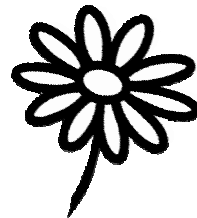


The 2011 Lenten Sermon Series

By Dr. J. Wesley Hertel



Getting to Know God Better



1. "God, the Supreme Reality" (Genesis 1:1)
2. "God is a Good Father" (Luke 11:5-13)
3. "He is Always Gracious" (Psalm 103)
4. "He Always Does What is Right" (Psalm 119:137-144)
5. "Does God Ever Turn His Back?" (Hosea 5:1-6)

God – The Supreme Reality

Genesis 1:1

1) Though he was a skeptic, Voltaire once said that if there were no God, it would be necessary for man to invent one, for man is incurably religious. The Bible records that where men departed from the true God, they invented gods in the form of idols.

- At one time, certain scholars insisted that man began by worshiping many gods and finally evolved into the worship of one God.
- But, about 80 years ago, working independently, the sciences of anthropology and archaeology concluded that man began by worshiping one God, and then most of them degenerated into the worship of many gods.

That is exactly what the Bibles teaches.

2) Many people may live today ignoring God and acting as though there is no God, but I do not believe there is such a thing as a true atheist. Even if there were such, he or she would have made his or her mind his god. The Bible dismisses the so-called atheist with one terse phrase. It says,

"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Psalm 14:1a)

a. The fool is an unreasoning person. If he would look at the world about him or the heavens above him and reason through to a logical conclusion, he would have to admit that these things are not the result of blind chance. Call Him what you will, but back of this orderly universe there must be a supreme being or intelligence. The Bible calls Him God.

b. But note exactly what the Bible says – it says the fool says ***"in his heart"*** that there is no God. The heart is the seat of the will. So actually, he wishes there were no God to whom he is responsible. But wishing does not make it so. I might also add that the greater fool is he who admits there is a God, yet lives as if there were none.

3) The Bible nowhere attempts to prove the existence of God. It assumes His being. In Genesis 1:1 it simply says,

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."
(Genesis 1:1)

Once you accept the first four words in the Bible, ***"In the beginning God"***, belief in the rest of the Bible comes easy, including divine creation, the flood, miracles, prophecy, and God's incarnation in Christ as the virgin-born, dying, and living Lord.

4) Great minds through the ages have sought to probe back from effect to cause to arrive at the original supreme reality. Ancient pagan philosophers saw it as wind, fire, or water. But the Bible in magnificent grandeur and simplicity says,

"In the beginning God. . ." (Genesis 1:1a)

The physicist Compton calls these the most wonderful words ever written.

a. When Isaiah caught a vision of God, He saw Him as –

"The high and lofty One who lives in eternity. . ."

(Isaiah 57:15a NLT)

He is **"high"** or exalted within Himself. As the **"lofty One"** He towers above everything in His universe. He is the Source of all things and the Goal toward which all things move.

- As Source, he is the Creator of the universe and man.
- As Goal, He is the redeemer of both and wills that all shall be saved in order to find in Him the ultimate in grace and love.

As both the source and the goal of the universe, God is the Supreme Reality.

b. Jesus revealed to us that –

"God is a Spirit" or **"God is Spirit."** (John 4:24)

As Spirit, He is the invisible God. No one has ever seen God – nor can we. God is the invisible presence that is always with us.

5) Theologians speak of the "attributes" of God, meaning those qualities which describe His character and nature. These attributes are usually divided into seven natural and four moral characteristics.

a. The seven natural attributes see God as –

- Eternal – God has no beginning or end.
- Omnipresent – He is present simultaneously in every point of space and moment of time.
- Self-existing – His being is not dependent upon any source outside Himself.
- Immutable – He does not change in His character, nature, or purpose.
- Immense – He is not contained in or limited to space. He is superior to space. He is above space but in it.
- Omniscient – He possesses all knowledge simultaneously and is the source and ground of all truth with no necessity to gain knowledge by processes of thought or reason.
- Omnipotent -- He possesses unlimited power to act in accord with His character and purpose.

b. As a personal Being, God's four moral attributes are holiness, righteousness, truth and love.

- His holiness is the source and ground of all His moral attributes.
- His righteousness is His self-affirmation on behalf of the right as opposed to the wrong. He is benevolent and purposeful as He overrules the evil of men to guide history to His own benign purposes.
- As truth, God is the source of all forms of knowing and all objects of knowledge.
- As love, He seeks the highest good and most complete possession of His creatures. God's love, which means absolute loyalty to its object, colors all other parts of His nature. Whatever God does He does in love.

6) God's love is holy, righteous and according to truth. As such He can neither ignore nor condone sin. He loves you, the sinner, but hates sin which would destroy you who are the object of His love.

a. God is love, not sentiment. He is not a grandfather with a long white beard who ignores the sins of His grandchildren. He is a Father who disciplines His children in love.

- One often hears the statement, "I do not believe that a God of love would condemn a soul to hell." God does not condemn souls to hell! They go there, if they do, in spite of all that God has done to save them from hell. Romans 5:8 says,
"But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8 NLT)
- So if you go to hell it is of your own choosing, not God's.

b. He has made man a person, which means that man is free to choose, but is responsible for his choices. Even so, Paul in Romans 8:28 says literally,

"For we know that to the ones loving God, He works together with respect to all things unto good, to the ones being called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

7) God is transcendent. This means God is above history, but He operates in the arena of history. God is not responsible for man's evil doings within history, but He overrules it to guide history toward His benevolent purpose of redemption.

a. Historians may record the surface events of history, but the sacred historian can look beneath these to see God's history within history. It is holy history or salvation history.

- Moses records God's leading Israel out of Egyptian bondage to become a priest nation of God to a pagan world. He entered into a covenant with Israel for such.
- When Israel rebelled against that covenant, going into idol worship, God in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities purged His people that they might become fit vessels for His use.
- Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, but in the process God used even this pagan to spread the Greek language which later would make possible the preaching of the gospel throughout the known world. It was the most expressive language ever known and was used to write the New Testament, which records the riches of God's grace through Jesus Christ.
- Rome may have conquered the world in her time, but in the process she established law, roads, and sea lanes by which the early Christians were able to preach the gospel throughout her empire.

b. Thus we see holy history in history, as God worked in all things for good to those loving Him and who were fitted into His purpose.

8) And He is still doing so. At the moment, it may be difficult for you to see, but given the perspective of time, we or future generations should Jesus delay His coming, will see that the hand of God is busy today guiding events toward His never-changing goal for good and redemption.

a. Which means that God, not some dictator or even the Antichrist, will have the last word in history. Psalm 2 tells the story.

"The kings of the earth prepare for battle; the rulers plot together against the Lord and against his anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they cry, 'and free ourselves from slavery to God.' But the One who rules in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them." (Psalm 2:2-4 NLT)

b. There was a report in the New York Times this past week (6 March 2011) that Fox News is looking at ending its relationship with broadcaster Glenn Beck. The reason is lost viewers – he has lost about 1/3rd of his viewers. Apparently, Fox officials are concerned that Beck's positions on various issues have become increasingly paranoid and alarmist. Beck has disturbed some on the right by suggesting that the democratic revolutions sweeping the Middle East are actually fronts for Islamic radicals who want to establish a worldwide caliphate.

The article says, "The problem with 'Glenn Beck' is that it has turned into a serial doomsday machine that is a bummer to watch."

Joel Cheatwood, a senior vice-president of development for Fox News and the executive in charge of the show, thinks it's silly to suggest the American viewing public's romance with Mr. Beck is on the wane – he's trouncing his competition – but says keeping the show upbeat is something he discusses with Mr. Beck. "We have talked about that at his instigation. It is really important that no matter how dire he thinks things are or what horrible direction things may be going from his perspective that the show maintains a sense of hope."

9) Let me ask you, since I can't ask Glenn Beck: "Where do you find hope in a world like ours?" I don't know what Mr. Beck believes or where he finds hope – if he finds it at all. But, the God who revealed Himself to us as Jesus Christ is our only source of hope – today or any day.

a. It is always good for us to read and re-read the Book of Revelation. While Christians were being persecuted on earth, the Lord gave John a vision of heaven in chapters 4 and 5. On earth it seemed that God had been dethroned, but as John looked he saw God seated on the throne of the universe, and Jesus Christ, His crucified, risen, and living Son, seated at His right hand in the position of greatest power.

b. In the Book of Revelation God is saying, "Believe in me." So, when the evil rage and imagine a vain thing, keep your faith firmly fixed in God.

- Do not see God through your problems, but see your problems through God.
- Do not measure God's power by yours, but see in Him the One who always enables us to walk in triumph through the toil and trouble of the day.

c. As Paul says so beautifully,

"For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

God is a Good Father

Luke 11:5-13

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

With these short words the Bible introduces us to God. We learn that the God of the Bible is Creator – maker of heaven and earth, the giver of life and all that is good.

1) The Bible is an extended record how God has revealed Himself to us over time.

a. Long after He made the earth, God appeared to a special man, later named Abraham, speaking promises that surely seemed incredible. But Abraham believed God, and went to a place he did not know far away. God promised to Abraham that he would found a great nation, and that he would receive a magnificent inheritance, with eternal life. But last of all he made the greatest promise –

"I will be your God." (Genesis 17:7)

In making this promise, the Creator became the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He became the God of Jacob's descendants, the nation of Israel.

b. Some 400 years later, Abraham's descendants hardly seemed to be God's nation, for they were slaves in Egypt. But, God had not forgotten His people. The Lord appeared to another special man – Moses. God told Moses that he had a great mission to complete. Moses was to deliver God's people from their bondage. Moses asked the question that he had to know to begin his task – "WHO ARE YOU?"

"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:14)

God revealed himself as "Yahweh" – a Hebrew name meaning "he who was, who is, and who will be." To Moses and to the nation of Israel, God showed Himself to be a God of power and deliverance, leading the nation out of slavery in Egypt through mighty displays of power.

c. Some 500 years later, the Lord appeared to Elijah, a man who would become a prophet without equal for centuries to come. Once Elijah became afraid and fled to the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb. There the Lord God summoned him to the mouth of a cave –

- He revealed Himself in a mighty wind that broke the rocks. But, God was not in the wind.
- Then He revealed Himself in a thundering earthquake – but God was not in the earthquake.
- He revealed Himself in a raging fire – but God was not in the fire.
- Last of all, God spoke in a still small voice. His revelation to Elijah pointed forward to a time when the Lord would be revealed in full.

d. Some 900 years later that voice did spring to life. The Son of God, a man named Jesus, was born in a village named Bethlehem. This Jesus came with a very special purpose – to reveal God in a way no one else had ever done – to reveal God as He really wants us to know Him. To reveal God as a Father, God needed a son.

2) A quick glance at a concordance reveals that the name “Father” is applied to God very infrequently in the Old Testament and never by a person referring to God as “my father.” It always refers to God as the Father of the nation of Israel.

a. Jesus, however, called God “Father” more than 60 times. Why this enormous difference? Because, the revelation of God as our personal Father is based on the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. It’s not that God wasn’t a Father to His people in the Old Testament, but that’s not the primary way He revealed Himself.

b. Revealing God as our heavenly Father was one of the most important missions in the life of Jesus. In the preface to his Gospel, John says,

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” (John 1:14)

c. Jesus would say later,

“He who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9)

Jesus was, in effect, turning on its head the popular phrase, “like father, like son”. In this case, no one had ever seen God. But, now they saw His son, and in seeing Jesus, they could see all the magnificent character of the Father.

3) In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus once and for all dispelled the fear that men had felt when approaching God. He said to pray like this –

“Father, hallowed be your name.” (Luke 11:2b)

a. God is the Father of the Son. But wonderfully, incredibly, He can be our Father too. Indeed, the mission of Jesus was not only to reveal God as Father. It was also to show us, you and me, how to become His children. The only people who can call God Father are those who are the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:26 says,

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

(Galatians 3:26)

b. I know it is popular today to say, “We’re all God’s children” with a kind of glibness that blurs the distinctions between those who know Jesus Christ and those who don’t. The Lord’s Prayer is not a general prayer intended for the masses, but is instead a prayer for the true disciples of Christ, those who have been converted by the saving grace of God.

c. God is willing to make us part of His special family, but that does not happen automatically. We must enter His family in the special way He has prescribed. That way is summed up in these words:

"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

(John 1:12-13)

d. Jesus came to convey a message to all of us; namely, that the Almighty God of the universe, the One who created our world out of nothing, the One who created the mountains and the oceans and the deserts and flung billions of stars out into the universe, is our heavenly Father.

4) Your view of God is the most important thing about you. Everything else flows from that perspective. Let me illustrate this truth with a story from real life:

a. Fred Craddock was a professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta for many years. He told the story of being in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, eating with his wife at the Black Bear Inn. During their meal an old fellow in overalls came over to their table, pulled up a chair, and started talking with them.

The stranger asked, "What's your name?" Annoyed at having his meal disturbed, he replied, "Fred Craddock." "What do you do?" the old man asked. Fred thought he would politely run him off by saying, "I'm a homiletics professor at a theological seminary." But instead, the old man said, "So you're a preacher? My name is Ben, and I've got a preacher's story." And he told his story.

"I used to be called Ben, the bastard boy. I didn't know who my dad was. My mother wouldn't tell me. I was so ashamed. Then a new preacher came to town, and I went to his services. I'd go late and leave early so I wouldn't have to be around the other people. I was so ashamed of who I was. One day the preacher was so good that I stayed late and couldn't get out before the rest of the people did. All of a sudden there was a hand on my shoulder and when I turn around there was the preacher."

He looked me right in the eye and asked, "Who's your father?" "It felt like a knife went into my guts." He asked again, "Who's your father, boy?" "I couldn't speak." Then the preacher said, "I know who your father is. Your father is God. God is your father." And he walked away. "My life changed from that moment on," said Ben. "I knew God was my father, and I was someone special."

The old man got up from the table and left. Then the waitress came over and asked Fred, "Do you know who that was?" "Some old fellow named Ben," replied Craddock. The waitress said, "That was Ben Hooper, the former governor of Tennessee."

b. It is only when we truly learn who God is that we find ourselves. Jesus came to tell us that we are loved no matter how far we've wandered from home. He painted a picture of God as our Heavenly Father who waits and watches for us. God is the Father who suffered every day of our absence from His home. God is the Father who welcomes us with his whole heart. However derelict or faithless we may have been, we have never set foot beyond the boundaries of God's love. That is the truth.

5) But for many of us, it just seems too good to be true.

a. If God, to you, is a harsh taskmaster who commands you to make bricks without straw, then that perspective will color all of your life and all of your relationships. The more accurately we understand the character of our heavenly Father, the better our relationship with Him will be, and the better our prayer life will be.

b. Here are some questions that may shed light on our understanding of the character of God:

- Do you feel adored by God?
- Do you feel that He takes pleasure in you?
- Do you believe He has good plans for your life?
- Or, do you see God as giving you castor oil and bouillon soup.
- Do you think of Him as holding a stick over your head to come down on you when you mess up?

c. When you call God "Father," you are saying there is one in heaven who hears and knows and understands and cares. Whatever a good father on earth would do for his children, that's what a good Father in heaven will do for his children.

6) There are three primary roles of God as our Father.

a. First, He is the Source of all things.

"Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him." (I Corinthians 8:6)

All things, including all of us, come from God the Father. Our heavenly father created us, loves us, and is glad we are here. An understanding of this can motivate us to come to our heavenly Father in prayer because we know we are loved and accepted.

My children don't need an appointment to see me, and I don't need an appointment to see my Heavenly Father. Even in the midst of running the entire universe, keeping the stars in their courses, and making sure the planets don't run into each other, and while he oversees six billion people with all their troubles, cares, worries, fears, problems, and difficulties, our God still has time for us. He listens to us as if He had no one else to listen to. You don't have a need in your life that He can't meet because He's a father in heaven who hears and answers prayer.

b. Second, He is our Protector. He actively keeps us from harm. The Psalmist said,

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."
(Psalm 46:1)

The Hebrew idea of a refuge is a shelter, a stronghold, a fortress, a place of safety. Like being outside when a thunderstorm hits and running into your home for safety. God is our safe house around us that protects us.

c. Third, Jesus tells us that God is our Provider, and He compared earthly fathers with the lavish goodness and generosity of our heavenly Father.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? . . . If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11, 13)

This is the Father's love for us. He provides what we really need.

7) The word Father speaks of parental authority.

- He is God and you are not.
- He is running the show and you are not.
- He is a father; you are His child.

a. We must not use the fact of God's love as an excuse to reject His right to rule over us. Because He is our Father "in heaven," He has the right to do as He pleases even if His ways do not always make sense to us.

- We should affirm our confidence in His goodness toward us at all times.
- He is always near us whether we see Him or feel Him or even whether we believe He is there or not.

b. Everything God has for us and that He is for us is wrapped in the word "Father." When we come to Him in Jesus' name, we are not coming to an angry God, but to a friendly father. So don't be afraid to talk to God. Your Father is waiting to hear from you.

He is Always Gracious

Psalm 103

1) A few years ago, USA Today had a man-on-the-street survey and interview and went out and asked several people what they thought their chances of going to heaven were.

- One older fellow answered, "50-50. The older I get, the more I think my chances will improve."
- Another man, somewhat younger and more optimistic replied, "Eighty-five percent. I don't think the entrance exam will be that tough."
- One lady said, "My chances are kind of slim – maybe 50-50. You have to be more than a nice person. But, I'm still in the running."

a. This is a trick question. It invites the person being asked to make a judgment on a sliding scale, as all three did. If you say –

- 0%, then people would wonder what kind of monster you were inside that you were sure that you weren't going to heaven.
- 100%, then people might think you were a holier-than-thou hypocrite who thought you were perfect.

b. But, it cannot be answered on a sliding scale because the answer for all of us here this morning is either 0% or 100% -- we are either going to heaven or we are not. And, you don't have to believe you're so despicable that you know for sure you couldn't go to heaven, and neither do you have to be so self-confident that you are sure you're perfect.

c. In fact, to answer this question, you need not to look at yourself at all. Because, the Bible says in Ephesians –

"For it is by God's grace that you have been saved. . .and this is not the result of your own efforts, it is God's gift --" (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Grace carries the idea of a gift. A gift is not earned. It is given and received. Heaven is not something we earn and are given at the end of life. It is not something we deserve.

2) This is the point that makes Christianity different than every other religion in the world. Every religion in the world insists that we must contribute something to our salvation; we must try harder; we must be better; we must live morally, and so forth.

a. All the various religions of the world offer a self-help way to merit restoration with God, whether it's the

- eightfold path of Buddhism,
- the karma and reincarnation cycle of Hinduism,
- the laws and ordinances of the Mormon church, or
- the four pillars of Islam

b. Only the Christian faith dares to suggest that God offers a relationship to people on the basis of pure grace. The whole basis of Christianity is that the human race as a whole and individually is too far removed from God to make it on our own. We need a Savior.

- We can't earn our way. We need a Savior.
- We don't deserve heaven. We need a Savior.

And God saw our need, and He provided a Savior. That's grace. Grace is getting what you do not deserve.

3) If you want to talk about what we deserve, listen to Romans 6:23.

"The wages of sin is death."

a. Now here's the deal. Way back in the Garden of Eden, God said, "The day you rebel against Me, the day you shake your fist at Me and say, 'I know Your way but I'm going mine,' the day you disobey Me with that rebellious spirit, in that day you shall surely die. The wages of sin is death."

b. In a moral economy ruled by an absolutely holy and righteous God, when we commit cosmic treason and lie, cheat, steal, profane God's name, and violate the holiness of God, we deserve death. If we were to get straight justice from God, we'd be obliterated on the spot. God wouldn't be mean and nasty when He annihilated us – He'd be just. We can't say, "We don't deserve this" – because we do. It's the way He set up the world. Justice is getting what you deserve.

4) If someone were to ask me to give them one verse from the Bible that gives us a picture of who God is, I'd point to Psalm 103:8.

"The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy." (Psalm 103:8)

a. "The Lord is merciful and gracious."

- Justice is getting what you deserve.
- Mercy is "not getting what we deserve." God doesn't give us what we deserve.
 - Several years ago, a state policeman stopped me. My first reaction was, "Well, at least I wasn't doing anything wrong." That was what I thought. But, it so happens that I had allowed my driver's license to expire. It was September and the license had expired in July – my birth month. He gave me a ticket. When I appeared before the Justice of the Peace, he asked me, "How do you plead?" I said, "Well, how can I plead? Obviously my driver's license was expired, but I want mercy and not justice." The JP didn't fine me. He didn't give me what I deserved. He gave me mercy.
- But, grace carries with it the idea of giving us what we don't deserve. Grace is a gift. A gift is not something you deserve. That would be a wage. A gift is something given by someone who loves the recipient.
 - It would be like the JP saying, "I'm going to waive the fine, and I'm also going to give you a hundred dollars for just coming in here."

b. Mercy is good. It's good that God doesn't give us what we deserve, but grace is just downright crazy! Grace is the unmerited, or undeserved favor from God. Grace is better than mercy. That's why it's called "amazing."

5) When you realize what you deserve, yet you get something more wonderful than you could earn in a thousand lifetimes – you will never be the same. That is exactly what happened to the prodigal son in Luke 15. This wayward son took his father's inheritance and blew it. He did every self-destructive and God-dishonoring thing a young, rebellious man with pockets full of money could do.

a. When his debauchery, high living, and foolish choices led him so low that pigs' food started looking good, he thought to himself –

- This is justice. I'm dying in a pen full of swine, but this is what I deserve. I wasted the old man's inheritance – money that he gained through decades of hard work and right living. I violated everything I was taught and I even invented new ways to get myself into trouble. I shook my fist at God and His ways, and now I've trashed my life and I'm crawling around with pigs. If I die like this, it's not an unfair deal; I got justice.
- Yet even though he was standing in a grimy, smelly pigpen, he dared to imagine mercy – not because his sins had become any less odious – but because he had some understanding of his father's love.

b. He just had the faith to believe the possibility that his dad might be merciful, so he told himself –

"All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.' So he got up and started back to his father." (Luke 15:17b-20a)

c. But he never got beyond mercy to grace. That never even entered his mind. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine what was waiting for him. This delinquent son got a huge love blessing that was completely out of line: the embrace of his father, a ring on his finger, a celebration with his friends and family, the feast of his life. It was irrational.

d. That kid was forever changed by a stunning assault of grace. I don't think that two months later he went back to the same town with money in his pockets to do the same stuff and wind up in the same pen. The kid who would have done that was dead. He had been blown apart by grace. Until this same thing happens in your heart, you'll never really understand grace.

6) Remember, God didn't just wink at sin. Jesus, His Son, paid the price to satisfy His justice requirements. Because of that transaction, God offers the gift of forgiveness and salvation and says, "Here it is, grace to all who want it, who need it, who will claim it."

a. Do you see grace more clearly now? It is undeserved. It comes from the heart of a God who is always gracious, and who wants to stun you and overwhelm you with a gift you don't deserve –

- Salvation and adoption into His family,
- His presence, His wisdom, His guidance, His love, and
- Eternal life in a special place called Heaven.

b. The truth is, we don't deserve a single one of these, any more than we deserve a million-dollar yacht, but God is so unbelievably gracious that He gives us eternal blessings so rich, they make yachts look like trinkets placed in Happy Meals.

7) The grace God offers is an equal opportunity offer. God makes this offer to spectacular sinners, boring sinners, nasty sinners, proper sinners, secret sinners, educated sinners, uneducated sinners, religious sinners, and atheistic sinners. No matter who we are, we are all in need of God's grace. As Paul says,

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

a. No matter who we are, a gap exists between God's standard for our lives and where we actually live. That gap is what we will be responsible for on the Day of Judgment. There are two ways of handling this shortfall.

1. You might call the first one the moral self-improvement plan. This is where people spend their lives trying to bring their mark up a little bit higher. The Bible says this way doesn't work even if you could give yourself a hundred lifetimes. You can never get up to the place of moral perfection.
2. The other way is the grace plan. That is where God says, 'I see the gap and I know you can't make it by your own human strength, so I'm going to send Christ, My Son, to pay for the shortfall. Salvation, and everything else will be made available to you as a gift.'"

Which way are you pursuing?

b. It is by grace, God's grace that we are saved and going to heaven. It is all of Him and none of us. All that we can do is believe, trust and commit ourselves to Him. I have done this. Will you in this moment of decision do the same?

He Always Does What is Right

Psalm 119:137-144

1) Long before you decide to commit your life to God and seek to know and to do His will – you have had to come to a basic belief about God. If we get that belief right, everything else follows. If we misbelieve at the beginning, it will cause inevitable trouble later on. How do you answer these questions?

- Do you believe God is good, that
- He always does what is right, and that
- He desires the very best for your life?

Your answers to those question shapes your entire approach to knowing and doing God's will in your life.

a. Don't be too quick to answer. What about the big disappointments in life? How do we reconcile a good God with birth defects, chronic pain, teen suicides, violent assaults, broken dreams and untimely deaths? It takes faith to believe that God is good in the face of sometimes persuasive evidence that God may not be as good as He's supposed to be. But, before deciding that God is not good, and before abandoning God in anger or disappointment – think about the alternative.

- If God is not good, we have no hope.
- If God is not good, we are on our own.
- If God is not good, evil is the ultimate victor.

b. I hope it comes to no surprise that I am an incorrigible believer. I have made a choice to believe that God is always good, always right, and always wants the best for my life.

2) The Bible speaks often of the "righteousness of God." This is one of God's attributes. Righteousness is something that God has. It emanates from His inner being. It is intrinsic to God's very nature.

Jeremiah, the prophet, proclaimed,

"You are always righteous, O Lord." (Jeremiah 12:1)

The Psalmist declared,

"The Lord is righteous." (Psalm 129:4)

To speak of the "righteousness of God" means that whatever God wills is perfectly right. God is always right. It is impossible for God to do anything wrong. This is what the Bible teaches us.

3) Theologians speak of the immutable character of God. It means that God does not change in his basic character. I love the words in Henry F. Lyte's hymn, "Abide With Me" –

*"Change and decay in all around I see,
O Thou who changest not, abide with me."*

a. Take any one thing you can say of God now, and it may be said not only in the dark past, but also in the bright future it shall always remain the same. Malachi 3:6 says,

"I the LORD do not change." (Malachi 3:6a)

Since God is righteous and He never changes, whatever God is, He always is. There are no "sometimes" attributes of God. All of His attributes are "always" attributes. He always is what He is. God can never act contrary to His character. God is always right.

b. A critic was disparaging God's creation. "It's all backwards," the man complained. "Look at the foolish way God has done things. He put the little acorn on a tree where it has a strong limb to support it. But He put the watermelon on a little flimsy vine that can't even hold it up. If I were God," he asserted, "I would put the watermelon on the tree and the acorn on the vine." Just as these words came out of his mouth, an acorn fell out of the tree and hit him on the head!

c. God is always right! Because God is 100% right,

- you can count on His justice. . .
- you can trust in His faithfulness, love, and mercy. . .
- you can count on His words being totally true.

d. The psalmist said,

"O Lord, You are righteous, Your regulations are fair. Your laws are perfect and completely trustworthy." (Psalm 119:137-138)

4) Because God is always right, we can trust Him. Now, trust is an act of faith. What is faith?

a. For some folk, faith is believing that God will always do things like I think they should be done. Everyone has heard of people who say they lost their faith in God. What that means is that God did something that they didn't think He should have done. Now, that's not faith at all. They never had faith in God.

b. Others say, "I don't understand why God allowed this to happen, but I do have the faith to believe He will explain it to me someday." Somebody wrote a song, "We'll Understand It Better By and By." That is not pure faith, but it is a step up.

c. Pure faith is this: "I don't agree with God, but if I never find out why it was for good, I still believe that God is right."

5) This may shock you, but I don't agree with some of the choices God made. I would have done things differently.

- I don't agree with God's choice of Jacob. He was a mama's boy, and one day he was home making chili while his brother was out hunting. This sorry rascal deceived his brother and got his birthright. Then, when his father was sick, he tricked his father and got the blessings his brother should have

gotten. After all of that, you know what God did? He changed Jacob's name to Israel – which means "prince of God" – and named His nation after him. I think He should have found somebody else.

- I don't agree when God did not allow Moses to go into the Promised Land. All he did was lose his temper after 40 years leading these complainers. I think that I've lost my temper a couple of times in my life. Have you ever lost yours?
- I don't like God calling David a man after His own heart. He stole another man's wife and sees to it that the poor fellow is killed. Even God said he was a man of blood when he denied him permission to build the Temple. And yet, God calls him a man after His heart.
- And, you won't believe who God calls the wisest man in the world – Solomon – a guy with 700 wives and 300 substitutes. I don't think so.
- I don't think Peter should have been allowed to preach on the Day of Pentecost. I don't think he deserved that role. Just 50 days before, he was a cussing man denying he even belonged to the Mt. Auburn United Methodist Church in Jerusalem, and now he is the headline preacher on Christianity's big day. I don't agree.
- While we are at it, I don't really understand the plan of salvation. It seems to me that a person who has lived a pretty good life ought to go to Heaven. The thief on the cross never did one solitary thing but trust Jesus, and he goes to Heaven. While the guy who never stole anything, never robbed anybody, never committed a crime dies and goes to Hell without Jesus.

a. None of this makes sense to me, but here is the point – it doesn't have to make sense to me. I believe God is right, and I am wrong. He may choose some day to explain to me why He did what He did, but He doesn't ever have to explain it to me. I believe God is right. He is always right, even when it doesn't make sense to me.

b. The greatest joy of the Christian life is to trust Him and need no explanation. The greatest thing you can do for God is to trust Him and ask for no explanation, either here or in eternity.

6) There are days this is more difficult to do than others – days when you're stressed, and it feels that everything is going wrong. Days when you're scared, and you feel alone, you can wonder if God really wants the best for you and if He is always right.

- a. These questions can intensify and accelerate in times of great suffering or loss.
- Disease threatens to undo all your dreams.
 - Death takes a precious child from your family.
 - Utterly unexpected desertion and divorce shake the foundations of your world.

At these times, people not only question God, but they can also become very angry at Him.

b. I know all of the usual answers. I've given them hundreds of times.

- "Some good purpose will result that you can't know now."

- "It will all work out later in wonderful ways you cannot foresee."
- "Someone may come to Christian faith as a result of what has happened."
- "God will use this to teach you some lesson that you would not otherwise learn."

I've said these words. I believe them. I wouldn't say them if I didn't believe them. Yet, they somehow ring hollow and inadequate when the pain is more than morphine can dull or when someone you love with all your heart has just died.

7) What Kind of God Do We Believe In?

a. This is an important question because it drives us back to the character of God. In the end, we must rest our faith on the goodness of God. This is the crucial issue of life – Is God good and does He care about us? Is God for us or against us?

- If you say "No", you will soon lose your faith altogether.
- If you say "Yes", then Romans 8:28 becomes more than a cliché.

It is the heart of the Christian answer.

". . .in all things God works for the good of those who love him. . ."
(Romans 8:28)

b. Your starting point makes all the difference. If you start with your trials and try to reason back to God, you'll never make it.

- Start with lung cancer and it's hard to find God.
- Start with divorce and it's hard to find God.
- Start with rape and it's hard to find God.
- Start with bankruptcy and it's hard to find God.

He's there, but he's hard to see when you start with your own difficulty.

c. You've got to start with God and reason from what you know about God back to your trials. There is an invisible line that stretches from God to us. That line is the line of God's goodness. We rest our faith on that invisible line. That's why –

"We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen." (II Corinthians 4:18)

8) God is good, and He is always right. How do we know this is true? Paul says,
"For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith –"
(Romans 1:17)

a. We do not discover these things ourselves. They are revealed to us. We accept these things that have been revealed to us as true and then we bet our lives on them.

b. I'm betting my life on the belief that God is always good and He is always right. What are you betting your life on?

Does God Ever Turn His Back?

Hosea 5:1-6

1) Today we dare to think about the unthinkable: Is it possible that God would ever turn His back on us? Some would answer – NO WAY! They quote verses like II Timothy 2:13:

"Though we are unfaithful, yet he remains faithful. . ."
(II Timothy 2:13)

But, we also should remember the verse just preceding that one says,
"If we deny Him, He also will deny us." (II Timothy 2:12b)

a. There is clear indication in the Bible that God does turn His back on individuals as well as nations. The quiet, subdued Old Testament prophet Hosea knew this truth. In the little book that bears his name, we not only find the story of his love for an unfaithful wife, we find two statements attributed to the eternal God.

b. First in Hosea 5:6 we read,

"When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the Lord, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them." (Hosea 5:6)

c. And then again in the same chapter we read,

"I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt."
(Hosea 5:15a)

2) This is not a pleasant thought or a view of God that is joyous to contemplate. Those who deny God could ever turn His back on a person are called "universalist." Universalism says no man is lost. In the end, everyone will be saved.

- The latest to espouse this theory is Rob Bell in a book *"Love Wins."* Although he denies that he is a universalist, his reasoning is basically the same – "A good and loving God could never send anyone to hell."

a. This reasoning is correct to a point. A good and loving God does not send people to hell. The person who ends up in that place has gone there despite all a good and loving God could do to prevent it.

b. If universalism is correct and in the end everyone will be saved anyway – why did Jesus command us to –

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20a)

We are going to a lot of unnecessary expense to evangelize the world if in the end everyone is going to be saved anyway.

- Why did Bill and Joyce Oden spend their lives in the Philipians if everyone goes to heaven anyway?

- Why do we go to all the effort and expense to have the church if everyone is saved with or without Christ?

If everyone goes to heaven, why bother?

c. If everyone goes to heaven, why did Jesus warn us otherwise?

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

3) The problem is not that God turns His back on man, but that mankind has turned its back on God. In the first chapter of Romans, we read about the downward spiral of non-religious man. This spiral began when there was sufficient knowledge of the one and only God. God says this knowledge about God is so clear that no one has an excuse.

"What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them." (Romans 1:19)

a. Human history didn't start with man in a cave, ignorant of his Creator, striving to better himself as many anthropologists theorize today. On the contrary, according to the Bible, human history began with man walking in a garden with his Creator in a state of perfection where he knew God intimately!

b. The Apostle Paul says that God is angry because He offers sufficient evidence and man intentionally chooses to deny it. We have turned from God and this is the result.

"Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." (Romans 1:22-23)

c. Isn't it interesting how we classify ourselves on this planet? We call ourselves "homo sapiens." It means wise one! Now, listen to how we explain where we came from.

"We begin by saying a superior being or God did not create us. Of that we are most certain. We look a bit like monkeys, so we probably came from them. Where did the monkeys come from? Perhaps they came from amphibians. Our ancestors were Salamanders. But, where did the Salamanders come from? Obviously from fish, which came from other sea creatures, which had to come from plankton, which came from protean molecules, which came from complex amino acids which came from random collisions of other molecules, which came from a primal puddle of ooze somewhere in Africa that was hit by a bolt of lightning."

Pitiful, isn't it? The wise one's best and brightest effort to explain his existence takes him back to a mud puddle. And for that you can get a PhD or be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. No wonder God is angry.

4) What is God to do when He sees His creation going awry? One can only imagine the pain the Father God must feel. As parents who love our children, what do we do when we see our children taking the wrong path and flirting with disaster? We warn them of the consequences.

a. God doesn't abuse our humanity by running roughshod over our personalities. He protects our free will by allowing us to make even destructive decisions, but He warns us of the consequences if we continue and don't turn back. This is the essence of love, and the key to entering into a love relationship with us. His faith in us despite knowing our nature to wander to the darkness is truly amazing. I don't have a category for the depth of that love.

b. It is typical of the God of the Bible that the driving force behind divine declarations of doom is God's longing to inspire people to turn around before it is too late. Our Lord goes to such lengths not because there is no hope of them escaping the prophesied disaster, but precisely because there is hope. In His grace, He is giving them a foretaste of what it will be like unless they turn around and get serious with God.

5) Many Christians have wrongly supposed that if God prophesies something, it is final. The truth is that Scripture emphatically and repeatedly declares that whether God's prophecies come true depends on the response of the people the prophecy is aimed at.

a. The Lord, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, clearly lays out this principle.
"The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it." (Jeremiah 18:7-8)

The reverse is also true. A change of heart for the worse can nullify prophecies of blessings.

"And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it." (Jeremiah 18:9-10)

b. Most prophecies are not declaring the inevitable future but are detailing what can be expected if there is not a change of heart. God's purpose is to motivate them to call upon Him, because –

"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Joel 2:32)

c. For a prophecy of doom to "fail" is the ultimate success to God.

Look at Jonah. His message from God to the Ninevites was that in just forty more days, they would be destroyed. The prophecy held not a shadow of hope. There was nothing about the body language or tone of voice of Jonah to hint to these pagans that God might be loving or merciful, but when the Ninevites repented, God spared them.

Whether God's prophecies come true depends on the response of the people the prophecy is aimed at. In this case, Nineveh repented and the Lord relented.

6) When contemplating whether God ever turns His back on us, we must remember that God did turn His back on Jesus when He hung on the cross. The prophet Habakkuk says this about God:

"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."
(Habakkuk 1:13a)

a. God cannot look upon sin, because it is nauseous to Him. He can't have anything to do with sin and be God. So, in that moment when the sins of the world were placed upon Jesus, God (the Father) turned His back and could not look at the sin that Jesus bore. It was at that moment the Son cried out –

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
(Matthew 27:46b)

b. If you reject the One who died for your sins, refuse the cleansing blood which washes away your sins, and you elect to stand before God in your sin – in that moment God will have to turn His back on you.

7) The most important thing I can tell you is that God never shuts the door on anyone who truly wants to come to Him in repentance and faith. Jesus' promise is for you:

"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."
(John 6:37)

a. One clear sign that God hasn't shut the door on you already is your own inner desire to come back to Him. Where does this come from? It doesn't just come from your own dissatisfaction with the way you've been living. Instead, God gives it to you! His Spirit is at work in your heart (whether you're aware of it or not), convicting you of your sin and convincing you of your need of Christ. Jesus said,

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."
(John 6:44)

b. Would God be drawing you to Himself if He wasn't willing to receive you and forgive you? Don't ignore His call, however, or assume you can indefinitely delay turning to Him. The Bible says,

"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (II Corinthians 6:2).

c. A woman had finally decided to leave her husband. She had hung on as long as she possibly could. Her husband was completely insensitive to her needs. He was inconsiderate and thoughtless. He had ruined their relationship. For the sake of her own health and the welfare of her children, she had decided it would be best for her to leave. But, she left a note with her pastor that said: "If he ever really wants me, tell him this is where he can find me."

If you really want God, He left His address at the cross of Calvary. I plead with you to turn to Christ and commit your life to Him today.



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