Knowing God and Prayer

by Greg Herrick

Greg Herrick's five-part study connecting prayer to knowing God, treating prayer as the life breath of the Christian and grounding it in God's character and his deep love for people. In copyright; included with a standing offer of removal at the rights holder's request.

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Chapter 1

Knowing God and Prayer (Part I)

Knowing God and Prayer

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Knowing God and Prayer (Part I)

Introduction

> Prayer is the most ancient, most universal, most intense expression of the religious intellect. It touches infinite extremes, for it is at once the simplest form of speech that infant lips can try and the sublimest strains that reach the Majesty on high. It is indeed the Christian's vital breath and native air.-J. Oswald Sanders (late Director of Overseas Missionary Fellowship)

Indeed! Prayer is the very life blood of the Christian. It is to engender real, fervent, and intelligent prayer that the following articles are directed. I fear, that if we were to take Mr. Sanders' words literally-"[prayer] is the Christian's vital breadth and native air"-many Christians would have died some time ago due to asphyxiation. But again, as a fellow struggler, I am not here to derail and condemn, but merely to call us forward to a life of prayer and personal communion with God.

In his sermon, The Disciples Prayer, Haddon Robinson recalls:

> "When our children were small, we played a game. I'd take some coins in my fist, They'd sit on my lap and work to get my fingers open. According to the international rules of finger opening, once the finger was open, it couldn't be closed again. They would work at it, until they got the pennies in my hand. They would jump down and run away, filled with glee and delight. Just kids. Just a game."

Robinson continues,

> "Sometimes when we come to God, we come for the pennies in his hand. 'Lord, I need a passing grade. Help me to study.' 'Lord, I need a job.' Lord, my mother is ill.' We reach for the pennies. When God grants the request, we push the hand away. More important than the pennies in God's hand is the hand of God himself. That's what prayer is about."

We must be reminded that the Lord's prayer begins with "Our Father" not "Our needs." Prayer involves access to the presence of God, first and foremost. C. S. Lewis observed essentially the same thing. In discussing the question of whether prayer really "works," with his usual uncanny insight, he commented frankly,

> "The very question 'Does prayer work?' puts us in the wrong frame of mind from the outset. 'Work': as if it were magic, or a machine-something that functions automatically. Prayer is either a sheer illusion

> or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its wine. In it God shows himself to us. That he answers prayers is a corollary-not necessarily the most important one-from the revelation. What he does is learned from what he is."

Now we are clearly not saying, nor would God ever endorse the idea, that requests of Him are unChristian or pure paganism. Not at all. But, we are saying that coming to Him only for things, or constantly coming to Him, first, for what he can give us, is sub-Christian. This is the same mistake made by those who revel in God's promises all the while divorcing them from the Promise-Giver who wants to be known personally as the Faithful One. They want the gifts, but not the giver. Fortunately, it doesn't work that way. So then, the place to begin to understand prayer is in the broader context of the relationship we have with God.

A. W. Tozer has said that,

> "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. …the gravest question before the church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at any given time may say or do, but what he is his deep heart conceives God to be like. …Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about him or leaves unsaid. …Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, "What comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might be able to predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the church will stand tomorrow."

Our knowledge of God is absolutely crucial to our relationship with him and our prayer lives. Prayer is carried to God in faith. Faith is, in large measure, dependent on who we think God really is. Therefore, the vibrancy of our prayer lives is directly dependent on our thoughts and our personal knowledge of God.

This may answer the question as to why there is so little real prayer in our churches. People do not think about their God very often, and according to the latest polls in evangelicalism, not very seriously either. Here I am not referring solely to "knowledge" as mastering systematic theological outlines and details, though it most certainly entails that. But it is deep theological understanding of God, ourselves, and our world, as pressed home to our hearts in study, meditation, prayer, and temptation. But, while the distance from the head to the heart in most people is only about 12 inches, the pipeline joining the two appears to be less than the width of a straw. The solution: Repentance and Trust-trust expressed in sincere and devout reflection on God in his Word and what godly theologians as teachers of the church have said about Him. But we must do so in humility and meditation, not just to fill our heads for the next unsuspecting victim. We must lay hold of God himself!

So let's spend some time right now thinking about the God who has called us into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1Co 1:9). Worship Him as we meditate on his person and his deeds. May our minds be invigorated with great thoughts about Him-thoughts that until today we had never had, or even dreamed of having. Hey, maybe we could become Eph 3:20 people, believing that God can do more than we can ever ask or imagine! Let's meditate on his personalness and his faithfulness (if I may), his sheer greatness, his infinity (we'll explain this term), and his passion to redeem people. In this lesson we will concentrate on his personalness and his faithfulness.

God's Personalness and His Faithfulness

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob-indeed the God revealed in and through Jesus Christ, my God and your God-is a super-personal being. But, the way some people pray today reveals the fact that they think about God more as a machine-a nickelodeon, so to speak-where you put your money in (i.e., your prayer) and hopefully get what you want. This, of course, says more about the person praying than it does the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The apostle John said that "no one has seen God, but God the Only Son who is at the Father's side has made him known" (i.e., interpreted him for us; Joh 1:18).

The idea that God is somehow a machine or at least "on the order of" a machine has a long and sad history, having been believed by various peoples and groups throughout all recorded time. During the Enlightenment period, Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), though more sympathetic to certain Christian doctrines than his predecessor Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), nonetheless treated God, that is, the Absolute, as more of an impersonal force in which everything in history was regarded as a developing manifestation. There was no face to Hegel's God.

Hinduism is also very impersonal, though present expressions of it worship a myriad of deities. It has been popularly said that there are over 330,000,000 deities in the Hindu religion and that if one began to say all their names at five seconds a piece, it would take fifty-two years to address all of them. As Winfried Corduan points out, this is obviously an exaggeration, but the hyperbole makes the point. In Hinduism, Brahman is impersonal and a pantheistic expression of reality/deity. The worshiper (Atman) does not turn outward to the deity, but instead looks inward in an attempt to lose his/her own self-consciousness and identity in the whole. Nirvana is the stage at which a devotee stops striving and comes to rest.

Thus, while it may be common among some Christians, and while it has been advanced in philosophical writings, and is tragically endemic to certain world religions, it is not the biblical concept of God. God is not impersonal, but indeed possesses personality and personalness. He is not to be perceived as the deistic One who wound up the clock (i.e. the world), so to speak, and then left the "scene." As I said already, he is the super-personal being. This truth is prior to, and absolutely fundamental to, any possibility of having a relationship with him-let alone enjoying a healthy, vibrant relationship with him (Joh 1:14; Joh 1:18).

Scripture reveals in many ways that God is indeed a person. Let's look at the case of God's revelation of himself to Moses. Do you remember that? In Exo 3:13-15 God appeared to Moses, and Moses spoke with him:

> 3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is his name?'-what should I say to them?"
>
> 3:14 So God said to Moses, "I AM that I AM." And he said, "Thus you will say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'." 3:15 And furthermore, God said to Moses, "Thus you will say to the Israelites, 'Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is my memorial from generation to generation.'-NET Bible

Several important observations emerge from this exciting encounter, including the revelation that God is personal, i.e., he has a name-a name which He revealed to Moses. It is crucial to realize that Moses did not give him this name, like when a parent names a child, God revealed it to Moses. Hey, but what's in a name? Answer: Lots! You may recall that Adam was told to name the animals and that Jesus asked the

name of certain demons. A name is important for getting a “handle” on who we’re talking to or about. Here God reveals the fact that he has a name and that that name undoubtedly is important for understanding who he is.

Many names in the Hebrew Bible tell us something about a particular person’s character. In the Hebrew mindset, the name of a person or entity often indicated essentially who that person or entity was, what they were like. Think for a moment of Abraham and how God changed his name from Abram to Abraham (Gen 17:5). The first name, Abram, means “exalted father,” probably referring to Abram’s father Terah and the fact that he was a man of some economic or societal standing. Thus Abram was born of noble birth. The name change to Abraham, however, closely links the patriarch with the covenantal promises, outlined for example, in Gen 12:1-3. This new name sounds like the Hebrew term for “father of a multitude” which speaks directly to the fulfillment of God’s promises given Abraham concerning a great nation to come from him (see also Neh 9:7). One can also see the same principle at work in relation to Jacob’s name, which means “deceiver” or “supplanter,” and the details in the narrative regarding his character and life. Therefore, a name is very important, especially when God reveals his name to us. Remember Jesus’ words: “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name….” (Joh 16:24).

But what does God mean here in Exo 3:14 by calling himself, “I AM”? Well, this name certainly reveals that he is not just another pie-in-the-sky, nameless, Canaanite deity, but is indeed a very real person-a person to whom absolute importance should be attached. He wants to be known as Somebody specific and not just another face in the pantheistic crowd. When you pray to him he wants you to know with whom you are speaking and to be conscious of that!

God’s name has special significance for who he is and what he’s like. The name “I AM” is taken from the Hebrew verb “to be.” This seems to indicate that God (YHWH) is the self-existent, eternal one who lives in an “eternal now.” Therefore, he is the God of the past, the present, and the future. He is the God of the present, whenever that is! The mention of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob serves to remind the Israelites of this fact. “How,” you ask?

Well, first, the mention of the patriarchs connects Israel to her past in terms of God’s choice of his people. He chose them as the apple of his eye; he is the One who chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the nation. He was with the patriarchs; he entered into covenant relations with them and by historical extension, the nation. Arnold Toynbee once said: “I am not a determinist. But I also believe that the decisive choice is seldom the latest choice in the series. More often than not, it will turn out to be some choice made relatively far back in the past.” And so it is with God’s people, including us. The most important thing about us is that God chose us in eternity past to be part of his family and to enjoy his presence-the presence of the “I AM” (Eph 1:4). Wow!

Second, the mention of the patriarchs reminds Israel that her future is rooted in divine fidelity and promise. Chuck Swindoll tells the story about the expectation of the future:

> You remember coming home in the afternoon after school feeling very hungry and your mother had supper on the stove? And you remember at times she would have a cake in the oven? I don’t know why mothers put children through such torture. When you were so hungry, the aroma of the cake filled the house, and you wanted a piece of that cake. “Not until after supper.” Every mother I’ve ever met says that. Being the model child I was, I would wait patiently, except on a few occasions I would badger her for a slice of that cake. And then she would take an exceedingly sharp knife with an

exceedingly thin blade and slice off the smallest slice of cake one can imagine and give me a little taste of the first fruit of that cake. It was only a sample of what was to come later.

What God did for the patriarchs and what he has done for us in Christ is only a sample of what is to come later. Our lives and future are rooted in the divine promise of getting all the cake in the future, that is, to know the beauty of Christ firsthand, when seeing through a glass darkly gives way to better than 20/20 vision. What a hope!

Third, the mention of the patriarchs not only reminds Israel that God was with his people in the past, and that he has a bright future for them, but that he is always present with his people, just as he was with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, he is the One who has heard their groanings in Egypt and has raised up Moses to redeem them from bondage. When Moses goes to Pharaoh, God will be with him. This he can be certain of.

Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of an old Scot who was quite ill, and the family called for their dominie, or minister. As he entered the sick room and sat down, he noticed another chair at the opposite side of the bed, a chair which had been drawn close. The pastor said, “Well, Donald, I see I’m not your first visitor for the day.”

The old man looked up, was puzzled for a moment, then recognized from the nod of the head that the pastor had noticed the empty chair. “Well, pastor, I’ll tell you about the chair. Many years ago I found it quite difficult to pray, so one day I shared this problem with my pastor. He told me not to worry about kneeling or placing myself in some pious posture. ‘Instead,’ he said, ‘Just sit down, put a chair opposite you, and imagine Jesus sitting in it, then talk with him as you would a friend.’” The aged Scot then added, “I’ve been doing that ever since.”

A short time later the daughter of the Scot called the pastor. When he answered she informed him that her father had died rather suddenly and she was quite shaken for she had no idea death was so near. Then she continued, “I had just gone to lie down for an hour or two, for he seemed to be sleeping comfortably. When I went back, he was dead.” Then she added thoughtfully, “Except now his hand was on the empty chair beside his bed. Isn’t that strange?” “No,” said the minister, “it’s not that strange at all.”

The aged Scot had come to learn the spiritual lesson that we all need to learn: God is with us all the time. Just as he was with the children of Israel in their helpless estate and in their misery, so he is with us. Jesus said in Joh 14:23-26 that the Trinity, the New Testament revelation of the “I AM,” would take up residence in our hearts, establishing a relationship that would never be broken. Oh, it is true, that unconfessed sin blurs our fellowship with Christ, but God’s Spirit never leaves us. Instead, he prods us along, mediates the presence of Christ to us, and glorifies the Son of God in our hearts (Joh 16:13-14). He is God with us and for us, the down payment who guarantees our eternal home with God (Eph 1:13-14; 2Co 1:21-22).

Therefore, the name “I AM” in Exo 3:14 reveals that God is indeed a person who chooses unworthy, but not worthless, people in covenant friendship and sticks with them, through thick and through thin, come high water or come what may! The name speaks volumes about his untiring and pervasive faithfulness to his people, both in the big “things” of life as well as the details of life. Often it is the details that make the difference.

In Robins Reader, Frank W. Mann, Jr. writes:

> An enlightening pastime is to make a list of favorite sounds: a distant train whistle; a mother talking to her new baby; the scrunch of leaves on a bright autumn day; seagulls crying; a hound baying in the woods at night; the absolute silence of a mountain lake at sunset; a crackling fire on a bitter day; a stadium crowd singing the national anthem; the screech of an airplane's tires as they touch down; his wife's voice at morning.

Such is God's faithfulness in the details of our lives. Throughout all our lives he is working-not as our slave, but as our gracious sovereign-to provide us with a rich (rich does not always equal pleasant) experience of himself and his world and one for which we ought to be thankful and one in which we ought to trust our faithful God. He is our "I AM;" the one who was there at our birth, there during our upbringing (no matter what kind of home it was, he was there; he saw our tears and heard our cries), is with us today and will be there in the future. He will never leave us or forsake us, for He is faithful. We can trust him implicitly.

Dr. Bruce Waltke tells the story of a "brave" individual who attempted to cross the frozen St. Lawrence river in Canada. The man was unsure of whether the ice would hold him so he first tested it by laying one hand on it. Then he got down on his knees and gingerly began to make his way across. When he got to the middle of the frozen river, where he trembled with fear, he heard a noise behind him. Looking back, he saw a team of horses pulling a carriage coming down the road toward the river. And upon reaching the river, it didn't stop, but bolted right out onto the ice, and past him, while he kneeled there on all fours, turning a deep crimson.

Sadly, some Christians' faith in our faithful God never seems to grow a great deal, much like this man who tried to cross the St. Lawrence river. He was ignorant of the strength and sheer reliability of the ice, so he doubted it throughout his journey across. The truth of the matter is, however, that the faithfulness of God-his utterly reliable commitment to his people expressed in his word-can bear the weight of the greatest faith. So why keep wondering and doubting? God is able. Our God wrote the book on faithfulness. Those who faithfully trust him know that! When we come to God in prayer let us be conscious of who it is we approach.

Summary

We suggested throughout this article that in order to learn how to pray, a person ought to meditate on God and his character. This is true because all prayer is offered in the context of our relationship with God-he is not a mindless robot waiting to receive commands or an unwilling compliant needing to have his arm twisted. But this relationship cannot really mature if we do not grow in our understanding of who God is, how he wants to be known by his people. With this in mind, then, we looked briefly at God's self-revelation in Exo 3:13-15, especially, the "I AM" of 3:14. From this we have come to understand that God is super-personal and not some impersonal force in the universe. We have also come to understand that he is in love with the people he has chosen unconditionally, that is, through no merit of their own, and that he has guaranteed his presence with them forever. This is the relationship into which we have been called and the context in which we have been invited by Him to pray.

So we need to persevere, looking a little deeper at our God. As we said, he is the super-person and he wants to be known as the God who is always there and always faithful to his people and the promises he has made to them on their behalf. But, how is it that he can make wonderful promises of his presence and provision? What is his nature like that he can actually come good for what seems to be impossible feats.

What kind of God do we worship? Answer: A God of sheer greatness! The psalmist cried out, “Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise. His greatness no one can fathom” (Psa 145:3). We’ll develop his greatness a little in the next lesson.

Chapter 2

Knowing God and Prayer (Part II)

There's no way to get around it. Knowing God is the most exhilarating experience a man or woman can ever be graciously invited to enjoy! His very nature defies adequate description and yet, through his indwelling Spirit, he has flooded our hearts with his love and majestic beauty (Rom 5:5). The sheer force of his presence calms our fears and assures us draw near in holy, humble adoration. There are times in prayer, I believe, that he may actually let us stretch out a hand so as to almost touch his face:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth And danced the skies on laughter-silver wings; Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth Of sun-split clouds, and done a hundred things You have not dreamed of-wheeled and soared and swung High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there, I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung My eager craft through footless halls of air

Up, up the long, delirious burning blue I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace Where never lark nor eagle flew- And, while the silent lifting mind I've trod The high untrespassed sanctity of space, Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

Prayer is that rare privilege in which we sore to the very throne of God himself, quite literally I mean, and fellowship with the one who is all powerful, all knowing, and lives everywhere at once with his whole being. We meet God himself!

We said in the last article that prayer has more to do with gaining access to his presence and knowing God personally than it does making endless requests of him. To grow in our prayer lives, then, we must grow in our personal knowledge of God, our relationship with him. He is not a machine, we said, though much of the way we treat him reveals that we secretly possess vestiges of this pagan conviction; such ignorance still lingers in our hearts.

But treating God as an automaton or mindless robot-as revealed by mindless petitions, rote prayers, and in some cases chanting-is as ridiculous as it is dangerous, especially when we'll have to give account to a jealous God. On the contrary, in Scripture we are introduced to the super-personal Being who has made himself known to Moses and to us (in Christ) as the great "I AM."

Thus God is indeed personal and possesses the qualities we normally think of when we think of "personality." This is not to say, however, that God exists simply on a super-human level, however glorified that might be. The awesome truth is that quite unlike us he is self-existent, eternal, lacks for nothing, and is accountable to no one. Yet he is nonetheless the God who abides always with his covenant people and persists in utter faithfulness to his word. God is eternal, personal, and faithful.

God is shrouded in majestic greatness, the depths of his being have never been-nor will they ever be-plumbed by human understanding. Not now, not even in heaven (cf. 1Jn 3:2-3).

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), the famous Italian, medieval theologian, created one of the greatest intellectual achievements of Western civilization in his Summa Theologica. It's a massive work: thirty-eight treatises, three thousand articles, ten thousand objections. Thomas attempted to gather into one coherent whole all of known truth. What an undertaking: anthropology, philosophy, science, ethics, psychology, political theory, and theology, all under God.

On December 16, 1273-so the story goes-Thomas abruptly stopped his work. While celebrating Mass in the Chapel of St. Thomas, he caught a glimpse of eternity, and suddenly he knew that all his efforts to describe God fell so far short that he decided never to write again.

When his secretary, Reginald, tried to encourage him to do more writing, he said, “Reginald, I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as so much straw.”

And so it is when we come face to face with God in prayer. It’s not that what he has revealed in his Word is wrong or that human language is completely inadequate. Certainly not. It’s just that we are finite, and so is language, and thus we will never be able to finally-once and for all-bend our minds around his infinite greatness. In contrast to the practical conviction of most theologians, there is no “BOX” big enough for God. We will never get past God, if you will, to see what’s on the other side. Indeed, there is no other side. He’s the all in all, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end-God for eternity!

God’s Awesome, Infinite Power

One of the attributes of his greatness is his infinite and awesome power, particularly displayed in creation. In a children’s book entitled Is A Blue Whale the Biggest Thing There Is? Robert Wells gives us a taste of God’s power in creation; he takes us from a size we can grasp to one we can’t.

The largest animal on earth is the blue whale. Just the flippers on its tail are bigger than most animals on earth.

But a blue whale isn’t anywhere as big as a mountain. If you put hundreds of blue whales in a huge jar, you could put millions of “whale jars” in a hollowed out Mount Everest.

But Mount Everest isn’t nearly as big as the earth. If you stacked a hundred Mount Everests on top of each other they would only be a whisker on the face of the earth.

And the earth isn’t anywhere as big as the sun. You could fit over one million earths inside the sun.

But the sun, which scientists tell us is a medium size star, isn’t anywhere as big as the red supergiant star called Antares. Fifty million-that’s right, count them all-fifty million of our suns could fit inside Antares.

But Antares isn’t anywhere as big as the Milky Way galaxy. Billions of stars, including supergiants like Antares, as well as countless comets and asteroids, actually make up the Milky Way galaxy.

But the Milky Way galaxy isn’t near as big as the universe. There are literally, billions of other galaxies in the universe. And yet, filled with billions of galaxies, the universe is almost totally empty. The distances from one galaxy to another are beyond our imagination. It defies exhaustive comprehension. And so does the One who made it! To think that he did all that with just a spoken word. Incredible! “Righteous”…as some younger members of the race are wont to say these days. But if the truth be known, it was only an infinitely limited expression of his power.

So when we approach a God of this magnitude in prayer, let us come humbly, knowing that he is awesome in power, that there is good reason the Hebrews referred to him as El Shaddai, the Almighty!

God is omnipotent; there is no end to his power. Jeremiah the prophet said, “Ah sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched hand. Nothing is too hard for you!” Jesus understood this truth well. In Mar 14:36 he said: “Abba father, everything is possible for you….”

Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy brought forth the praise that "nothing is impossible for God" (Luk 1:37).

The good news is that the same God who is all powerful, is also the same God who is holy, loving, and wise. When contemplating, with frightening awe, a God with such unending, limitless power, the opposite is unthinkable. If God were a capricious, totalitarian despot…. Think for a moment of what has generally happened in human history when certain individuals have acquired enormous political power. Has anything good ever come of it? Have they not left a mark on history we'd rather not remember, let alone think about. I don't even have to mention names….What I am saying is that God's will is tied to his nature and he, therefore, cannot do anything against his nature, i.e., anything unwise, anything unloving, anything that does not exude with his infinite perfections and holiness.

God's infinite power means that his good and holy plan will be accomplished in history (Eph 1:11) and no one can thwart it. The thought of God being stifled in some way, is absolutely impossible and pagan. Even a child knows that! The category of God-the Biblical God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob-precludes that he should "lose" at anything. Besides the book of Revelation tell us that he wins once and for all. The great news is that all those who are joined to Christ by faith win too-big time, if you will (Rev 21:3-4)!

It is intriguing that in western culture, where technology has produced machines of enormous and unthinkable power, that we have virtually lost the truth of God's almighty power. In Who Needs God, Harold Kushner writes:

> The next time you go to the zoo, notice where the lines are longest and people take the most time in front of the cage. We tend to walk briskly past the deer and the antelope, with only a passing glance at their graceful beauty. If we have children, we may pause to enjoy the antics of the seals and the monkeys. But we find ourselves irresistibly drawn to the lions, the tigers, the elephants, the gorillas.
>
> Why? I suspect that without realizing or understanding it, we are strangely reassured at seeing creatures bigger or stronger than ourselves. It gives us the message, at once humbling and comforting, that we are not the ultimate power.
>
> Our souls are so starved for that sense of awe, that encounter with grandeur which helps remind us of our real place in the universe, that if we can't get it in church, we will search for it and find it somewhere else.

When you pray to God realize that you are coming to an omnipotent sovereign who actually desires your presence and is able to receive your praise and answer your requests. His arm is not too short, as the prophets say. Do not let your guilt stand between you and God. Come to him in contrition and you will find a profoundly gracious heart.

God's Infinite Knowledge

Tom Allen tells the story of a large bowl of Red Delicious apples, placed at the front end of the cafeteria line at Asbury College. The note attached read: "Take only one please, God is watching." Well, some prankster attached a note to a tray of peanut butter cookies at the other end of the line that said, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

We laugh. Why? Because we instinctively know that God sees both the apples and the cookies! Of course, the biblical God is of a different genus, another God altogether. Infinite knowledge is intrinsic to

any understanding of the sheer greatness of God. He is all knowing. He knows the apples and the cookies, equally well. God is not simply all powerful-as we said above-he is also omniscient. This is good news if you're an obedient Christian, it's not so good if you're a Christian who thinks they can get away with sin, and it is down right terrible news if you're trying to avoid God altogether. So when you come to God in prayer, understand that he already knows everything about you-what you did today, where you went, what you thought, your dreams, aspirations, sins.

Peter declares in Joh 21:17 that Jesus knows "all things" and the writer of Hebrews says that "nothing in creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account" (4:13). Therefore, our prayers are not done in order to inform God of anything. This is a carnal, pagan approach to God. Jesus said in Mat 6:7 not to run on endlessly-I believe the word is "babble"-like the pagans because God already knows what you need before you ask him. In fact, God knows all things, whether actual or possible, equally and effortlessly well. Jesus said in Mat 11:21 that if Sodom and Gomorrah had had his miracles performed before them, they would have repented in sack cloth and ashes. Only God can know that. Indeed, God knows all the limitless options and human choices and what would happen in each case. Try that one on for size! As the psalmist says, "His knowledge has no limit" (Psa 147:5) and our response is to "sing to the Lord with thanksgiving and make music to our God with the harp" (v. 7).

It has been said that nothing, with the possible exception of a fire, or the whistle to end a work day, can break up a conversation quicker than a fellow who actually knows what he's talking about. Well, God has stopped a lot of useless conversations in his day! He's the only one who always knows what he's talking about, 24 hours a day without end. God never has to study, he just knows everything. We, on the other hand, are quite different. The famous theologian/medical doctor Albert Schweitzer summed up our situation quite well: "As we acquire knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious." Fewer statements have proved more prophetic.

The fact is, however, that we live in an age characterized by information explosion, doubling, even tripling our knowledge at an alarming rate. The half-life of any college degree now makes the paper it's written on almost useless. But, people appear to be more confused than ever about the important questions of life. What is happiness? What is meaning? Why am I so given to materialism? It's like were building a world of automation of which we, by virtue of our very nature, will have little or no part.

Some argue that we are just at the beginning of the knowledge explosion. In many respects and in comparison to years past, the fields of astrophysics and mathematics-two fields which are inextricably bound up, one with the other-demonstrate the rapid advance in scientific knowledge.

Astrophysicists now generally agree that while the actual center of the universe cannot be known, it had an actual beginning and is finite. This is due in large measure to the ground-breaking work of the famous German physicist Albert Einstein and his theory of general and special relativity. Others such as Stephen Hawking later developed the solution of Einstein's equations even further to include not just matter and energy, but also space and time. Thus Einstein opened the door and paved the way for studies in unified field theory.

Studies as recent as the late 1990s have shown that the four forces of physics (namely, electromagnetism, the weak and strong nuclear forces, and gravity) can be unified. At first, the theory of supersymmetry demonstrated that electromagnetism and the weak and strong nuclear forces can be

unified. That left only gravity to be integrated into the model. This occurred as recently as 1994, when in the wake of certain breakthroughs in mathematics and science, gravity was added to the unified field theory in a consistent way. One of the most significant advances in thought which made these discoveries possible was the idea that perhaps there are more dimensions than just the four readily apparent to us. The unified theory with its understanding of “strings” and “massless blackholes” makes sense in a ten-dimensional realm.

The point I wish to make from all this is that whether or not the science being done is completely accurate, it nonetheless calls to mind a very important theological point concerning God: by looking closely at his creation we may surmise that the infinitude of his power and knowledge are ultimately beyond description. No matter how much information we acquire, scientific or otherwise, we have obviously not begun to make a dent in God’s infinite knowledge, let alone his wisdom (something the world could use a heavy dose of). We need to bow before the God who simply spoke and created the universe, who created something from nothing, fit for ordered and purposeful existence. We need to bow in humility before a God who possesses such unimaginable depths to his knowledge that he would even be able to dream (pardon my anthropomorphism) of such a cosmos. It boggles the mind to say the least. Who knows how great he really is? This is the God who loves us and has called into fellowship with him (1Co 1:9).

We must hasten to add that the inscrutable depth of God’s knowledge and understanding does not entail the idea that his knowledge is so qualitatively different from ours that his truth may be totally different from ours. Not at all. We know from the nature of Scripture, from the incarnation, and from the image of God in us, that this cannot be so. His knowledge operates at levels and dimensions well beyond ours to say the least (Isa 55:10-11), but what he has told us in his Word is as true for him, as it is for us.

But the most important fact about God’s knowledge, as far as we are concerned, is that he knows us. Paul straightened the Galatians out on this matter. He told them that it was more important that God knew them than that they knew God. His theological point was that God’s knowledge of us is prior to and the cause of our knowledge of him. Once again, the Bible doesn’t head down some purely theoretical road when discussing the wonderful attribute of God’s limitless knowledge, but rather relates it to our salvation, our participation in knowing him personally. The apostle says essentially the same thing to the Corinthians (1Co 13:12): “For now we see in a mirror indirectly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known” (NET Bible).

J. I. Packer, as insightful as he is clearheaded, has summed it up well:

> What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis the fact that I know God, but the larger fact that underlies-the fact the he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.

Too bad we couldn’t approach this subject with as much amazement as the youngster in the Sunday School class who had some problems reciting the Lord’s prayer: “Our father, who art in heaven, how’d you know my name?”

When God teaches us about his incomprehensible knowledge he does so by relating it to our well being under his watchful and competent eye. This is in keeping with his jealousy, that he has “eyes for us only”

and that we have our hearts set on him alone. Jesus told the disciples in their time of need that not even a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from his knowledge and permission, and that all the hairs on their head are numbered (Mat 10:29-30). As my good friend repeatedly says: “How cool is that?”

God’s Infinite Presence

So God is all powerful and all knowing. But have you thought recently about his relationship to space. Not to outer space per se, but his relationship to everywhere in the universe. The God whom you worship is omnipresent. Jeremiah said it well: “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 (23:24 NIV).

This means that wherever we are, God is there. This means that right now God is with you. He is present with you with his whole being and in absolutely undivided attention. And yet, at the same time, and in the same way, he is with me. Thus there is an intimate relationship between his infinite knowledge and his infinite presence. The psalmist knew this and marveled at God’s wonderful nature:

In Psa 139:1-4 the psalmist is quite aware of God’s knowledge of everything about him…

> 139:1 O LORD, you examine me and know. 139:2 You know when I sit down and when I get up; even from far away you understand my motives. 139:3 You carefully observe me when I travel or when I lie down to rest; you are aware of everything I do. 139:4 Certainly my tongue does not frame a word without you, O LORD, being thoroughly aware of it. 139:5 You squeeze me in from behind and in front; you place your hand on me. 139:6 Your knowledge is way beyond my comprehension; it is so far beyond me, I am unable to fathom it.

…the psalmist then relates God’s intimate knowledge of us to his presence with us:

> 139:7 Where can I go to escape your spirit? Where can I flee to escape your presence? 139:8 If I were to ascend to heaven, you would be there. If I were to sprawl out in Sheol, there you would be. 139:9 If I were to fly away on the wings of the dawn, and settle down on the other side of the sea, 139:10 even there your hand would guide me, your right hand would grab hold of me. 139:11 If I were to say, “Certainly the darkness will cover me, and the light will turn to night all around me,” 139:12 even the darkness is not too dark for you to see, and the night is as bright as day, darkness and light are the same to you.

…then the psalmist marries God’s knowledge and presence with his power in creation. God is the One who created us and determined the plan for our lives:

> 139:13 Certainly you made my kidneys, you wove me together in my mother’s womb. 139:14 I will give you thanks, because your deeds are awesome and amazing. You knew me thoroughly, 139:15 my bones were not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and sewed together in the depths of the earth. 139:16 Your eyes saw me when I was a fetus. All the days ordained for me were recorded in your scroll before one of them came into existence (see Jer 1:5).

Is it any wonder that the psalmist ends up with a penetrating clear realization of his own limitations and creaturely-ness in contrast to God’s infinite knowledge, presence and power…

> 139:17 How difficult it is for me to fathom your thoughts about me, O God! How vast are their sum total! 139:18 If I tried to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. Even if I finished

counting them, I would still have to contend with you.

…The net result is that we should desire the establishment of God's kingdom both in the world and in our own lives as well!

> 139:19 If only you would kill the wicked, O God! Get away from me, you violent men! 139:20 They rebel against you and act deceitfully; your enemies lie. 139:21 O LORD, do I not hate those who hate you, and despise those who oppose you? 139:22 I absolutely hate them, they have become my enemies. 139:23 Examine me, and probe my thoughts! Test me, and know my concerns! 139:24 See if there is any idolatrous tendency in me, and lead me in the reliable ancient path!

God's omnipresence means that Jesus will be with us as we set out on our mission to make disciples of all nations. He told the disciples that all authority had been given to him and that they were to go and share his message of faith and obedience to all peoples on the globe and then added, "And surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age" (Mat 28:19-20). His omnipresence also means that when people do come to Christ, and there are problems in relationships, Christians can get together to work out those problems with the full knowledge that he is there present with them. In Mat 18:20 he said-in the context of church discipline I might add-that "whenever two or three come together in my name (i.e., to restore a sinning brother or sister), there am I with them." Now the truth is that Jesus is with Christians whether there's one person present or one hundred, but he wants us to know that he will not abandon us in the difficult things he has called us to do. We can count on his presence when we have to deal with a sinning brother, confront a spouse, question a wary teenager, fire an employee, meet the expectations of our children, face difficulties at work, deal with irate customers, etc. We know his "empowering presence" when we pray.

Therefore, the truth of God's omnipresence is good news because it assures us that no matter what God calls us to do or what he permits to happen in our lives, he will be there with us. He will never leave or forsake us.

The hammer is a useful tool, writes A. W. Tozer, but the nail, if it had feelings and intelligence could present another side of the story. For the nail knows the hammer only as an opponent, a brutal, merciless enemy who lives to pound it into submission, to beat it down out of sight and clinch it into place. That is the nail's view of the hammer, and it is accurate, except for one thing: The nail forgets that both it and the hammer are servants of the same workman. Let the nail but remember that the hammer is held by the workman and all resentment toward it will disappear. The carpenter decides whose head will be beaten next and what hammer shall be used in the beating. That is his sovereign right. When the nail has surrendered to the will of the workman and has gotten a little glimpse of his benign plans for its future it will yield to the hammer without complaint.

The file is more painful still, for its business is to bite into the soft metal, scraping and eating away the edges till it has shaped the metal to its will. Yet the file has, in truth, no real will in the matter, but serves another master, as the metal also does. It is the master and not the file that decides how much shall be eaten away, what shape the metal shall take, and how long the painful filing shall continue. Let the metal accept the will of the master and it will not try to dictate when or how it shall be filed.

As for the furnace it is the worst of all. Ruthless and savage, it leaps at every combustible thing that enters it and never relaxes its fury till it has reduced it all to shapeless ashes. All that refuses to burn is melted to a mass of helpless matter, without will or purpose of its own. When everything is melted that will melt and

all is burned that will burn, then and not till then the furnace calms down and rests from its destructive fury.

Suffering is no fun. Sometimes God uses a hammer-at least it seems that way-and at other times he uses a painful file. He even uses a furnace, though perhaps not as often, being ever mindful that we are made of dust. Suffering is gut wrenching and drawn out at times, but the one thing that you must know Christian, is that God is with you through the whole ordeal. He has focused all his energies on you and has never left your side, though for a moment it may seem as if he's abandoned your heart and fled from your thoughts. You may come to the throne of grace to find mercy and grace to help in time of need for in truth God has never left your side. Where ever we are, as the psalmist has said, there is our Father.

In our first study on prayer we learned that it was essential to deepen our personal knowledge of God if prayer was not to sink into some form of paganism. In this way we would come to appreciate that prayer is more than petition. So we looked at God's personality and his faithfulness. We meditated on the fact that God is not a robot or an impersonal cosmic machine, but instead was super-personal. We learned that he chooses people and enters into covenant relationships with them and will prove himself faithful through thick and through thin. In this study, we were essentially asking the question, what kind of God can make these promises of covenant faithfulness on such a grand and otherwise impossible level? Now we know. He is a God who is omnipotent, he can do anything; he is a God who is omniscient, he knows everything; he is a God who is omnipresent; he is everywhere with his whole being. Behold your God!

Chapter 3

Knowing God and Prayer (Part III)

Andrea Wolfe, on staff with the CoMission office in Raleigh, North Carolina tells the following story:

In 1930's Stalin ordered a purge of all Bibles and all believers. In Stavropol, Russia, this order was carried out with a vengeance. Thousands of Bibles were confiscated, and multitudes of believers were sent to the gulags-prison camps-where most died for being "enemies of the state."

The CoMission once sent a team to Stavropol. The city's history wasn't known at that time. But when the team was having difficulty getting Bibles shipped from Moscow, someone mentioned the existence of a warehouse outside of town where these confiscated Bibles had been stored since Stalin's day.

After much prayer by the team, one member finally got up the courage to go to the warehouse and ask the officials if the Bibles were still there. Sure enough, they were. Then the CoMissioners asked if the Bibles could be removed and distributed again to the people of Stavropol. The answer was, "Yes!"

The next day the CoMission team returned with a truck and several Russian people to help load the Bibles. One helper was a young man-a skeptical, hostile agnostic collegian who had come only for the day's wages. As they were loading Bibles, one team member noticed that the young man had disappeared. Eventually they found him in a corner of the warehouse, weeping.

He had slipped away hoping to take a Bible for himself. What he found shook him to the core.

The inside page of the Bible he picked up had the handwritten signature of his own grandmother. It had been her personal Bible. Out of the thousands of Bibles still left in that warehouse, he stole the one belonging to his grandmother-a woman persecuted for her faith all her life.

No wonder he was weeping-God was real. It was his introduction to the sovereign God of the universe! Remember Jeremiah's words: "'Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill both heaven and earth?' declares the Lord."

> This is really the truth we have been meditating on in the last couple of lessons concerning "knowing God and prayer." God is sovereign. He is all knowing (omniscient), everywhere present (omnipresent), and all powerful (omnipotent; [Lesson II]). But he is also personal-indeed, we said super-personal, and faithful to his people (Lesson I). "'Who will you compare me to?' asks the Lord." He knew what the young, agnostic, Russian man needed. He was there the whole time and he was able to pull it off. Only God can do those kinds of things. When it comes to salvation, Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." The Lord is Creator and Sustainer and is in control of all things. He has never been "surprised" by anything-including our sin-and knows no genuine rivals. He is free to do whatsoever he pleases, answering to no one but himself. He is the Supreme, self-existent Lord and Director of all creation. Listen closely to the words of the prophet Isa_:40:21 Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told to you since the very beginning? Have you not understood from the time the earth's foundations were made? 40:22 He is the one who sits on the earth's horizon, its inhabitants are like grasshoppers before him. He is the one who stretches out the sky like a thin curtain, and spreads it out like a pitched tent. 40:23 He is the one who reduces rulers to nothing, he makes the earth's leaders insignificant. 40:24 Indeed, they are barely

> planted, yes, they are barely sown, yes, they barely take root in the earth, and then he blows on them, causing them to dry up, and the wind carries them away like straw. 40:25 “To whom can you compare me? Whom do I resemble?” says the Sovereign Ruler. 40:26 Look up at the sky! Who created all these heavenly lights? He is the one who leads out their ranks, he calls them all by name. Because of his absolute power and awesome strength, not one of them is missing.-NET Bible

The good news, which we have already hinted at in the first and second lessons, is that this sovereign God is at once Supreme and infinitely holy, loving, and wise. In this lesson we want to give serious thought and meditation to passages dealing with his holiness and connected ideas of his righteousness and in particular his justice. We want to do this keeping in mind through the whole lesson that our concern is really with prayer and approaching God. But, before we talk about God’s holiness, righteousness and justice, we need to take a closer look at what the Bible means when it refers to God as the One and only true God.

The One and Only-The Living and True God!

In Becoming a Contagious Christian, Bill Hybels and Mark Mittleberg tell this story: A newly promoted colonel had moved into a makeshift office during the Gulf War. He was just getting unpacked when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a private coming his way with a toolbox.

Wanting to seem important, he grabbed the phone. “Yes, General Schwartzkopf, I think that’s an excellent plan.” He continued, “You’ve got my support on it. Thanks for checking with me. Let’s touch base again soon, Norm. Goodbye.”

“And what can I do for you?” he asked the private.

“Ahhh, I’m just here to hook up your phone,” came the rather sheepish reply.

Trying to be something your not. Bad news. Worse for those who have to listen to you. In contrast to our colonel friend-who though having a significant rank in the military was still trying to be something he wasn’t-God is the One and only, living and true God. He is not trying to be something he’s not, nor does he promote such falsehood. When he says, “I am the Lord, that is my name. My glory I will not give to another” (Isa 42:8), he speaks the truth-an important truth I might add.

There is no other God apart from him. All other so-called contenders are idols fashioned by craving, human hearts and ignorant, wayward hands. Before we can talk about God’s holiness and his love we need to come to grips with this important truth. For when we come to God in relationship and prayer, we are not coming to a God, but the God-again, the One and only, living and true God.

It has been said that “he who speaks the truth ought to have one foot in the stirrup.” And so it is with this truth in particular. For no idea about God so decisively exposes the idolatry and subhuman life engulfing our culture. People bow daily at the shrine of money, sex, power, achievement, self-esteem, physical looks, substances, and the illusion of “the pain free life,” vigorously and endlessly conscripting for such “things” the status of deity. And gods they are, tiny and impotent, whose life expectancy is akin to whitecaps atop the waves of cultural opinion. They are the false gods our hands have made and they cannot save, i.e., they cannot “cut the mustard” or “make the grade.” Like the typical “down and out” PGA pro, who sleeps in his ‘68 Comet; they always choke under pressure, never able to make it from Sunday to Sunday.

Listen carefully to the words of Jeremiah, they are worth quoting at length:

> 10:1 You people of Israel, listen to what the LORD has to say to you. 10:2 The LORD says, “Do not learn to follow the religious practices of the nations. Do not be in awe of things that go on in the sky even though the nations hold them in awe. 10:3 For the religion of these people is worthless. For example, they cut down a tree in the forest. And a craftsman makes it into an idol with his tools. 10:4 He decorates it with overlays of silver and gold. He uses hammer and nails to fasten it together so that it will not fall over. 10:5 Such idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot talk. They have to be carried because they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them because they cannot hurt you. And they don’t have any power to help you either.” 10:6 I said, “There is no one like you, LORD. You are great. And you are well known for your power. 10:7 Everyone should revere you, O King of all nations. That is because you deserve to be revered. For neither among all the wise people of the nations nor among all their kings is there anyone that is like you. 10:8 The people of those nations are both stupid and foolish. What they learn from those worthless idols is no better than the wood those idols are made of! 10:9 Hammered out silver is brought from Tarshish and gold is brought from Uphaz to cover those idols. They are the handiwork of carpenters and goldsmiths. They are clothed in blue and purple clothes. They are all made by skillful workers. 10:10 The LORD is the only true God. He is the living God and the everlasting King. When He shows His anger the earth shakes. None of the nations can stand up to His fury.

Our so-called gods cannot save, deliver us from evil, or comfort our hearts in difficult times, but there is One who can! He is alive which means he can give us spiritual life, something idols, whatever they are, cannot do. He is truth and wants to establish your life on his truth, the solid foundation, as Jesus said (Mat 7:24-27). We will talk about this at length below.

The knowledge that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the One and only true God is one of the strongest and brightest lights we as creatures possess. But it is a light that has been reduced to a flicker at times through the darkness of the collective human heart. Our culture is unwittingly at that point. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure,” says the weeping prophet, and “Who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). God is just not somebody we want hanging around the “hood” of our thoughts and consequently we gladly accept a cheap imitation. As Paul says, we exchange the truth of God for the lie” (Rom 1:25).

Imitations are made of almost everything Americans use-pills, jeans, spark plugs, aircraft parts (isn’t that comforting), pacemakers, car brakes. Bogus transistors were even pawned off on Rockwall International for use in the 1976 Enterprise, a prototype of the space shuttle. Whether through an international consortium or privately, businesses tenaciously pursue counterfeiters, trying to protect their name brands and assure their customers of quality and value. Customers like to know their getting the full value for their money.

Impostors have two factors in common: (1) they claim to be as good as the real thing, and (2) they’re cheaper. Such an appeal is difficult to resist for the hard-pressed shopper looking for a bargain. What’s worse is that most people unfortunately can’t make the distinction between the true and the false anyway. Not much is different when it comes to religious and spiritual issues. Many have accepted the myriad of gods handed on to them by the gurus in America; gods of health, wealth, beauty, and wholeness ad infinitum. They claim to be the real thing and they’re definitely cheaper than the true God who doesn’t want your money per se, just your life!

But it's hard work to talk to folk about this biblical truth these days, just as hard as it was to convince Columbus that he was in the New World not in the Indies. Columbus's knowledge of winds and waves brought him to the New World and took him back to the Old. But if he knew the elements, he never escaped his illusions about the New World being the Indies. On the contrary, he found in every discovery new evidence to support his contentions. A shrub that smelled like cinnamon he called "cinnamon." The aromatic "gumbo-limbo" in the West Indies he considered the equivalent of the mastic tree of the Mediterranean. The common garden rhubarb of the West Indies he mistook for the valuable Chinese rhubarb. The scent of the far east floated in the Caribbean's tropical air and Columbus made the mistake of equating odor with geography.

People do the same thing religiously these days. Anything resembling truth becomes truth. They call it truth and immediately draw parallels to truth. The mother of heaven becomes the pagan ideal of the Virgin Mary; the ancient Egyptian trinity of Atum, Shu, and Tefnut becomes the biblical trinity; and various saviors in heathen writings are not unlike Christ in many ways. Whatever the Bible teaches, these seekers of their own objectives weave any thread of possibility into an unyielding rope of evidence. But given the moral bankruptcy of the nation one is justified in questioning the saving powers of these "truths," i.e., these other gods.

In contrast, the apostle Paul went with great courage and conviction into a pluralistic Greco-Roman world with the gospel of God's grace and truth. He went through many cities preaching the One and Only true God in the synagogues and undoubtedly to any who would listen. The Thessalonians listened, set aside their spiritual pride and idolatry, and gave themselves wholeheartedly to Christ. The apostle was overjoyed with this young church. The reason, in his own words: "Therefore we do not need to say any more about it [i.e., your faith], for they themselves [believers in Macedonia and Achaia] report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1Th 1:8-10).

Do you want to know this God? Trust in Christ yourself. As Howard G. Hendricks has said, "Great impressions can be made from a distance, but reality can only be tested up close. So then, by faith, and in prayer, draw close to God through Christ and taste and see that he is good, that he is the One and Only, living and true God.

I'll say it again. We must remember that the God we seek in relationship is the one true God. Therefore, he will not accept us playing with cheap imitations. There can be no idolatry in our lives if we are to have a healthy prayer life, for our God is a jealous God (Exo 20:3-4).

His Holiness

So the Lord is the One and Only, true and living God. Closely connected to this is the Biblical idea that he is majestic in holiness. This means, negatively speaking, that he is not tainted in any way whatsoever by sin, and positively, that he is infinitely good and just. Moses expresses the Lord's unique holiness or otherness in his song of praise:

> Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods? Who is like you?-majestic in holiness, fearful in praises, working wonders? (Exo 15:11)

The prophet Habakkuk, in contrast to the sin of his people and the nations around them, stresses the absolute moral perfection of YHWH's holiness:

> Your eyes are too pure to look on (i.e. approve) evil, you cannot tolerate wrong (Hab 1:13).

The holiness of God is that attribute which speaks peace to our hearts as Christians. For we know that he cannot be tempted in any way by sin and that there is never an evil thought in his mind (Jam 1:13). "He is untouchable," as the phrase goes; sin can never penetrate its way into his heart, as it has ours and the Devil's. This is definitely good news for modern man, depending, of course, on how he responds.

In The Encounter Charles Mylander writes:

Los Angeles motorcycle police officer Bob Vernon saw a red pickup truck speed through a stop sign. "This guy must really be late for work," he thought to himself. He turned on his emergency lights and radioed that he was in pursuit. The pickup pulled over and Vernon approached.

Meanwhile the driver thought, "The cops already know." He rested his hand on the same gun he had used just moments ago to rob a twenty-four-hour market. The sack of stolen money was beside him.

The officer said, "May I see your-"

He never finished the sentence. The driver shoved his gun toward the policeman's chest and fired. The officer was knocked flat seven feet away.

A few seconds later, to the absolute shock of the criminal, the officer scrambled to his feet, pulled his service revolver, and fired twice. The first bullet went through the open window and smashed the windshield. The second tore through the door and ripped into the driver's left leg.

"Don't shoot!" the thief screamed, throwing the gun and sack of money out the pickup window.

What saved the policeman's life was a material called KevlarTM, the super strong fabric used for bullet proof vests. Only three-eighths of an inch thick, Kevlar can stop bullets cold.

Such is the nature of God's unchangeable holiness-absolutely impenetrable and impervious to sin. Though he is immediately and actively engaged in the world, he is not of the world. Therefore, he will always and only do what is right and good.

The first use of the term "holy" in the OT is in Exo 3:5 and refers to divine sacredness. Before God had made himself known by the name, "I AM" he revealed himself to Moses as awesomely holy. Moses records the incident:

> 3:2 And the Angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. He looked-and the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not being consumed. 3:3 So Moses thought, "I will turn aside to see this amazing sight, why the bush does not burn up." 3:4 And when Yahweh saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." 3:5 And he said, "Do not come near. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 3:6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look on God.

The meaning of the burning bush is never given in Scripture and interpretations are legion. The bush was small and insignificant. This could indicate that God was concerned with his people who were small and insignificant and suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. Others have suggested that the lesson was for Moses. He was to learn that God was in the small and insignificant things of life, like a bush. I highly doubt that either of these interpretations is correct in itself. The truth is likely some combination of the two with a focus on God's attribute of holiness and his desire to redeem his people. The one thing we can be sure that Moses "walked away with" was a new appreciation of God's purity and holiness.

The holiness of God forbids any come near with an indifferent attitude. Twice, God repeated Moses' name in order to warn him not to come any closer. The Lord commanded Moses to take off his sandals because the place where he was standing was holy ground. Thus Moses learned that one should not run hastily into the presence of God, but must realize and come to grips (as best mortal man can) with God's staggering holiness. People know God because he wants to be known, not because they have any natural abilities equal to the task. But for those whom God has called to know him he demands holiness in approaching him. "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart."

The children of Israel needed to learn the same lesson as well. The Lord descended on Mount Sinai, but he specifically told the Israelites that they were not to rush up to see the him lest he break out against them and many perish:

> 19:16 And on the third day in the morning there were thunders and lightning and a dense cloud on the mountain, and the sound of a very loud horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. 19:17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the lower end of the mountain. 19:18 Now Mount Sinai was completely covered with smoke because Yahweh had descended on it in fire; and its smoke went up like the smoke of a great furnace, and the whole mountain shook greatly. 19:19 When the sound of the horn grew louder and louder, Moses was speaking and God was answering him with a voice. 19:20 And Yahweh came down on Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain; and Yahweh summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. 19:21 And Yahweh said to Moses, "Go down and solemnly warn the people, lest they force their way through to Yahweh to look, and many of them perish. 19:22 And let the priests also, who draw near to Yahweh, sanctify themselves, lest Yahweh break through against them" (Exo 19:16-22)

This is where we fallen humans have a problem.

The very idea of holiness is difficult to talk about nowadays, undoubtedly because of the "bad press" and the obvious, inherent implications. The very idea of "holiness" is often associated with ascetic religious practices-practices which have little or no apparent value to our culture today. Or, it is sometimes-dare I say, often-associated with dispositions of anger, bitterness and the attitudes of people who decry everything other people (i.e., sinners) do, especially the jokes they tell. In short, holiness is more often associated with hatred than goodness. Now there are many times where Christians have justly earned this characterization and criticism. Some of the most bitter people I have ever met claim to be born-again Christians. Sad.

On the other hand, many Christians who are trying to lead godly lives in our day-to-day world have encountered people who, no matter what the Christian does, condemn it. They think that just because Christians frown on living together before marriage, disapprove of stealing from the IRS, and advance the ridiculous notion that there really is "right" and "wrong," and that we can know it, they are attempting to be

self-righteous and puritanical about their own so-called “holiness.” I believe their standard line is: “You just think you’re better than everyone else,” which is another way of saying, “I’ll do whatever I want, whether you think it’s right or not.” For some people it’s enough just to be around Christians and they’re set off.

R. C. Sproul tells the story: A few years ago one of the leading golfers on the professional tour was invited to play in a foursome with Gerald Ford, then president of the United States, Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham (he had played frequently with Nicklaus before). After the round of golf was finished, one of the other pros came to the golfer and asked, “Hey, what was it like playing with the President and with Billy Graham?”

The pro unleashed a torrent of cursing and in a disgusted manner said, “I don’t need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat.” With that he turned on his heel and stormed off, heading for the practice tee.

His friend followed the angry pro to the practice tee. The pro took out his driver and started to beat out balls in a fury. His neck was crimson and it looked like steam was coming from his ears. His friend said nothing. He sat on a bench and watched. After five minutes the anger of the pro was spent. He settled down. His friend said quietly, “Was Billy a little rough on you out there?” The pro heaved an embarrassed sigh and said, “No, he didn’t even mention religion. I just had a bad round.”

Astonishing. Billy Graham had said not a word about God, Jesus, or religion, yet the pro had stormed away after the game accusing Billy of trying to ram religion down his throat. How can we explain this? It’s really not difficult. Billy Graham didn’t have to say a word; he didn’t have to give a single sideward glance to make the pro feel uncomfortable. Billy Graham is so identified with religion, so associated with the things of God, that his very presence is enough to smother the wicked man who flees when no man pursues. Luther was right, the pagan does tremble at the rustling of a leaf. He feels the hound of heaven breathing down his neck. He feels crowded by holiness even if it is only made present by an imperfect, partially sanctified human vessel.

If this is what people do in the presence of a godly Christian, just imagine what men will do when they come face to face with the Lord God almighty in all his multi-splendored holiness and dazzling brilliance. Will they survive? In the eighth century B. C. a man by the name of Isaiah had just such an opportunity. Listen to what he says:

> 6:1 In the year of King Uzziah’s death, I saw the sovereign Lord seated on a high, elevated throne. The skirts of his robe filled the temple. 6:2 Seraphs stood over him; each one had six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and they used the remaining two to fly. 6:3 They called out to one another, “Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” 6:4 The sound of their voices shook the door frames, and the temple was filled with smoke. 6:5 I said, “Woe is me! I am destroyed, for my lips are contaminated by sin, and I live among people whose lips are contaminated by sin. My eyes have seen the king, the LORD who leads armies” (Isa 6:1-5).

God is holy. Now there are two principle ideas which flow from God’s holiness. These are his righteousness and his justice. In the first article we talked about his righteousness in terms of his faithfulness. This means that God always and only acts in ways completely upright, consistent with his character. He does not impose any standard on anyone that he himself does not perfectly keep. The Law reveals his perfections and he maintains the perfect demands of the Law in his relationships with people. He is utterly faithful to what he has said he will do and not do.

The second attribute that flows from his holiness is his justice. He not only acts in perfect accord with the His Law (which is only a revelation of his infinite perfections), that is, his very nature, he demands that others do so as well. And for those who do not, there is punishment. For those who do, there is reward. God administers the world with justice, though we do not always see it (cf. Psalm 73). There have been people who have done terrible things who seem to have gone unpunished by the state, let alone by God. This takes us deep into the problem of evil and the sovereignty of God. We will not deal with that here, but suffice it to say that God's essential holiness leads us into discussions of his righteous dealings with people and his impartial justice, which in turn leads to his judgment.

The first idea that we need to learn about God's judgment is that it is impartial and retributive. Every man, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, will be judged impartially by God. There will be no glossing over our sin as Christians in the day of judgment. God will not grant us a special dispensation, but will indeed hold us accountable for what we have done (1Pe 1:17-19; Rev 22:12). Second, there is nonetheless a difference between God's judgment of the Christian and his judgment of the non-Christian. By way of the cross and the death of Christ God has made a way to eternally forgive all those who confess their sins in this life so that their judgment in the eschaton concerns not their eternal destiny, but reward (Rev 22:12). The judgment of the non-Christian, who dies apart from Christ, is also not about eternal destiny. That too was decided during his life when he refused to accept the offer of life in Christ. His place for eternity is already assigned, but the degree of punishment will be made known at the Great White Throne.

Now, as with every Bible doctrine, there are those who deny that the Bible teaches the doctrine of hell. They claim that the thought of eternal, conscious punishment is so contrary to the love of God so as to put an unbearable strain on the two and to throw the attributes of God into an irreconcilable confusion (so Origen). One of the two doctrines has to go, it would seem, at least as it has been historically understood within conservative Protestantism. You guessed it, of course,…hell. It's amazing that Augustine, Calvin, and Luther, not to mention Jesus and Paul, never seemed to want to get rid of one in favor of the other. How convenient that we should. But someone might just as well ask, "Why not dispense with love?" After all, it has been said by many biblical scholars that the bible speaks more about God's wrath and judgment than his love. And if the Bible's anthropology is correct it would seem more natural that all should go to a place of punishment than that any should spend even one moment in heaven enjoying the presence of a holy God.

But this attitude exits on a much broader level in our culture than just among certain academic, Biblical scholars. There is a prevailing attitude in our country today that dispenses with this aspect of the justice of God. People nowadays do not believe God will judge them for anything. After all, who does he think he is anyway?

In 1994 Life magazine conducted interviews with dozens of people on the issue of prayer. One person they talked to was a prostitute, age twenty-four, in White Pine County, Nevada.

"I don't think about my feelings a lot," she said. "Instead I lie in bed and think onto him. I meditate because sometimes my words don't come out right. But he can find me. He can find what's inside of me just be listening to my thoughts. I ask him to help me and keep me going.

"A lot of people think working girls don't have any morals, any religion. But I do. I don't steal. I don't lie. The way I look at it, I'm not sinning. He's not going to judge me. I don't think God judges anyone."

The most revealing aspect of this particular interview is that from an innocent question about prayer comes the young girl's defense of her morals and the idea that God wouldn't dare judge anyone. "Their consciences bear witness, their thoughts now accusing, even defending them," says the apostle Paul (Rom 2:15).

In summary, the holiness of God is his absolute, infinite, and untainted purity and goodness. There is no sin or evil in him at all and he is good to all that he has made. This means that he is completely righteous and upright in his dealings with people according to the standard of his own being. Jesus said that "he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." He does not give a stone when men ask for a fish or a loaf of bread. His holy character means that he judges each man impartially according to his deeds. It means that for those whose deeds come from faith in Christ, he rewards them. It means that for those whose deeds reflect an unregenerate, unbelieving heart that has never accepted Christ's invitation, there will be wrath (Mat 11:28-30; 2Th 1:8-9).

Let us remember that when we come to God through Christ (Joh 14:6) we come to the One and Only, Living and True God. Let us cleanse our hearts from idolatry in any and every form (1Jn 1:9). And as we draw near, let us be conscious that God is holy and that he conducts himself as such in his affairs. Let us also remember that he demands that the world account for itself. The gospel does not change these facts (Heb 4:13). It only brings them into their proper focus and interrelatedness, both in the lives of those who do not know him, as well as those who do. The love of God and his grace must be seen in relationship to his holiness, lest our view of God degenerate into some cosmic, benevolent Santa Claus. In the next article we will look at God's infinite and holy love.

Chapter 4

Knowing God and Prayer (Part IV)

Marsha Kaitz, a psychology professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, did a test to see how well mothers know their babies. According to the Associated Press, the forty-six mothers chosen for the test had all given birth in the previous five to seventy-nine hours. They had all breast-fed their newborn.

Each mother was then blindfolded and asked to identify which of the three sleeping babies was her own. Nearly seventy percent of the mothers correctly chose their baby. Most of the mothers said they knew their child by the texture or temperature of the infant's hand. The women apparently learned the identifying features during routine contact, said Kaitz, because they weren't allowed to study their babies to prepare for the experiment.

God's Deep Love for People

To what extent does God love us? "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem…," Jesus cried out, "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings…" (Luk 13:34). Like a mother's love and affection for her child, so is the Lord's love for his children. He is passionate about his kids! Prayer and communion with God is entirely built on this truth.

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands…." So says Isaiah (49:15-16 NIV). The Lord does not forget his people, even in times of personal and corporate failure, gross and wanton infidelity. He keeps us permanently before his watchful eye; he has engraved us on the palms of his hands. The closest comparison of such a perfect and unfailing love is that between a mother and her infant child. The total need of the infant is so great that only the watchful eye of the ever-caring, cautious mother is equal to the task. But though the best of human love may fail-a mother may do the unthinkable and abandon her child, as the prophet Isaiah above implies-the Lord will never leave or forsake his children. Indeed, God literally yearns for his people (Jer 31:20). Remember Jesus and the painful tears he shed over Jerusalem.

In 1973 a California newspaper carried a story about a discovery made by astronomers in the giant observatory at the University of California. The scientists picked up radio signals from a body in space that they estimated to be about fifty million light years from earth. Prior to that the most distant object known was about ten million light years from earth. Distances such as these go well beyond our comprehension, much like the infinite boundaries of God's love toward us: "For as high as the heaven is above the earth so great is his love for those who fear him" (Psa 103:11).

God's love is breath-taking. Like the starry universe on a clear black night, it possesses limitless character. It has limitless intensity and will not be defeated. The apostle Paul was convinced that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, would be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). The love of God secured us and the love of God keeps us. It will never run out.

A young woman grew up in dire poverty in the heartland of the country. A benefactor made it possible for her to take a trip to the coast where for the first time she saw the ocean. Enraptured, she stood gazing at

its vastness. In awe she was heard to say, “Thank God for something for which there is more than enough!” So it is with God’s love!

We have been saying, since the first lesson, that knowing God is integral to prayer, lest our prayers degenerate into babble or the like. Therefore, we talked about God’s personality, his greatness and infinity, and his holiness, righteousness and justice. It is time now to meditate on his love, holy love as I prefer to think about it. We will touch on several aspects of this amazing attribute, including its grace, mercy, and indefatigable persistence. And further, in this study, we will look at how God’s holiness and his love come together to purchase his “presence in peace” for the Christian.

God’s Love and Our Sin

The truth of God’s love belongs together with the truth of his holiness, like partners in a perfect marriage. They must never be divorced, though I fear our churches have oft times plotted the couple’s demise. Therefore, since holiness is integral to a proper, biblical understanding of love, so is the realization of our sinfulness. Indeed, the sheer bottomless depth of God’s love can only be appreciated when seen in the light of how unlovely, irreverent and undeserving we are. I am not saying that we are worthless, but we are indeed unworthy. Listen to Paul:

> 2:1 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2:2 in which you formerly lived according to this world’s present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 2:3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest…2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us,

Did you see the juxtaposition of the truth about who we are and the truth about who God is? Verses 2:1-3 is about us and our depravity. Such words-“dead,” “transgressions,” “sins,” “according to the world,” “sons of disobedience,” “cravings of the flesh,” indulging the desires of the flesh,” “by nature children of wrath,”-present our condition before a holy God as seemingly hopeless and irreversible. “But”-and it is the most important “but” in Scripture-verse 4 is about God and his great love. The point is as profound as it is simple: God loves the unlovely! God loves sinners, people who are consistently falling short of his standard of holiness-sinners, who are spiritually dead, and on their own could never do anything to achieve a right standing with their Maker and Judge.

But as we have said throughout this series, we tend to downplay sin in our lives. But God measures our hearts and hands by his Law, the perfect standard of his holiness (Jam 1:21-25). We may take the ten commandments as the ten suggestions, but they will be our judge today and in the end. A cartoon in the Hong Kong Tattler showed Moses just come down from the top of the mountain with the tablets in hand. He’s reporting to the children of Israel and says, “It was hard bargaining-we get the milk and the honey, but the anti-adultery clause stays in.” Unfortunately, unlike certain tax laws, there are no loopholes in the ten commandments! But such is fallen human nature to be looking intently for them.

This is painful truth, but truth nonetheless. We have a propensity to exchange the ethical truth and righteousness God requires for some substandard of our own making. Under the deluding influence of pride, we step across lines designed for our spiritual and physical health, and protection. We suffer the consequences and generally blame God for allowing us to get into this mess. In truth, if you think disobedience is attractive, just ask anyone whose paying for it now. Make no mistake about it, sin is

attractive, but underneath that sparkling bait, is a hook. Bite and….

In order to help the church in her struggle against sin, believers throughout church history-the early church fathers, the Reformers, the Puritans-have been inspired by Scripture to reduce spirituality to two lists known as “the seven deadly sins” and “the seven virtues” of saintliness. The former includes pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. The latter includes wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, faith, love, and hope.

Mahatma Gandhi, though not a Christian, also had a list of “seven deadly sins, stated in the form of contrasts: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, politics without principle.

The truth of the matter is that all have fallen short of God’s glory and all are responsible to him (Rom 3:23). All of us have committed in some fashion-but nonetheless truly committed-some or all of the sins mentioned in the above “list.” “Each of us,” as Isaiah said, “has turned to own way” (Isa 53:6).

“During my hitch in the marines back in 1958,” writes Chuck Swindoll, “I was stationed on Okinawa where there was a leprosarium. At that time I was playing in the third division band in the Marine Corps and we were to do a performance on that north part of the island of Okinawa.

I had read about leprosy, but I had never seen a leper and I wasn’t really prepared for what I saw. We went over a bridge or two and got into the interior of this compound. I saw stumps instead of hands, I saw clumps instead of fingers. I saw half faces. I saw one ear instead of two. I saw the dregs of humanity unable even to applaud our performances. I saw in the faces of men, women, and some teenagers an anguish crying out. We could play music for them, but we could not cleanse them of their disease.

In scripture leprosy is a picture of sin. And we see that it is cleansed rather than healed. Only Jesus’ blood has the power to cleanse us of our condition of sinful corruption. Now I understand when the Scripture says, ‘He was moved with compassion.’”

Indeed, we are all spiritual lepers in God’s sight. And the truth about our wretched condition-while highly unpopular today-is prior to any real life-changing understanding of his love. Each of us knows what it is to hurt someone intentionally, to curse God, to gossip against our neighbor, to lift a brazen arm to the Almighty, to act out of malice toward someone created in God’s image, to use God to our own selfish ends, to hate others, to tread underfoot the blood of Christ by willfully and consistently sinning against him presuming he’ll simply grant forgiveness, to connive plans for your own advancement all the while ignoring the injury caused to colleagues, to demand God come through for you, to allow your wife to go to sleep with a heavy heart, to use grace as a fire escape, to curse the man in traffic, to hold God in contempt, to verbally dismantle your spouse in front of people-and on and on the list goes.

“The true problem lies in the hearts and thoughts of men,” says Albert Einstein. “It is not a physical, but ethical one. What terrifies us is not the explosive force of the atomic bomb, but the power of the wickedness of the human heart.” Einstein was right.

Who understands better the depth of God’s unconditional love? The one who has been forgiven much? Or, the one forgiven little? Well, in truth-and Jesus would agree-the latter category does not really exist. We are all deeply offensive to God’s holiness and an affront to his perfections. We all need unimaginable pardon. We understand his love when we understand that fact! Otherwise, we denigrate his love into some

form of soft sentimentalism. But it is a holy love.

God's Love Is His Grace and Mercy Abounding to Us

It is quite a simple step, then, to move from our sinfulness to God's love in terms of his grace. For if he is to love us at all-and he most certainly does-it must be a love grounded in his graciousness. He could have demanded that we meet certain expectations and then showered us with everything good his benevolent heart could dream of. But, if this were the case, we should never have known the love of God. For "there is no one righteous, no, not even one" (Rom 3:10). But the love of God is manifested brilliantly in his grace toward undeserving sinners. And that is exactly what grace is: God's love freely given to the unlovely.

In Pursuit, author and evangelist Luis Palau writes:

Thank God his grace isn't "fair." A couple of years ago, one of my nephews (I'll call him Kenneth) was near death. He had AIDS. During a family reunion in the hills of northern California, Kenneth and I broke away for a short walk. He was a hollow shell, laboring for breath.

"Kenneth, you know you're going to die any day," I said. "Do you have eternal life? Your parents agonize. I must know."

"Luis, I know God has forgiven me and I'm going to heaven."

For several years, since his early teens, Kenneth had practiced homosexuality. More than that, in rebellion against God and his parents, he flaunted his lifestyle.

"Kenneth, how can you say that?" I replied. "You rebelled against God, you made fun of the Bible, you hurt your family terribly. And now you say you've got eternal life, just like that?"

"Luis, when the doctor said that I had AIDS, I realized what a fool I'd been."

"We know that," I said bluntly, but deliberately, because Kenneth knew full well that the Bible teaches that homosexual behavior is sin. "But did you really repent?"

"I did repent, and I know that God has had mercy on me. But my dad won't believe me."

"You rebelled in his face all your life," I said. "You've broken his heart."

Kenneth looked me straight in the eye. "I know the Lord has forgiven me."

"Did you open your heart to Jesus?"

"Yes. Luis! Yes!"

As we put our arms around each other and prayed and talked some more, I became convinced that Jesus had forgiven all of Kenneth's rebellion and washed away all his sin. Several short months later he went to be the Lord at age twenty-five. Says Palau, "My nephew, like the repentant thief on the cross, did not deserve God's grace. I don't either. None of us do. That's why grace is grace-unmerited favor."

Grace is the theme of the New Testament and the key to understanding its message. For the New Testament writers speak of salvation and always connect it to the grace of God. Our salvation from sin and wrath was God's gracious idea before the beginning of time (2Ti 1:9) and was brought to fruition in

history according to his gracious plan and call (Rom 8:30). We are saved by the grace of God, not by works, (Eph 2:8-9), and the grace of God teaches to live out our salvation before God in an honorable way (Tit 2:11-12). The praise of the glorious grace of God is the final goal of salvation (Eph 1:6).

And just so that we would understand the extent of God's grace he gave many examples in the Bible, in particular, the example of the apostle Paul. Isn't it amazing that God should take one of the greatest legalists of all time and make him the greatest spokesman for his grace? Paul said that God had chosen him so the people might learn in him-a murderer and persecutor of the church-the true meaning of the grace of God:

> 1:15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and I am the worst of them. 1:16 But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life.

While we were at war with God-enemies as Paul says in Rom 5:10 -he was making a way to extend his grace to us. What incredible love.

During WWII a man died and his two friends desperately wanted to give him a decent burial. They found a cemetery in a nearby village. It happened to be a Roman Catholic cemetery and the dead man had been a Protestant. When the two friends found the priest in charge of the burial grounds, they requested permission to bury their friend, but the priest refused because the man had not been a Catholic. When the priest saw their disappointment, he explained that they could bury their friend immediately outside the fence. This was done.

Later, they returned to visit the grave, but couldn't find it. Their search led them back to the priest and, of course, they asked him what had happened to the grave. The priest told them that during the night he was unable to sleep. He got up and moved the fence to include the dead soldier.

And so it is with God's love. He has found a way to include us in his love. He has found a way to extend the fence of his love to take in the unlovely. What is more amazing is that he did so without compromising the just demands flowing from his holiness. His love is his grace and his mercy flowing freely toward us. The natural question is, "How?" and, "On what basis?"

God's Love and His Holiness: The Infinite Sacrifice of His Son

The heart of God is filled with love and in its center stands a cross. The cross-the ignoble means by which God has satisfied the just demands of the Law (i.e., his own holiness) and freely embraced us as sinners. The law stipulates that the penalty of sin is death. So Christ paid that penalty in our place. The apostle John says: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1Jn 4:10). Paul says: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Peter also says the same thing: "For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God" (1Pe 3:18).

Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless life (Heb 4:15) and obediently offered himself to God as a ransom for people (Mar 10:45). The full and just demands of the law have been met in him and his death pays the penalty for our sins (Heb 9:28). God's wrath has been fully satiated and his love flows freely upon this blood-stained ground. God's love is his mercy and grace abundantly showered on his elect in Christ (Eph

1:4).

Therefore, we must trust him and him alone for our salvation and Christian life. As Paul said: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). He died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2Co 5:15; see also Joh 14:21-23; Joh 15:10).

When Louis Lawes became the warden of Sing Sing Prison in 1920, the inmates existed in wretched conditions. This led him to introduce humanitarian reforms. He gave much of the credit to his wife, Kathryn, however, who always treated the prisoners as human beings. She would often take her three children and sit with gangsters, the murderers, and the racketeers while they played basketball and baseball.

Then in 1937, Kathryn was killed in a car accident. The next day her body lay in a casket in a house about a quarter of a mile from the institution. When the acting warden found hundreds of prisoners crowded around the main entrance to the prison, he knew what they wanted. Opening the gate, he said, “Men, I’m going to trust you. You can go to the house.” No count was taken; no guards were posted. Yet not one man was missing that night. Love for one who had loved them had made them dependable.

So I too must respond to the love of Christ for me. I cannot continue in my wayward ways and sinful paths. It is his love that draws me to believe and accept what he says about my sinful condition. It is his deep love that sent him to the cross on my behalf, to pay the penalty of my sin. Have I trusted him and him alone for forgiveness? Or, am I still putting that decision off? “Now is the day of salvation,” says Paul. Won’t you trust Christ today? Right now?

Some people say that they have responded to Christ in faith, but in reality they have not. They still believe they are sufficient for life and will take their chances on eternity. In reality they only “toy around” with believing in Christ. They’re like the young woman who was being pursued by a young man truly in love with her. As the two sat together overlooking a beautiful lake, the young man proposed to her: “Darling,” he said, full of affection, “I want you to know that I love you more than anything in the world. I want you to marry me. I’m not wealthy; I’m not rich. I don’t have a yacht or Rolls-Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart.” She thought for a minute, and then replied, “I love you with all of my heart, too, but tell me more about Johnny Brown.” Jesus calls us to total commitment, that rare kind that does not look to the left or to the right.

Francis Thompson’s early life was one dead end after another. He studied for the priesthood but did not complete his course; he studied medicine and failed; he joined the military and was released after just one day; he finally ended up an opium addict in London. Yet he never did escape the pursuit of God, the hunter and initiator, For God loved him. In the midst of his despondency he was befriended by someone who saw his poetic gifts-and as time went on, Thompson was able to put his experience in verse. The poem is “The Hound of Heaven,” which Coventry Patmore has called one of the finest odes in the English language. Thompson says it for all of us:

> I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
> I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
> I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
> Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I his from Him, and under running laughter
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
And shot, precipitated
Down titanic glooms of chasmed fears
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

God's love for us is gracious; he gives all of himself to us where we're at. God's love for us is merciful; he pities us in our helpless estate. His cross secures a permanent forgiveness for us. And, as Francis Thompson's life demonstrates, God's love for us is persistent; he wrestles with us untiringly.

This lesson is the fourth in a series on knowing God and prayer. "Why" you ask, "have we then spent so much time on God's holiness, his love, and Jesus' death on the cross for us?" The answer is simple. If you're a Christian, you need to grow in your understanding of who your heavenly father is, for prayer is just an expression of your relationship with him. Remember, we said at the outset that prayer is more than just asking for things-it is communion with a holy and loving God who cares deeply about you. Growing in our understanding of God's nature and attributes can only foster a deeper prayer life in the willing heart. As you pray to the Lord, then, be conscious of the truths of his greatness (no prayer is too big or too small), his holiness (prayer must be offered with a clean heart [Psa 66:18]) and his love (he enjoys your presence and no prayer goes unheard).

If you are a non-Christian, that is, you have never trusted Christ personally, then that is the first prayer God wants you to make. You can personally confess your sins to Christ and receive him as Lord and Savior. You know now that God loves you and desires that you turn to him in faith and complete trust. He will receive you freely apart from any good works you may or may not have ever done. Just come to him. Jesus said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mat 11:28-30).

Chapter 5

Knowing God and Prayer (Part V)

The famous New York diamond dealer Harry Winston heard about a wealthy Dutch merchant who was looking for a certain kind of diamond to add to his collection. Winston called the merchant, told him that he thought he had the perfect stone, and invited the collector to come to New York and examine it.

The collector flew to New York and Winston assigned a salesman to meet him and show him the diamond. When the salesman presented the diamond to the merchant he described the expensive stone by pointing out all its fine technical features. The merchant listened and praised the stone but turned away and said, “It’s a wonderful stone but not exactly what I wanted.”

Winston, who had been watching the presentation from a distance, stopped the merchant and asked, “Do you mind if I show you the diamond once again?” The merchant agreed and Winston presented the same stone. But, instead of talking about the technical features of the stone, Winston spoke spontaneously about his own genuine admiration of the diamond and what a rare thing of beauty it was. Abruptly, the customer changed his mind and bought the diamond.

While he was waiting for the diamond to be packaged and brought to him, the merchant turned to Winston and asked, “Why did I buy it from you when I had no difficulty saying no to your salesman?”

Winston replied, “The salesman is one of the best in the business and he knows more about diamonds than I do. I pay him a good salary for what he knows. But I would gladly pay him twice as much, if I could put into him something I have and he lacks. You see, he knows diamonds, but I love them.”

Do you just know about Christ? Or, do you know him and love him? Is your Christianity rooted solely in the intellectual technicalities of the faith? Or, are you emotionally and spiritually in love with him? Does he command your best thoughts, draw out your deepest feelings, and secure your happy and willing allegiance? Have you experienced his wooing and attractive presence? Is there a joyful spontaneity about your relationship? Or, is your Christianity predictable-akin to watching the same ol’ tired reruns you once loved, but have now grown quite tired of? Your life should sing like a song, not read like a telephone book. There’s a difference you know.

We have been saying all along in this series that spiritually meaningful prayer takes place in the context of relationship with a personal, supremely majestic God whose perfections of love, holiness, wisdom, and sovereignty extend to infinity. But he has, according to his own infinite counsels and goodness, condescended among the ranks to made himself known to us in our helpless estate: Jesus Christ is the revelation of God par excellence. And for those of you who have been looking intently for God, you need look no longer. Your search for God has ended; he is staring at you in the face of Christ! Christ is the glory of God; God at his fullest to us, so to speak (Joh 1:18; 2Co 4:4; 2Co 4:6) . And so we love him, and we come to him according to the wide, yet specific access he has opened up by his own blood (Eph 2:18). “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,” Jesus said, “and I will give you rest” (Mat 11:28).

So we love and praise God in prayer because he first loved us and sought our friendship (1Jn 4:10). But, even as Christians, we are still so weak. We are like the proverbial second grader who sits before a textbook on Einsteinian physics; the gap between the learner and subject defies description. So wouldn’t it

be nice if God had written the textbook, so to speak, in a way our feeble hearts and minds could grasp? Wouldn't it be nice if he gave us an example that could help us learn how to pray in a way that honors him? Not so that we might turn it into a mindless method per se-calculated to get us what we want, which, of course, is our special proclivity as fallen human beings-but so that we might understand even better what truly pleases him.

Well, truth be known, he has filled his Word with hundreds of examples of prayer. One need only read the Psalms to see that. But, he has also left us the example of his son-the "Pray-er" par excellence.

In both this lesson and the next one, we will be concentrating our attention on Christ as the supreme model for prayer. Did you know that in the Gospels there is only one occasion when Jesus was explicitly asked to teach something? It comes in Luk 11:1. After the disciples had watched Jesus pray, a certain one asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray." "How to pray" is the only thing the disciples ever asked the Lord to teach them. More is caught than taught!

"When I was a small boy," says Bruce Larson, "I attended church every Sunday at a big Gothic Presbyterian bastion in Chicago. The preaching was powerful and the music was great. But for me, the most awesome moment in the morning service was the offertory, when twelve solemn frock-coated ushers marched in lock-step down the main aisle to receive the brass plates for collecting the offering. These men, so serious about their business of serving the Lord in this magnificent house of worship, were the business and professional leaders of Chicago.

One of the twelve ushers was a man named Frank Loesch. He was not a very imposing-looking man, but in Chicago he was a living legend, for he was the man who had stood up to Al Capone. In the prohibition years, Capone's rule was absolute. The local and state police and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation were afraid to oppose him. But single-handedly, Frank Loesch, as a Christian layman and without any government support, organized the Chicago Crime Commission, a group of citizens that was determined to take Mr. Capone to court and put him away. During the months that the Crime Commission met, Frank Loesch's life was in constant danger. There were threats on the lives of his family and friends. But he never wavered. Ultimately, he won the case against Capone and was the instrument for removing this blight from the city of Chicago. Frank Loesch had risked his life to live out his faith.

Each Sunday at this point of the service, my father, a Chicago businessman himself, never failed to poke me and silently point to Frank Loesch with pride. Sometimes I'd catch a tear in my father's eye. For my dad, and for all of us, this was and is what authentic Christian living is all about."

There is nothing like a living example of truth to clear the fog from our brains and motivate us to action. Truth clothed in flesh is like meeting a famous radio personality for the first time; it's amazing how different they look from what you had imagined. As Frank Loesch's political life is an example of courage under fire, so Christ's prayer life is an example of real, unfeigned communion with God. Consistent reflection on the model of Christ's prayer life is crucial to the growth of the Christian in terms of knowing God and prayer.

Jesus' Prayer Life as the Model for Prayer

National Park officials welcome 250 million people to our treasured parks each year. Most visitors are day trippers, coming to look and run. In 1983, the average time spent for all forty-eight national parks was four and one-half hours. For Isle Royale it was four days, perhaps due to remoteness. But, Yosemite or Sequoia, Yellowstone or Glacier National Park in four and one-half hours? To so heatedly race in and out of these stunning temples of granite offers no time to pause, let alone stop and look, listen and smell the delights of the mountains, rivers and high country. What's even worse is that our prayer times fare no better. We rush in and out, like we're in a frantic hurry in the drive-through at McDonalds, often missing God's majesty in our haste to go nowhere.

But this is in part due to our weak comprehension of the beauty of God. In a culture driven insatiably by the secular, our knowledge of God is scarce, hardly ever true, and threatens prayer with extinction. This is why when Jesus taught on prayer-since he had to deal with the same problems of human misunderstanding of God-he spent time explaining the good nature of God. And, we will get to that in a minute. Suffice it to say here that personal knowledge of God-a growing and fruitful knowledge-is integral to prayer. And yet it needs to be pointed out that the two are, in reality, mutually determining.

So our prayer times often look more like a pit stop on race day at Daytona than a purposeful and delightful stroll through a beautiful park on a spring afternoon. But we did not learn this from Christ. No a chance! Our Model is different. He was constantly in prayer and for long periods of time. Such was his devotion to prayer and his relationship with the Father that the writer of Hebrews-probably pulling on broad early church tradition concerning Christ's earthly ministry, including Gethsemane-was prompted to say that "During his earthly life [Jesus] offered both requests and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Heb 5:7).

The stress in Heb 5:7 is generally on the humanity of Christ, that he was truly human-like we are, yet without sin-and needed communion with the Father. He prayed constantly and seriously with great concentration, knowledge of God, and sincerity. The term "supplications" is more intense than "requests" and has been associated by some NT scholars with the ancient practice of holding out an olive branch as a sign of appeal. Further, the reference to "loud cries and tears" expresses anguish, struggle, and a deep sense of humble submission to the will of God. Rabbinic tradition suggests that "there are three kinds of prayers, each loftier than the preceding: prayer, crying, and tears. Prayer is made in silence: crying with raised voice; but tears overcome all things ('there is no door through which tears do not pass')." Finally, though Gethsemane is an excellent example of Heb 5:7, the writer says that this kind of prayer characterized the days of his life. Our Lord prayed seriously and without ceasing.

So where are we in this regard? Do we pray constantly? Seriously? With great strength? Or, do we pray once in a while, with passing interest and no real conviction? If this is the case, do not turn inward with a "woe is me" attitude. This will accomplish nothing. Instead, begin to ask God to teach you to pray and expect that you can learn much. This is one of the problems of our churches. We really don't believe that prayer is something that has to be learned through practice, trial and error. If this were not the case-i.e., that prayer did not need to be learned-then Jesus would not have had to teach both his disciples to pray and as well as critique prayer that was wrongheaded (Mat 6:5-15)? While it is true that even children can pray, and should, it is equally untrue that adults should remain childish in regard to their prayers. There is a difference between that which is simple and that which is simplistic-and naïve. The latter is no virtue.

I leave you with one example which illustrates the “ongoingness” of Jesus’ prayer life. The story is in John 11. Martha and Mary informed Jesus that their brother, Lazarus-a person whom Jesus loved, was sick. Now Lazarus was in Bethany in Judea and Jesus was probably across the Jordan to the east when the news reached him. But, instead of departing immediately to attend to his friend, he spent two more days where he was (11:1-6). Then he journeyed to be with his friend.

As Jesus came close to the village of Bethany, he met Martha and eventually Mary and comforted them because Lazarus had subsequently died and was buried four days earlier. Jesus himself was deeply moved and wept (11:35). He then went to the tomb where they had laid Lazarus and asked that the stone be moved away. After the stone had been taken away, Jesus looked up to heaven and uttered a most amazing prayer. The part that interests me here is:

> “Father, I thank you that you have listened to me” (Joh 11:41).

The point I wish to make is that nowhere in the text does it say that he had prayed. When, therefore, did God listen to him? If it were a general reference to his prayer life in the past, we would expect to see the word “always” inserted here: “Father, I thank you have that you have always listened to me.” But this is not the case. The context suggests, on the other hand, that from the moment he had heard about it, he had been offering prayer for his friend Lazarus, as well as all the people involved, namely, his disciples and friends. We may logically infer, then, that his prayers regarding this issue were constant and perhaps silent as he traveled back from across the Jordan to Bethany. The fact that he knew when Lazarus died (11:11), apart it would seem, from any human means, makes this more tenable. Further, his confidence that God wanted to raise Lazarus from the dead was most likely developed through prayer and communion with God (11:14-15, 23, 40). In any case, the point is that he was praying continuously and as such provides an excellent model for us.

Applications from the Life of Jesus

There is no reason that we cannot carry on a “prayer-conversation” with God all throughout the day. What we are really doing is “practicing his presence” as brother Lawrence tells us. He loves to hear from us, as it were, and such prayer keeps our hearts warm toward his love, and free from sins of worry, anger, gossip, immorality, and a host of other evils.

But like the example of Christ, there are times when we will need to draw aside for an extended period and pray. It is true, we need to pray throughout the day, each day, but we also need concentrated times of prayer. We have seen that Heb 5:7 and John 11 show the Lord praying all the time and we will see in the next lesson that extended times of prayer were a habit of the Lord’s as well. I want to introduce the idea of extended times on prayer and discuss with you how you might go about doing this. By the way, nothing will fuel your daily prayer more than to get away for a rich, extended time of prayer.

In these times of extended prayer you will need to get rid of all distractions and concentrate much more intensely, focusing all your energies on the Lord and securing his ear in prayer. Don’t misunderstand me. We know that he listens because we learned in the first two lessons that he was omnipresent and omniscient, but sometimes we possess very little conviction that he has listened and heard my prayers and is concerned with my requests and needs. This is especially true in the area of guidance and “big” decisions that concern “my life only.”

A great way to implement the idea of extended prayer is through half-days in prayer. Let me show you what I mean. You will probably need to plan a couple weeks ahead since most of our schedules are so full. Get baby sitters if you have children. The bottom line is to secure a quiet place where you will not be distracted by telephone calls, pagers, emails, etc. You are not going to be available to anybody except the Lord. It is time to listen to him. This is an excellent opportunity to get away with your spouse a pray.

As I said, this will be an extended time of prayer. Here's how I suggest you do it. Perhaps this will give you some ideas. First, after knowing where you're going to pray, decide on the length of time. Perhaps you can pray from 8am to 1pm. That's five hours. You will be amazed at how quickly it goes by! Second, do not spend any time during the five hours sharing prayer requests and thinking about what to pray for. Do all this beforehand. Take a couple of weeks and plan what you're going to pray about and write it out. This will help you stay focused during the prayer time. Apart from actually doing it, this is the key to a successful and meaningful extended prayer time. Perhaps the following chart will be of some help in your half day of prayer. By the way, don't let anyone tell you, "you can't do that, it's too hard…or, it's a waste of time, etc." You can do it and I'm sure the Lord will bless you as you do.

Time | Prayer Detail

8-8:30 | Read Bible and Prayer Book Select a psalm before prayer day (A psalm you really like, e.g., Psalm 1, 16, 23, 37, etc.) Use a devotional/prayer book you like

8:30-9:00 | Worship and Praise God in Prayer and Song Praise God in Prayer Use Instrument, CD player, or Cassette (Whatever works for you)

9:00-10:00

Prayer for Family Children and their needs Marriage Other Extended Family Members Major Events Finances

10:00-10:15 | break

10:15-11:00 | Meditate on Scripture and Read Prayer Book Use another psalm, etc. What has God spoken to me about so far?

11:00-12:00

Prayer for People and Ministry Church Involvement (Vision/Practicalities/Problems/Solutions) Commitment to Evangelism with Neighbors (Pray for people by name) Commitment to Discipleship (Does God want me to more actively pursue this? How?

12:00-12:45

Prayer for Missions Specific Missions and People (Gospel Success/Protection/Finances) Use "Operation World" to Pray for Countries of the World. Use Map.

12:45-1:00 | Worship and Praise the Lord.

This chart is just a suggestion of the way you might invest the time with the Lord. Decide on whatever seems best to you. The most important thing is a time of worship and prayer where you can praise him and also consciously bring everything in your life under his Lordship.

Writing on the subject of prayer, Dudley J. Delffs sums up our common difficulties with the subject and points us in the right direction:

Recently I cleaned out a bathroom cabinet and found an old bottle of expensive cologne. When my wife gave it to me several years ago, it was my favorite, redolent of cedar and pine. Opening the bottle now, however, I found its flat aroma sour and unpleasant. It reminded me of the way my prayer life becomes when I don't pursue new methods. I begin feeling tired and stale with God. I dread having to keep my appointed time with him.

What I long for instead, and what I know God desires, is the sweet aroma of my heart in love with him. My comparison echoes Rev 5:8, which describes the "prayers of the saints" as "golden bowls full of incense." Our prayers should be devoid of pride and legalism, and filled instead with the honesty of our heart's true desire for connection with the Father. Our love becomes a sweet aroma, pleasing to him who so loves us.

The point of drawing aside and having extended times of prayer is so that our hearts can return fully to the One who has bought and paid for our lives (1Co 6:19-20). It is so that we can know Christ better and enjoy him more. "I want to know Christ," says the apostle (Php 3:10-11). There are also other benefits such as clearer lifelong goals, ministry vision, vision for the family, and clarity in important decisions that need to be made.

In conclusion, the point of this lesson was simply to establish the profound truth of Jesus' commitment to prayer and the clear example he has given us. The ideas of praying throughout the day and half-days in prayer are applications from the life of Christ. In the next lesson we will build on these ideas, discussing aspects of Jesus' prayer life as it related to his ministry and the mission to which God had called him.

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