

Concerning God

by G. Campbell Morgan

The sermon explores the teaching of JESUS concerning GOD, focusing on the assumption of GOD's existence, the references to GOD in the words of JESUS, and the meaning of the names of GOD.

Scripture: Matthew 6:8-11, John 4:24, John 5:17, John 10:17, John 14:7, John 14:9, John 16:28

Topics: "Understanding God", "Revelation of God through Christ"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores the teachings of Jesus concerning God, emphasizing that while Jesus assumed God's existence, He did not provide a systematic theology but revealed God through His life and actions. Morgan highlights that God is a Spirit, a Father who knows and cares for His creation, and a Lord whose law is rooted in love. The sermon underscores the importance of understanding God through the person of Jesus Christ, who embodies the ultimate revelation of God. Morgan concludes that knowing Jesus is essential to knowing God, as He is the manifestation of God's nature and character.

Transcript

"Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" (Matthew 6:8).

"(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (Matthew 6:32).

"All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

"Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38).

"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

"But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5:17).

"Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again" (John 10:17).

"If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him" (John 14:7).

"Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" (John 14:9)

As we approach the theme of the teaching of CHRIST concerning GOD, inevitably we are conscious of its vastness and importance. We recognize also that if there is to be any teaching about GOD, or any understanding of that teaching, the revelation must be adjusted to human capacity, in order to human comprehension.

In the universe the fact of GOD is patent and open; but that vision is too large for human sight, and too vast for human comprehension. In order therefore that it may be known by men, it must somehow be brought into such narrowness of expression that they may hear and understand.

Both these facts - that of the vastness of the theme, and that of the necessity for a revelation adjusted to human capacity, - are recognized in the words of our Lord, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

The vastness of the fact in the words, "the only true God," and the medium of manifestation adjusted to the capacity of humanity in the words, "Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent."

The first impression made upon the mind by a study of the words of JESUS about GOD is that of how little He said of Him. We have in these Gospel narratives no sustained argument for the existence of GOD. His existence was assumed by JESUS. In the words of JESUS we find no systematic teaching about the nature of GOD. That seems to be treated, from first to last, as incomprehensible. JESUS never argued for the existence of GOD; He assumed that existence.

He never taught men anything about GOD systematically; He seems to have taken it for granted that GOD is entirely beyond the ultimate comprehension of the finite mind.

On the other hand, there is no assumption on the part of JESUS, and nothing in His teaching that would lead us to the conclusion that He considered GOD to be unknowable. On the contrary, He declared incidentally, over and over again, and more than once quite emphatically, that GOD is revealed, and therefore can be known. That is the burden of the thought underlying the words recorded by Matthew, "no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son."

So far we have only the assumption that the Father is known by the Son; but the declaration did not end there, for He continued, " and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matthew 11:27); and in that word we discover His recognition of the fact, that GOD can be known by men, in measure, and accurately, through revelation.

In seeking for the teaching of JESUS concerning GOD, we have then:

First, to recognize: the One Whom He assumed in all His ministry; and

Secondly, to consider that One so far as He is revealed in the words of JESUS.

We must, however, at once recognize the fact that the words of JESUS do not constitute His complete revelation of the Father; that His teaching about GOD is not to be found finally in what He said, but in what

He was, and in what He did. We are now dealing with His words, and I repeat, then, that as we listen to the words of JESUS two things seem to be necessary. If we would understand His thought of GOD, we must first recognize the One Whom He assumed, the One for Whose existence He never argued, the One Whose nature He never attempted systematically to explain, the One to Whom He perpetually referred in the course of all His conversation and of all His teaching; and, in order to this, we must listen to the references He made to that One, and so far as it is possible, attempt to understand them. Then, secondly, we must attempt to consider that One assumed, in so far as He was actually revealed in the teaching of JESUS.

The recognition of the GOD assumed by JESUS can only proceed so far as He is revealed in the references which prove the assumption.

We claim that His references to GOD do prove His assumption of His existence. We claim further, that in a measure we may understand His thought of the One Whom He assumed, as we listen to His references to that One.

The first question we have to ask is, By what references is that assumption proven; then, secondly, What do these references reveal?

When we come to the consideration of things definitely said concerning GOD, we should remember that such consideration must be conditioned by the method which the Teacher adopted.

The method of JESUS in His teaching concerning GOD was twofold.

First, He made certain clear declarations about GOD, but they were all incidental; one of them was separate and direct, but not one of them was an affirmation made for the sake of telling men something about GOD. Everything so said was for the sake of flinging light upon some condition of human life.

But the final teaching of JESUS, in His manifestation of GOD, was not that of the words of reference to GOD, nor that of the words of declaration concerning GOD; but that of the manifestation of His whole being and doing.

To use the stately and mystic words of John, by the fact that "the Word was made flesh," did CHRIST bring to the world His full and final teaching concerning GOD. Therefore the final teaching of JESUS concerning GOD is not to be found in the words, but in Himself; and as we grow to a more perfect knowledge of CHRIST, we shall ever be coming to a more perfect understanding of what He taught us concerning GOD.

In our present study, then, there are three things for us to do:

First, to attempt to recognize His assumption by an examination of His references;

Secondly, to consider the few brief declarations He clearly made about GOD; and

Finally, to observe how these things prepare for the final teaching of His own Person.

Now when we attempt to recognize His assumption, as we have already pointed out, we can only do so by paying attention to His references. A careful reading of the actual words of JESUS, as they lie scattered through these four Gospels, reveals the fact that whether the teaching was the more public general teaching, or the more systematic teaching, such as the Manifesto of the Kingdom, or the final paschal

discourses delivered to the disciples, or the great prophecies on Olivet; in all such teaching and converse, JESUS constantly referred to GOD.

Those references are of supreme importance, not in the matter of what He said, but in the way in which He referred to GOD; or quite clearly, in the names of GOD which He employed.

We find that in all the Gospels He is only reported to have referred to GOD by the use of three names or titles. There is a sense in which it would be correct to say He only referred to GOD by the use of two names, for in every case where He used the third, He did so in making a quotation from the Old Testament Scriptures.

The One Whom He assumed, and to Whom He perpetually referred, He always called "God," or "Father," when speaking His own words. He also called Him "Lord" by quotation from the Old Testament Scriptures. The two outstanding and peculiar names, which JESUS employed in referring to the One Whose existence He assumed, were those of "God" and "Father."

I think that fact illuminates for us certain words in the Epistles, to which I only refer in passing. I think that is what Paul meant when he said at the beginning of his Ephesian letter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:13). I think that is what Peter meant when, in his letter, he wrote the identical words of Paul, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:3). While I am perfectly sure that each of these apostles recognized the relationship between the Lord JESUS CHRIST and the Eternal One, I think they were also remembering the way by which He described the One to Whom He was related, perpetually speaking of Him as GOD or as Father.

Let us then in the very simplest way possible consider these names.

The word GOD stands for an abstract idea. It explains nothing. It suggests no truth concerning substance, attributes, or activities. Just as when we begin to consider the component colors of light, we lose light; so in the moment in which we begin that which for certain reasons is necessary and proper, a study of the nature and attributes and activities of GOD, we lose that supreme conception which the word suggests when used apart from definition.

When we begin to enquire the meaning of the Greek word Theos we find ourselves involved in a discussion of eight suggested derivations. And finally we shall have to be content to leave the matter where the scholars have left it, that most probably the underlying thought, the root from which the word came, was one meaning to implore, or to sacrifice; and that the word itself in its first use suggested One implored, or One to Whom sacrifice is given. That is all doubtful; but the fact of the darkness round the origin of the word is in itself suggestive.

If our Lord made use of that actual word, Theos, if He spoke a Greek dialect, there can be no question that the thought in His mind was the thought of the Hebrew word, Elohim, that majestic and mysterious plural in which the master conception is that of strength.

There is less doubt about the Latin word Deus than about the Greek word, for we are familiar with the fact that it comes from a root signifying to shine.

The origin of the word GOD of our own language is also clouded in obscurity. One thing is absolutely certain; it has no root connection with the word good. In all probability its root significance is exactly the same as that of the word Theos; Some one to be implored; Some one to whom sacrifice is offered.

If in this consideration I have succeeded in showing how ignorant we are as to the meaning of these words, that is in itself a preparation and a revelation. In all languages the words which stand for the Supreme Being represent an abstract idea; and yet in their very indefiniteness, in the fact that the light which seems to be upon them, when we commence to examine them, merges into a great darkness, which is the darkness of a light too bright to be examined, we have the first great suggestion about GOD. Thus JESUS perpetually used a word that attempted no definition, but that brought to the mind the conception of a Being, of an Existence, and of a conscious Existence. By all His uses of the word GOD, we realize that to Him GOD was One existing, apart from final definition, and yet forevermore so acting, as to make it possible for men to touch Him, to come into contact with Him, to have definite relationships with Him.

The second of these words, Father, is a word of an entirely different kind, bringing the mind into a new attitude in thinking of GOD. While the word GOD is abstract, and suggests separation, the word Father is relative, and suggests a relation.

Now it is of the utmost importance that we should understand the true nature of the relation suggested; and as we give close attention to the word we find ourselves, I think, face to face with somewhat astonishing facts.

The word Father itself does not at all suggest what we mean by father to-day. It does not suggest the origination of life. The Greek word so translated, the Latin word which was derived from the Greek, and our word derived from the Latin, suggest, not the fountain of life, not the origin of life, but a nourisher, a succourer, one who cares for. The Aramaic word Abba, appearing in our New Testament, is used in our literal and immediate sense, but its root idea is figurative and remote.

The Father, then, is

One Who nourishes,

One Who succours,

One Who cares for;

One Who makes His sun to shine upon the evil as well as upon the good;

One Whose relationship to those of whom He is Father, is the relationship of providence, of love and care, of thought, blessing and guidance.

JESUS perpetually spoke of GOD as Father, essentially as His own Father, peculiarly as the Father of His disciples, inclusively as the Father of all men.

Thus, Father is a word that suggests a relationship between that GOD Who cannot be defined, and all the creatures of His hand. We are not now discussing the question of the Fatherhood of GOD, in the special New Testament sense as resulting from the regeneration of the individual. We are simply taking the word in the sense in which our Lord made use of it, as a revelation of GOD in His attitude towards, and relationship with, men.

The final word to be considered is the word Lord.

Here again we have a word suggesting a relationship. A careful examination of the passages containing the records of our Lord's use of this word will show that, when using it, He was invariably quoting from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It may be that His quotations were from the Septuagint, in all probability they were; and therefore it must be remembered that the Septuagint was successful in hiding certain uses of the titles of GOD, which are of the utmost value in the study of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Septuagint uniformly translated the Hebrew word Adonahy, and also the tetragrammaton, YHWH, which we render Yahweh, or Jehovah, by the Greek word Kurios. Now if we examine the passages which our Lord quoted, not in the Septuagint, but in the Hebrew versions, we shall find that the name of GOD in them was never Adonahy. So that every time we find the word Lord in the words of JESUS about GOD, we know that the thought of JESUS was that of the Hebrew conception of GOD, expressed in our word Jehovah.

It is not within the necessity of our present study to enter in any detail into the discussion of the suggestiveness of that title. It is sufficient to say that the suggestion was not that of the self-existence of GOD contained in the word Elohim with which the Old Testament Scriptures open. Jehovah suggested rather the fact that this Being, incomprehensible, utterly beyond the possibility of finite mind to perfectly understand, accommodates Himself to the necessities of His people; that He becomes whatever they need in the processes of His dealing with them.

There are expositors of the New Testament who tell us that our Lord carried over that great thought from the Hebrew economy into the New, by constantly adopting the title of Father for GOD, as we have exactly the same thought of succour therein. I should personally consider that there is a distinction between them, because .Jehovah ultimately suggests that incarnation by which GOD became flesh.

Having thus considered the words, we may now attempt to state what may be known of the One Whom JESUS assumed.

By the one word He most constantly made use of, which in our language is the word GOD, He assumed the being and existence of One of Whom final definition is impossible. That One is, according to the suggestion of the Greek word, One Who may be implored, to Whom prayer may be made; according to the suggestion of the Hebrew word, One all-sufficient in strength; according to the suggestion of the Latin word, One shining in glory.

It is impossible to define; but the fact is recognized that, behind the lilies, with the sparrows, numbering the hairs of the head, close at hand, far away, annihilating all distance in His Being, counting no time in the fact of His existence, is One.

That is the final fact; and it is an amazing fact to us because we are finite; for Elohim is the mightiest name of GOD, more wonderful than Jehovah, if we were able to comprehend it. Because we are finite, the next, and perhaps in the light of the first fact, the yet more amazing fact is, that JESUS referred to this One as Father; recognizing by that name His relation to men, as the Nourisher of men, as the Succourer of men, as the One Who cares for men.

Finally, by His quotation of the ancient Hebrew thought, He recognized that the methods of that One in His redemption of man is that of becoming whatever His people need, in order to the perfecting of those upon whom His love is set.

Our consideration of the definite and explicit declarations He made about this One must be brief, for they were very few.

About GOD He made one such declaration, and only one; and then, as I have already pointed out, not in order to make the declaration, but in order that by the making of it, He might teach another lesson.

To the woman of Samaria He said, "God is a Spirit" (John 4:24).

There is no record in the New Testament of any other essential and final declaration concerning GOD from the lips of JESUS. In the declaration there are two values: the word GOD suggested Being, and in some sense of the word-more wonderful than we can comprehend-personality; and the word Spirit suggested the nature of the personality, Spirit being free from the limitation of space and time.

Let the context illuminate the declaration.

Our Lord made the statement, not to a Jew, but to a Samaritan; not to a man, but to a woman; not to a fair and beautiful woman, but to a sinning woman; and He uttered the truth in order to teach that woman that ultimately, when men knew and understood, when His own work was completed, worship would be possible anywhere, no one place and no one method being necessary; no longer in Jerusalem, nor in this mountain, but wherever the worshipper is, who worships in spirit and in truth, there worship is possible; for GOD is Spirit. Therefore whether it be in cathedral or chapel or closet; or away from all, on the deep, on the mountain height, in the valley, in the desert, there He is; and if the heart be true, there is the shrine, there is the place of worship.

That revelation about worship was the reason of the declaration. Thus in the midst of that teaching came the one great word of CHRIST concerning GOD, mystic, and utterly beyond our final analysis, "God is a Spirit."

As to our Lord's declaration concerning the Father, I can but take illustrative words, for there were many. I think three will suffice.

In Matthew it is recorded that in the course of the Manifesto, twice over He said one thing about GOD as Father; practically He said it over and over again, but twice it comes out into definite ~ form: "your Father knoweth what things ye have need of" (Matthew 6:8).

In John we have a truth, often referred to in many different ways, crystallized into a definite statement. The Lord healed the man in the porches of Bethesda, and His enemies were criticizing Him for breaking Sabbath; when He said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5:17).

A little later on, in the same Gospel of John, it is recorded that in speaking of His work He affirmed definitely a truth which was constantly illustrated in His teaching: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again" (John 10:17).

I say these are but illustrations. If we take the whole of His teaching, we shall find these truths running all through His statements in varying applications; but I select these because of their definiteness.

The value of these statements we may epitomize by saying that He declared that the Father knows all the need of man; that the Father is at work in the midst of all the things that cause humanity suffering, that He knows no Sabbath because man has lost his Sabbath; that the Father loves; and that the supreme reason

- a mystic and awe-inspiring declaration - of His love of the Son, is that the Son gives Himself to die for the saving of man.

Concerning the fact that this GOD and Father is Jehovah, He made only one declaration, and that by quotation. When some one asked Him, Which is the great commandment? His answer was immediately given, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:37-39).

And in that illuminative word JESUS taught that the law of Jehovah aims at creating love in the heart of man towards Himself, and towards his fellow man; and therefore that His law must be the outcome of the love of His heart.

Thus the supreme truths about GOD in the teachings of JESUS may thus be briefly stated; GOD in Himself is a Spirit; towards all He is a Father, knowing, working, loving in His method; and He is Lord, the Author of a law born of love, and intended to produce love.

All this however but prepares for the final teaching. That final teaching is found in nothing JESUS said about GOD either directly or incidentally.

He is in Himself the final teaching. This is His claim for Himself: "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father" (John 16:28).

This is His claim concerning His relation to His Father in the world: "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

This is His claim concerning men: "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" (John 14:9)

Thus, inclusively, He claimed that if men saw Him, they saw GOD; that His final teaching concerning GOD was not that of His words, but that of Himself. Therefore, if I would know this GOD Who is Spirit, this Father Who knows and works and loves, this Lord Who is Lawgiver, Himself forevermore becoming what I need, I must know Him through JESUS.

To put the matter in another way; if I know this JESUS - not listen merely to what He says, but know Him - then from Him I may project the lines into the vastness of eternity, and they will include the fact of GOD.

As Charles Wesley dared to put it in one of his most magnificent hymns, in Him we see "GOD contracted to a span"; and that in order that we may see, that we may know, that we may understand.

Our study of the teaching of CHRIST concerning GOD must be imperfect; because in His words His final teaching about GOD is not contained. Nevertheless, in the words we have found revealed the facts, of the sovereignty of GOD Who is a Spirit; of the nearness of our relationship to GOD as Father; of the perfection of His method, in that He is the Lord, Author of a law of love, Himself becoming what His people need, in order to help them to become.

The ultimate unveiling of GOD is to be found in the One Who spoke; Who is infinitely more than all the words that ever passed His lips; because He is Himself the Word of GOD.

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