

INTRODUCTION

A friend once confided to the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'My dearest hope is to leave the world a better place than I found it.' 'Mine,' responded Tennyson, 'is to have a clearer vision of God.' The latter should be the Christian's supreme calling and where it is pursued the former is realized also. For the person who by God's self-revelation begins to see 'the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' and is 'transformed into the same image from glory to glory just as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6) will certainly leave the world a better place than he found it.

For most people today, the vision of God is blurred and distorted. Even if they are prepared to recognise His existence they, by ignorance or unbelief, fail to seek the knowledge of God in the only place where it truly can be found – that is, in His revelation of Himself through Holy Scripture, the Bible. The highest study that can ever engage the human mind is surely the being and character of God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. As we shall see below, it is what we were created for, and because God is infinite it will occupy

and enthral us 'world without end.' To disregard the study of God is to impoverish ourselves. It is to go through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of why we are here and where we are headed.

Consider these often-quoted words of C.H. Spurgeon, in a sermon on Malachi 3:6:

It has been said by someone that 'the proper study of mankind is man.' I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly *improving to the mind* in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, 'Behold, I am wise'. But when we come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with solemn exclamation, 'I am but of yesterday, and know nothing'. No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God ...

But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also *expands* it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe ... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect,

nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.¹

It is a very difficult subject, I know, but it is vitally important. So let us begin at the beginning.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IS OBVIOUS

The Bible nowhere attempts to prove the existence of God. It simply begins with the words, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen. 1:1). The Bible assumes the existence of God. How else could the world have been created, if it was not the work of an intelligent Supreme Being who created it out of nothing? There are those who would say that the creation of the world can be equally well explained as a *chance event*. The problem with that explanation, however, is that you have to believe in a whole series of chance events at incredible odds to account for everything that transpired. To quote John Benton:

If, for example, we look at our own planet, even at the inorganic level, the fact that although there are many stars in the universe of greatly varying sizes, ages and states of stability, yet we just happen to have a nice, middle-aged, friendly one at the centre of our solar system is by chance. The fact that our planet is at just the right distance from the sun, so as to make it neither too hot nor too cold, is by chance. The fact that our planet's size is such that gravity is neither so great as to crush, nor too little so as not to be able to retain atmosphere, is by chance. Again, the helpful rotational period of the planet is neither too slow, so as to cause impossible temperature variations, nor too fast so as to cause impossible cyclonic conditions; that also is a

1. C.H. Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit* (Pilgrim Publications, n.d.), 1855: No. 1, p. 1.

chance situation. This continual turning to chance just goes on and on and as yet we have not even begun to talk about the chances surrounding the actual origin of life, the so-called “primeval soup”, or the chances involved in the theories of the evolution of all the species by possible mutations in genetic material ... The account of chance is overdrawn at the bank of credibility.²

God’s creation is a miraculous masterpiece displaying His power and majesty. John Calvin called it a theatre of the glory of God. For those with eyes to see, it is evident that behind the natural order is a mighty and majestic Creator. To deny the existence of God is a sin against knowledge. It is a culpable offence against God as the apostle Paul so plainly states in Romans 1:18-25,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie [of idolatry], and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

2. John Benton, *Is Christianity True?* (Evangelical Press, 1988), p. 48.

This reliable evidence from the natural order constitutes the content of general revelation, so called because everyone receives it just by virtue of living in the world, beholding and enjoying God's creation. This knowledge of the existence of God has been part of human experience since the beginning of history. In Acts 17:27-28 Paul quotes a Greek poet as witness that human beings acknowledge their divine creation. Talking to the philosophers in Athens, he says, 'He [God] is not far from each of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said: "For we are also His offspring."' He also affirms the goodness of the Creator: '...the living God ... in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with good and gladness' (Acts 14:16-17). Moreover at least some of the demands of His holy law are known to every human conscience, bringing the fear of accountability and eventual retributive judgment (Rom. 2:14-15; 1:32). Failure to thank and serve the Creator in righteousness is sin against the universal revelation of His almighty power, supreme praiseworthiness, and moral claim on all human beings. Most people, looking at our universe, see the hand of design, not the blind stumbling of chance. The case for the existence of God is very plain. It does not need to be proved to an open and honest mind. All human beings have a deep inner sense that God exists, 'because what may be known of God is manifest to them, for God has shown it to them' (Rom. 1:19). It is something that remains in all of us, because we are created in the image of God. Sin cannot get rid of it. That is Paul's sweeping claim.

THE LIVING GOD IS A SELF-REVEALING GOD

To love and serve the Creator in righteousness, men and women need something more than an awareness of His existence through general revelation. Humankind also needs to know who and what He is, where He can be found, and how He may be approached. This knowledge only God Himself can reveal to us, and so He supplemented general revelation with the further revelation of Himself as the God and Saviour of sinners through Jesus Christ. This revelation, given over many centuries and recorded in the Bible, is called special revelation because it was specifically given to some for the benefit of all. Through it God revealed the nature of His being, character and will to 'holy men of God' whom He called His prophets, and what He revealed to them, they in turn recorded in the Bible for all humanity. All the books of the Bible owe their origin to God. 'For', says the apostle Peter, 'prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet. 1:21). Paul says, 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God' [literally, 'is God-breathed', 2 Tim. 3:16]. So the words they wrote were the very words God intended to be the means of revealing His glorious attributes and gracious purposes. As a result, we do not have to guess what God is like. God, through the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New, has told us all we need to know about Himself in order to worship and serve Him aright. But why was His self-revelation necessary? The Bible gives us two answers.

Because God is invisible

The Bible tells us that God is a Spirit (John 4:24). He does not have a body, as we do. He is invisible. The apostle Paul says that He is a God 'whom no man has

seen or can see' (1 Tim. 6:16), so He cannot be known or measured by our physical senses. It is true that we sometimes read in the Bible of His eyes, His ears, His mouth, and so on, but these are just human figures of speech, or anthropomorphisms. They cannot be taken literally, because God has no body. They are simply a way of telling us that God sees and hears everything, and that God can communicate with us. When the Bible says that some people saw God, it means that they saw the glory of God, but not God Himself; just as we do not see the sun itself, but the sunshine. Only in heaven shall we see God, because only then shall we be given new spiritual faculties which will enable us to see Him like the angels do. Meanwhile, God remains invisible to us. However, we must not think of Him as simply an invisible force like the wind or electricity or magnetism. God is a personal Spirit. He is not a something, but *Someone*. He is not a supreme power (deism), but a Supreme Being (theism) whom the Bible says has all the attributes of personality. God thinks, God communicates, God loves, God has a will and acts upon it. Psalm 94:9-10 says, 'He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? He who instructs the nations, shall He not correct?'

Indeed, God is not only personal but goes beyond our ordinary concept of personality. There is a superabundance of personality in God, for He is tri-personal. He exists in the mystery of the Trinity: one God in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who are not three gods, but one God. These are facts about God that we could never have known, unless God in His goodness chose to reveal them to us through His prophets and apostles.

Secondly, it was necessary for God to reveal Himself to mankind –

Because God is infinite

Finite man cannot possibly comprehend the nature of the being and character of God, the Creator, who is infinite. The idea of such a task moves us to identify with the words of Zophar in Job 11:7-9, 'Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.' Truly, when we try, for example, to fathom God's eternity, His omnipresence, His omniscience, His omnipotence, our minds are overwhelmed. But as A.W. Pink cautions: 'The incomprehensibility of the Divine nature is not a reason why we should desist from reverent inquiry and prayerful strivings to apprehend what He has so graciously revealed of Himself in His word.'³

Now in the Bible the infinity of God is usually contrasted with the finiteness of man. Man is confined and limited, but God is infinite, unlimited, boundless, immeasurable in every part of His being. For example, when we think of God and space, He is *everywhere*. Jeremiah 23:24 says, "'Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?'" says the LORD. "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD.' What an amazing truth! Most people think that God is stationed in heaven; but God is an infinite Spirit and the totality of His being fills all places at all times. There is, of course, a particular manifestation of His presence in heaven on His throne; but His essence is as much on earth as it is in heaven. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in the fifth century, said, 'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.' It is a difficult concept. Our finite minds cannot take

3. A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Baker Book House, 2004), p. 88.

it in. All we can do is believe what God has declared concerning Himself and bow in worship and wonder.

In relation to time, God is *eternal*. There are three types of existence according to Scripture. There is *life that begins and then ends*, which is the life of plants and animals. Then there is *life that begins but has no end*. This is the life God has given to angels and men. Men and angels will spend eternity either in bliss or in misery. And then, again, there is *life that has neither beginning nor ending*. Such is the amazing duration of God's existence. Moses says, 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God' (Ps. 90:2). Everything owes its beginning to God, but He Himself has no beginning. He is the God who is, who always has been, and always will be. All things depend on Him for their existence, but His own existence does not depend on anything or anyone other than Himself.

When it comes to knowledge, God *knows everything*. Psalm 147:5 says, 'Great is our Lord ...

His understanding is infinite.' As humans, we learn by degrees. We increase in knowledge, but our knowledge is always limited. For God, however, there is no such thing as learning or gaining knowledge. He has always known all things as they really are. There is nothing of which He is ignorant or uncertain, and that means He cannot be surprised or deceived.

Again, in the realm of power, God is *almighty*. Psalm 115:3 says, 'Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.' He has unlimited power which, guided by His infinite wisdom, always does what is right; and guided by His infinite purity, always does what is good. So although what God says about Himself is clear enough, it is all too wonderful for our finite

minds to comprehend. We cannot take it in, because God's thoughts and God's ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). We can see the truth of all the above, but we cannot explain *how* it can be so. Only God can fathom God (1 Cor. 2:11). Can anyone explain how it is possible for God to exist as a personal being, without a body? Or how He can see without eyes, or hear without ears, or speak without a mouth? Can anyone grasp how all of God can be in all places at all times? Or how He can be without beginning and without end? Our puny minds are baffled when we try to think of what it means to be all-knowing, or how God can be the author of all things and not be the author of sin? Truly, no question about God that contains the word *how* can be answered. Our finite minds are too poor for that.

Questions, however, that contain the word *what* can be answered plainly and clearly, because God has revealed the answers in the Bible. We are able to study what God has said in His word, and we are able to know what the truth is, but we are not able to explain how it can be so. We are overwhelmed by what we learn. The more we consider it, the more we realise that there is no appropriate reaction to what we have learned other than to fall down and adore Him, our great and awesome Creator. We rejoice that God in His goodness has revealed so much about Himself in Scripture, and we trust His perfect wisdom in choosing to reveal no more. For as mere creatures we would never have known what the invisible and infinite God was like, but what He has revealed is surely more than enough to make us true worshippers of Him. This is what Moses is saying in Deuteronomy 29:29, 'The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.'

For those who are seeking to correctly evaluate the evidence at hand, everything in nature and everything in Scripture proves clearly that God exists and that He is the almighty and all-wise Creator that Scripture describes Him to be. 'Therefore,' says Wayne Grudem, 'when we believe that God exists, we are basing our belief *not* on some blind hope apart from any evidence, but on *an overwhelming amount of reliable evidence from God's word and God's works*. It is a characteristic of true faith that it is a confidence based on reliable evidence, and faith in the existence of God shares this characteristic. Furthermore, these evidences can all be seen as valid proofs for the existence of God, even though some people reject them. This does not mean that the evidence is invalid in itself, only that those who reject the evidence are evaluating it wrongly.'⁴

WHAT IS AN ATTRIBUTE?

An attribute is a quality belonging naturally (intrinsically) to someone or something. It is not the essence of what is being referred to, but a quality characteristic of it. To quote A.W. Tozer, a great American preacher of the twentieth century,

'An attribute of God is not that of which God is composed. The very fact that God is God indicates that God isn't "composed" at all ... Anything that is composed has to have been composed by someone, and the composer is greater than the composition ... But God is not made! Therefore, we cannot say that the attributes are the part of which God is made, because God is not made of parts ... God's attributes are not God ... I say that God is holy, but holiness is not God. I say that God is wisdom, but wisdom is not God. God is God! The Christian believes that God is the original

4. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Zondervan, 1994), p. 143.

existence, that He said 'I AM.' And because God is, everything else that is, is.⁵

What, then, are some of the attributes of God? We cannot find a more simple answer than that given in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism for Children* under the fourth question: 'What is God?' The answer given is short, but sufficient: 'God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.' The attributes of God are the qualities belonging to, or characteristic of Deity, which set Him apart from all of creation and mark the difference and distance between the Creator and His creatures. They are natural and moral qualities relating to His being (or essence) and character. The natural qualities manifest the greatness of God's being, such as His eternity, His omnipotence, His omnipresence, His omniscience, and so on. The moral qualities manifest the goodness of God's character, such as His holiness, His love, His faithfulness, and His justice, to name a few.

CLASSIFYING GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

In studying the attributes of God, it is important to distinguish between those that belong to His being or essence and those that belong to His character. The former are termed his *incommunicable attributes* and the latter His *communicable attributes*. The attributes of God's being are incommunicable because He does not and cannot share or communicate any of them with any other being, human or angelic. They are the unique property of deity. Deity cannot be shared or passed on to other beings because deity is eternal. It has no beginning or end. Thus the first eight chapters of this book deal with the incommunicable attributes of God's being (His

5. A.W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God*, (Christian Publications, 2001), vol. 2, pp. 16-17.

transcendence, triunity, omnipresence, omniscience, wisdom, omnipotence, providence and immutability).

The last seven chapters deal with the communicable attributes of God's character which in His gracious goodness He has and He does share with humankind (His holiness, love, grace, faithfulness, jealousy, wrath and glory). They are communicable, because when God created man, He communicated to him finite qualities corresponding to His own infinite moral attributes. This is what Scripture means when it says that 'God created man in His own image' (Gen. 1:27). God created man a free spiritual being with a nature that was good, holy, loving, truthful and godly, so that he could commune with his Creator and respond to Him. These moral qualities given by God to man, however, were lost at the Fall, from which time the image of God was universally marred in humankind. All men and women are now ungodly by nature (cf. Eccles. 7:29). But God never gives up on His eternal purposes. From the Fall, in fulfilment of His eternal plan of redemption, God has been unceasingly at work in the lives of His believing people to repair His ruined image by communicating these godly moral qualities to them afresh (2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). Only at the resurrection will the image of God be fully restored in His saints, and only in the new heaven and the new earth will redeemed and glorified men and women know as much of the divine character as it is possible for a perfect finite human being to know. So in the end we need to realise that however helpful this distinction may be, there is no divine attribute that is *completely* communicable, because God is infinitely perfect and we can never become as infinitely perfect as God is.

THE INESTIMABLE BLESSING OF KNOWING GOD
PERSONALLY

It is our greatest privilege

We pride ourselves if we know great and important people, but who is greater and more important than Almighty God? Moreover, this is precisely what God created the angels and human beings for. It was not because He needed their company or their worship. Before creation the three persons of the Godhead were completely fulfilled in each other's company, attention and love. 'In the beginning God' (Gen. 1:1). There was no need of anyone or anything else. None! God's creation of men and angels added nothing to His eternal and perfect fullness. His divine glory cannot be increased or decreased. Rather, the creation of men and angels was an act of sovereign grace in which He generously provided them with the unequalled privilege of beholding with rapture the glory of His divine infinite perfections. God's communion with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden at creation was just a foretaste of what was to come for the human race if it continued in sinless fellowship with Him.

Indeed, when the divine plan for creation is finally accomplished by redemption through Christ, Scripture says: 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:9); and again, 'No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD' (Jer. 31:34). Until then we are to continually 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Pet. 3:18).

Our ultimate aim, then, in studying what God has revealed about Himself in the Bible must be to know God personally; to be enraptured with His glory and

love Him forever. God has given us the Bible, not just to fill our heads with lofty and amazing concepts of Himself. The pursuit of theological knowledge for its own sake will only make us proud and conceited. We will tend to look down on those less informed. For as Paul warned the conceited Corinthians, 'Knowledge puffs up, but love [for God] edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him' (1 Cor. 8:1-3). That must be the goal of all our study of God. God in His Word insists on it. He does not want to be just the object of our study, but the object of our love: "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" This is the first and great commandment' (Matt. 22:37-38). It is to be our supreme passion, honour and delight, because God is worthy of no less. 'Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight" says the LORD' (Jer. 9:23-24; cf. Hosea 6:3; Phil. 3:8).

It is our greatest need

Thus our Lord Jesus Christ's prayer for us in John 17:3 is, 'This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.' All who are rightly related to God and His Son, the fountain of life, enjoy eternal life (2 Tim. 1:10). The only reason why human beings die is that sin has cut us off from God. Isaiah 59:2 says, 'Your iniquities have separated you from your God.' Sin cuts us off from the

divine Source of life. The Bible therefore says, 'The soul who sins shall die' (Ezek. 18:20); and again, 'The wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23). That is why God sent His only begotten Son to the world. He came to pay the penalty of our sin by dying in our place on the cross. He came to remove sin's offence. Thus Peter says, 'Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God' (1 Pet. 3:18). Paul states it more fully in 2 Corinthians 5:19-21, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them ... For He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.' Our Lord Jesus said, 'He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him' (John 3:36).

What the Bible is clearly saying is that if we come to Christ in faith, we can be justly pardoned and reconciled to God, the Source of eternal life. Eternal life is not just life that has no end. Life in hell will have no end! Eternal life is to know God and live in the joy and favour of His presence forever. Of course, the fullness of that eternal life and felicity will only be enjoyed in heaven because sin will be no more; 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away' (Rev. 21:4). But even here on earth we can begin to enjoy eternal life in ever-increasing measure as we come to know God more and more through His Son, Jesus Christ (John 5:24). Thus Paul's prayer for every believer in Christ is: 'that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God' (Col. 1:10).

What an inestimable blessing it is to know God! Do not discount it. Heed the words of Job 22:21-22, 'Now acquaint yourself with Him, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you. Receive, please, instruction from His mouth, and lay up His words in your heart.' What instruction has God given us? These are His words: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31); and again, 'Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Jesus is 'able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb. 7:25). If we have not yet done so, let us believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour now, for He will respond immediately to our faith; 'the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out' (John 6:37).

If we are Christians, let us take these words upon our hearts and lips:

Day by day, dear Lord,
 Of Thee three things I pray:
 To see Thee more clearly
 To love Thee more dearly
 To follow Thee more nearly.

(Prayer of Richard of Chichester, 1197-1253)