, not because of any special qualities *they* possessed, but simply because he loved them. Moses reminds the people in his great farewell address: “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you ...” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). The prophet Jeremiah, even as he denounces their sin and threatens imminent punishment, reminds the people of God’s words in the past: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

The New Testament takes a leap forward in terms of its understanding of the revelation that God’s love is not reserved for Israel, but is to be expressed to all the world. John, in his account of the Gospel, tells us that “God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son ...” (John 3:16). Later, in one of his letters, he tells us that God’s very nature is love and that the measure of all love is “not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10) God’s love is boundless and measureless - awesome in its extent and depth. For if he loves the whole world to that extent, how much more must he delight to love those who, through faith, have embraced *the Beloved* and become inextricably bound up in the love relationship between the Father and the Son!

Goodness expressed in mercy

Another way in which the goodness of God is shown is in his *mercy*. Mercy is love and compassion in action. This strange world in which we live which pays homage to film and sports ‘stars’ and grants them status through wealth and fame, nonetheless recognises in someone like Mother Theresa the value of mercy. But it is rarely rewarded! The real heroes of our generation

are surely the unsung mercy-givers, working in refugee camps and forgotten places, risking, indeed sometimes sacrificing, their lives to help the victims of civil war, drought and disease. Every such action reflects the heart of God. His compassion has been put into action supremely through Jesus to deliver us from the degradations and distress of sin. Paul reminds the Ephesians of the extent of God's mercy: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is *rich in mercy*, made us alive with Christ ..." (Ephesians 2:4).

In one of the great prayers of the Old Testament, Nehemiah, leading the returned exiles in confession of their sins, recalls God's dealings with an earlier generation: "But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God." (Nehemiah 9:31) Through the prophets God makes clear time and again to Israel that he expects them to show mercy to the poor and those in distress, (see, for example, Micah 6:8), just as he had shown mercy to the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt. How much more then will he expect us to be mercy-givers who have experienced an even greater deliverance.

Goodness expressed in kindness

Finally, God's goodness is displayed in his *kindness* - his tenderness and benevolence to *all* his creatures. Psalm 145:9 tells us: "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made." Jesus teaches his disciples that they must be sons of their Father in heaven, who "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45) In Acts 14:17 Paul tells the pagan people of Lystra that God's testimony of his existence and care has been in the kindness he has shown by giving them rain and crops in their season. It is clear that, in Paul's thinking, this unselective kindness of God is the means by which he prepares people for the call to repentance through the preaching of the gospel. Writing to the Romans and addressing those who are tempted to pass judgement on others, he asks: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's *kindness* leads you towards repentance?" (Romans 2:4) It is not always the threat of judgement that is effective in bringing people into the Kingdom. God uses kindness to pave the way for encounter with his word and his Spirit. Perhaps less words and more kind acts and attitudes may prove effective for us too!

He is wise

Not only is God good - loving, merciful and kind - but he is also *wise*. The Psalmist exclaims, “How many are your works, O LORD! In *wisdom* you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.” (Psalm 104:24) The whole of creation is an expression of the wisdom of God, and usually works quite well - until humankind, in *its* ‘wisdom’ interferes! Daniel, after God had revealed to him the king’s dream, declares that it is God who “gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.” (Daniel 2:21)

Put very simply, God’s wisdom means that God knows exactly *what* to do, and *when* and *how* to do it. The fact that his wisdom is greater than ours is obvious - but we do not always acknowledge that fact readily! Like Adam and Eve we often ‘eat of the tree of knowledge’ and go our own way about things - and only later, sometimes out of pain, realise that God ‘knew best’ after all. Children sometimes have to be told that Mum or Dad knows best - and as children of our Father in the heavens we do well to trust our Father’s wisdom. Paul tells us that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ (Colossians 2:2-3). It is in our relationship with Jesus Christ, through the counsel of the Holy Spirit, that we will learn the true wisdom of the Father’s heart. That wisdom is not first a concern of the intellect, but of the heart. It is the knowledge of what is *right*, and what is the *right* time and the *right* way. Everything that God has done, is doing and will do for our salvation and benefit is directed by his wisdom, however foolish those ways may look to men and women. After all, at the heart of God’s wisdom is the folly of the Cross!

He is patient

In Numbers 14:18 Moses is appealing to God on behalf of the rebellious people; he reminds God of his own declaration: “The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished ...” God’s justice demands that sin must be punished. God’s compassion wants to forgive. The result is God’s *patience* - the restraint of his righteous anger and judgement in the face of mankind’s rebellion and sin; his forbearance with mankind.

We might see God here as a parent dealing with a child. Boundaries have been laid down and transgressed. Punishment is due; but Mum and Dad don't want to react too quickly - perhaps the instruction was not clearly understood; perhaps he acted out of frustration because Mum or Dad were too busy to listen to him. Patience is required - so that punishment is a just response, and not an angry reaction. In a sense this was what Moses was asking of God - please don't act hastily, be patient. And God is! Look at the centuries that have passed - and still God waits! Look at the degradations to which people have sunk - and still God waits! The apostle Peter forewarns us that in the last days people will mock God's patience: "Where is this 'coming' he promised?" they will say. But Peter appeals to us to remember that "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" (2 Peter 3:9, my italics). But the Day of the Lord *will* come with its judgement. God will not wait for ever. Nonetheless, as Peter goes on to say, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation ..." (verse 15). Paul likewise, in Romans 2:4, lists God's patience, with his kindness and tolerance, as a means of leading people to repentance.

We can be happy that God's patience gives us the room, time after time, to repent. But, like a wilful child, we must beware lest we presume upon his patience once too often! His disciplining hand, though necessary, can be painful.

He is gracious

The grace of God is seen in his goodness to those who are ill-deserving of his love. That means all of us. It is only by grace that we experience salvation. It is only because of his grace that we dare approach his throne in prayer. Like a King extending his sceptre in a gesture of mercy and acceptance, instead of dismissing us for summary execution, God draws us to the throne of his grace (Hebrews 4:16).

The apostle Paul reminds the Ephesians of the wonder of God's grace: it is *glorious* (Ephesians 1:6); it is *incomparably rich* (2:7). Peter reminds us that God is "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). Grace is the distinguishing mark of all God's dealings with us. Even to Moses and Israel this was the

signature of God: “And he (God) passed in front of Moses proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness ...’” (Exodus 34:6-7) God’s grace is our security and comfort, the key to our salvation, and the means of our own service - the resource by which we live, his own goodness, wisdom and patience shared with us through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.

Summary:

- God is *good*; his goodness is expressed in his *love, mercy* and *kindness*.
- God is *wise*.
- God is *patient*.
- God is *gracious*.

Chapter 8

God and me

So that's what God is like! How did you get on with Theology? Understanding God, and talking about his nature and character, certainly stretches our *minds*. But more than that, it expands our *hearts* and leads us to worship with greater feeling and content, as our own spirits seek intimacy with the Spirit of God. Like every relationship, our relationship with God grows and develops with greater knowledge and understanding. Love grows deeper and richer as we understand more of those we love. To really *know* God in an intimate and personal way has always been the desire of men and women of the past whose lives inspire us with their dedication and holiness. The Father's heart and desire is for his people to know him intimately and love him deeply. The shallow knowing and loving of so many in the Church must be a source of frustration to him.

So much that passes for worship is centred on our own experience or feelings, and is consequently shallow and superficial. True worship focuses upon God himself, recognising his value, his 'worth-ship'. He is the Creator and Sustainer and goal of all things - and he is our Father! However warm and comfortable we feel in the experience of fatherhood, that must never cause us to forget who he is. Our thinking about his nature and character makes us wonder the more at the grace which seeks us out to be his children. This wonderful, majestic and all-powerful God actually *wants* to be our Father and to lavish his love on us.

The magnitude of this truth is what grips the heart of the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Ephesians, in the first chapter - one of the greatest passages of Paul's writings - he talks of the "glorious grace which he has *freely given*

us in the One he loves” (verse 6) and also of “the riches of God’s grace that he *lavished* on us with all wisdom and understanding” (verse 8). And then, to bring the point clearly home, he writes: “*And you also were included* when you heard the word of truth ...” (verse 13, my italics). By drawing us to himself through his grace God has *included you and me* in his family.

When I was a boy I suffered from asthma and was consequently physically rather puny. When the time came for picking sides for playground games or teams for class games lessons, I was usually the last picked - if at all! It is an awful feeling, being left out. Many people feel rejected and betrayed in far more serious ways than that, and most of us have felt left out in some way or other. But the wonderful thing is that God *hasn't* left us out - he has *picked us for his team!* It's not so much that God is on our side - rather, *we* are on *his!* And his side is guaranteed to win!

God has a ‘game-plan’ far more serious than any football team. Paul explains that plan to the Ephesians in this way (as paraphrased in *The Message*): “He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.” (Ephesians 1:9-10) That’s where God is going and he has recruited us to work with him. He has no less a goal than to bring absolutely everything everywhere under the government of the Lord Jesus Christ - and we are his army!

It is a mind-boggling thought to me that God not only loves me enough to lavish his grace on me in salvation, but that he actually wants me to be in on his plan to bring everything under Jesus’ control. He has included me!

“How great is God - beyond our understanding!” declares Elihu in his defence of God against Job’s accusation. We have only dipped our toes into the vast ocean of the knowledge of God - but even a paddle is invigorating and refreshing! However much we explore, and however much we discover, God will always be greater, more majestic and more wonderful than we understand. To try to know and understand God and his ways is to set out on a wonderful journey. Hopefully this little book will help you to set out with joyful anticipation.

The amazing thing is that this God whose nature and character we have begun to talk about and wonder at, actually cares for you and me on an individual and personal level, and has gone to the most extraordinary lengths to express his desire and purpose to reconcile us to himself, despite our sin and frail humanness. But the story of *how* he has done that won't fit into these pages!

“Dad, does God really love *me*?”

“Yes, son, he really does love *you*, and so do I! Off to sleep now. Good-night and God bless!”