

ENDORSEMENTS

This short book by Baruch Maoz is not only a joy to read but it is a very timely and important book for the mental health of the West, in particular. Rationalism claimed that people can gather enough particulars to create their own universals, rejecting knowledge outside themselves, God, and revelation. But individuals who bought this view found they aren't big enough to collect enough "lived experiences" to build universals for life and recognized that the universals offered by society were arbitrary and, they felt, constraining them from happiness, their "inalienable right." Without universals, the distinction between reality and fantasy is lost and people escaped into their own heads and into protests against arbitrary societal absolutes imposed by establishment elites. Enter *God in His Beautiful Greatness*, clearly a book from a pastor's heart, reaching out to these people and to us all. The author has gathered, organized, and wonderfully presented the particulars that unify in the ultimate universal, God Himself. Like building a mosaic, one beautiful particular at a time, the book succeeds in presenting a picture of God's uniqueness, completeness, and more. The author encourages us to revel in this big picture and to appreciate the wonder, the mystery, and the gifts of learning our life has real meaning, we have personal significance, a purpose bigger than ourselves, and personal decisions matter, as he guides us from the tiny space of our own head into the expansive loving presence of the God who made us for Himself.

— Dan Brooks,
Emeritus Professor, Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ

Baruch takes the reader in this compact book from God's existence, His essence, His characteristics (attributes), the three persons of the Godhead (Trinity), and then to some significant but wrong views of God. One of the strengths of the book is found at the end of each chapter with what the author calls, "Further Reflection". If the student or group will thoughtfully, prayerfully answer, and meditate on these questions, a deep knowledge both intellectually and experientially will be gained about our beautiful God. I liked the emphasis on the experiential knowledge of God. I found as this profound doctrine was explained, my heart was lifted to worship and adoration. During the reading of chapter three on God's essence I jotted down this phrase, "a rich sweet reminder and insight" about God's eternity.

This book can be used both for personal and group study. I highly commend this small volume and I'm thankful, although originally written for a Hebrew speaking audience, that it is available in English.

— **Gordon Taylor,**
Former Pastor and Missions Coordinator

Our God's greatness is not merely supreme; it is compellingly beautiful. Far too many theological treatises fall woefully short of this reality, saying true things but failing to capture the worshipful majesty of our Lord. Baruch Maoz's *God in His Beautiful Greatness* is a welcome corrective to this far too common malady. In a logically systematic progression, Maoz leads the reader from the knowledge of God and His basic existence, through His essence and characteristics, to His triune glory and the stirring implications for the gospel. As Maoz writes, "Theology is not irrelevant, theoretical hair-

splitting; it is an opportunity for worship, a confirmation of our faith, and a tremendous help in everyday life.” This book has helped me to love the Lord all the more, for which I am truly grateful. May it similarly bless many more readers, and may our beautiful God receive all the glory.

— **Nicolas Alford,**
Pastor, King’s Cross Church (Kirkland, WA)
Guest Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Reformed
Baptist Seminary

Baruch’s book entices you into a love affair with his God and Savior. He lures the unsuspecting to study theology as a lover muses on the face of his darling. For him the Scriptures are a collage of glimpses of *God in His Beautiful Greatness*. Careful! It’s contagious—and also colorful. The first Adam wasn’t just Mr. Adam, from one Garden of Eden, Tree of Life, Earth; but he was head of the human race—their representative. Much like a president or prime minister who signs a declaration of war for all, so Adam signed one against God. And only the second Adam could break the damning war spell by brokering a peace treaty with all His blood bought friends. The love of Christ captivates you.

— **Mark Chanski,**
Coordinator, The Reformed Baptist Network,
Hermeneutics Professor, Reformed Baptist Seminary,
Author, *Encouragement Adrenaline, Manly*
Dominion, Womanly Dominion

I have often contemplated the Psalmist's desire to behold the beauty of the Lord. (Psalm 27:4). Baruch Maoz has captured something more profound than just a study in God's attributes as beneficial as that might be. This profound volume leads the reader to worshipful awe at the beauty and balance of God in all his greatness. This book will uniquely draw the reader into an aesthetic sense of wonder at the greatness of God. It is a book that you will read and return to again and again.

— **Dr. Tedd Tripp**
President, Shepherding the Heart Ministries;
Pastor Emeritus, Grace Fellowship Church
Hazleton, PA

GOD IN HIS
BEAUTIFUL
GREATNESS

GOD IN HIS **BEAUTIFUL** **GREATNESS**

**A DEVOTIONAL THEOLOGY OF
THE DOCTRINE OF GOD**

BARUCH MAOZ



FOUNDERS
MINISTRIES
CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

GOD IN HIS BEAUTIFUL GREATNESS

A Devotional Theology of the Doctrine of God

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FOREWORD

God is supremely beautiful. The greatest longing of King David was to behold the *beauty* of the Lord: “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple” (Psalm 27:4 KJV). Through faithful scriptural exposition, my good friend Baruch Maoz displays some of this divine beauty in this enlightening and helpful book.

The nature of beauty has long been the intellectual fodder of philosophers. We intuitively recognize beauty, but what actually *is* it? When we admire a plunging waterfall, a sunset over a canyon, or the smile of a newborn baby, we encounter *beauty*. We tend to restrict our definition of beauty to what we can *see*. A groom is overwhelmed by the beauty of his bride as she walks down the aisle; children are also beautiful, for they are youthful and innocent of the cares of life; and there is beauty in artwork that celebrates the marvels of God’s creation—like paintings that showcase such wonders as a sparkling ocean, a tropical rainforest, or a turquoise lake among jagged mountains that pierce the sky. Yet we also recognize beauty in the *unseen*. There is great beauty in music—such as in the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms that enrapture our souls and can sometimes make us leap for joy. There is likewise great beauty in mathematics—such as in the unending, swirling shapes of computer-generated fractals.

Both visible and invisible (or abstract) beauty share the common traits of perfection, excellence, and harmony.

As humans, we are drawn to *visible* beauty because it is a faint reflection of the *invisible* beauty of the Creator who imagined it all and spoke it into existence with the breath of His mouth (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 33:6; Romans 1:20). That is why beauty is so pleasing to us. (Incidentally, the more we deviate from a right relationship with God, the more the artwork we produce—whether in music, visual arts, or drama—will lack order, harmony, and excellence, degenerating into chaos, disorder, and distortion. The Devil far prefers ugliness to beauty.)

God is the archetype of beauty. His beauty is original and underived. It is the sight of this beautiful God face-to-face that constitutes the ecstatic joy of the beatific vision (Psalm 16:11; Matthew 18:10; 1 Corinthians 13:12). We cannot see God except as He is mediated to us through the Son (John 1:18). Yet we can admire His invisible and uncreated beauty through the mind. God is beautiful because His attributes are perfect, excellent, and harmonious. His attributes exist in perfect harmony, for they are all one in Him who is perfectly simple (or uncompounded). Thus, God's love is just, and His justice is loving; His grace is omnipresent, and His omnipresence is gracious; His omniscience is wise, and His wisdom is omniscient. We could likewise predicate every attribute of God with every other attribute of God. God's sovereignty, for example, is eternal, triune, all-knowing, all-wise, almighty, omnipresent, holy, loving, true, and righteous. This harmony of God's perfections should be pleasing—not to the eyes—but to the eyes of faith, the soul, and the mind. This knowledge of God mediated through Jesus Christ is the essence of eternal life (John 17:3).

Closely connected to beauty is the sensation of awe—perhaps one of the most sublime experiences that a human can enjoy. Have you ever had your breath taken away by the beauty of a sunset, the sparkle of an emerald lake, the imposing shadow of a mountain, or a tiny but gorgeous ladybug climbing a blade of green grass? That delightful feeling is the sense of awe. Awe lifts us out of ourselves and transports us to the sublime. No doubt this sense of awe will be part of the joy and bliss of heaven—to be caught up in eternal awe in the majestic presence of God and the contemplation of His being and the sight of Christ in the beatific vision. May our breaths be taken away by God Himself, both in this life and in the life to come!

Here, then, is a systematic-theological treatment of the doctrine of this beautiful God. Baruch's systematic treatment of God in His glorious greatness and goodness is delightful. This treatment is far more than a theological treatise, although it is that. Baruch wants his readers to meditate upon the law—the Torah or the “instruction” and “revelation”—of the LORD (Psalm 1:1). In other words, we must deeply reflect upon who God is and what He has done—both of which He has graciously revealed to us in His Word. Writing is one effective tool to aid such reflection, and that is precisely why Baruch finishes each chapter with practical application and prompts for meditation.

Baruch proceeds with his treatise on the doctrine of God in trinitarian fashion. He begins by examining the existence of God, the nature of God (His essence, eternity, self-existence, self-sufficiency, indivisibility, oneness, spirituality, Trinity), and the attributes of God (His holiness, wisdom, omnipresence, omniscience, all-knowingness, all-

wiseness, almightiness, omnipresence, sovereignty, holiness, lovingness, trueness, righteousness). He then proceeds to discuss the Trinity and the hypostatic union of deity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Baruch adorns his christological meditations with clear proclamations of the glorious gospel.

God is our God *in Christ*. Let us marvel that the God who is holy stepped into the unholy world; that the God who is just suffered injustice from godless men; and the God who is omniscient and omnipresent took upon human nature: the Son of God lay in swaddling clothes in a manger, worked in the carpenter's shop, and died a cruel death on Calvary's tree. This triune God offers Himself to us in His holiness, His love, His wisdom, and His goodness, such that we can exclaim with David, "Who am I, O Lord GOD? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?" (2 Samuel 7:18 KJV).

Pay special attention to Baruch's closing discussion of unbiblical worldviews, both ancient and modern—from pantheism to Docetism to the kenotic theory. As many have rightly observed, there is no new heresy—only recycled heresy. Acquaint yourself with these ungodly worldviews, for you will inevitably encounter some or all at some point in your life. Yet the best way to detect error is to know the truth, and it is to that point of understanding that Baruch will ably lead you.

Brother Maoz's work is biblical, Reformed, experiential, and practical. After all, the study of God is the most practical of all subjects. Consider just a few of His attributes. Knowledge of God's eternity should impact how we treat the world; knowledge of His self-existence and self-

sufficiency should generate humble dependence within us; knowledge of the Trinity should lead us to rejoice in the gospel; knowledge of His holiness should encourage our holiness. We should also depend upon God for His wisdom, fear Him in His omnipresence and omniscience, trust Him for His might and sovereignty, love Him in return for His love, trust Him because of His love and righteousness, and repent from our sins and find refuge in Christ because of His justice. Our knowledge of God should impact our affections and will. Right feeling and doing always spring from right understanding.

Above all, our author shows that biblical and theological study is not an end in itself. Rather, the goal of knowledge is that we would experientially know, love, obey, and praise this triune God for time and for eternity. Do not let the study to follow be a mere intellectual exercise. Enter this study with prayerfulness and with fear and trembling. Like Moses, stand before the burning bush of God's glory and remove the shoes from your feet. Stand in awe before the God of all the earth. Let this treatise and the meditations to follow draw you to Christ. If you do not know Christ, repent from your sins and believe in Him alone for salvation. If you are a believer, drink yet deeper from the wells of divine knowledge—deeper than you have ever done before. You will spend eternity with this God. Knowing Him is the essence of eternal life, and we can begin to know Him in this life through Christ (John 17:3). Knowing this great and glorious God now is the beginning of eternal life in the soul. Let the knowledge of God be the rapture of your soul. Thirst for God as though you were in a dry and parched land (Psalm 63:1).

Let us then press on to know the Lord (Hosea 6:3). Get out your Bible, pen, and paper, and begin to study the pages that follow with dependence, desire, and diligence. Then see, with the Spirit's blessing, how your life can be transformed by the doctrine of this great and glorious God—yes, this beautiful God.

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PREFACE

Nothing is sweeter than worshipping God. Everything we can know about Him persuades us of that, and the more we know, the more we can worship.

Originally, I wrote this book for a Hebrew-reading public. There are very few books in Hebrew that deal with theological subjects, and no theological subject is more important than one that deals with God. The Hebrew version is now being prepared for the press. But, having written it, I thought it might be helpful to offer this effort to engage in theology in a devotional manner in English as well. I offer no new insights—whatever I know has long been discovered by other generations before me. It is for you, dear reader, to determine whether I offer anything of a different perspective. I write as a Jew in Christ, circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, a Hebrew of Hebrews, converted from my wicked ways back in 1963, and ever since then, lamely seeking to serve Him who loved me so well and contrary to my deserts.

I begin with a brief set of recommendations on how to use this book. You might want to use it for your private or family devotions or in the context of a study group. My hope is that you will not skim through these pages and then place the book on your shelf, but that you will use it to engage your heart by engaging your mind, and that it will lead you to a deeper appreciation of God's beautiful greatness.

Chapter 1 highlights reasons why we need to know God. Knowing Him equips us for life and provides a worldview that serves as a guideline for all our thoughts and actions.

Such knowledge is not a mystical reality; it has to do with actual facts about Him, facts that make a real difference in the way we live, indeed, in the very purpose of our lives.

Chapter 2 focuses on the sources from which we can know about God. Because God is infinite spirit, wholly other than anything tangible and earthly, and because we are sinners whereas He is utterly holy, we can only come to know Him through the ways in which He has revealed Himself. He has made Himself known through the universe He created and by His Word His Holy Spirit inspired.

Chapter 3 leads into thinking about the essence of God: what is it about Him that constitutes His deity? Here we tread on holy ground, and we do so with care and trepidation. Our thoughts are guided by what God has revealed about Himself in Scripture, leaving us to wonder rather than to rationalize.

Chapter 4 describes God's characteristics, those that are exclusively His and those that He has condescended to share with us, in however a relative sense, when He created us in His image.

Chapter 5 begins to explore the relations between the persons of the Trinity, in this case between God the Father and God the Son, and spells out an important practical implication of the deity of the Son that affects our salvation.

Chapter 6 briefly pauses our discussion of the relations within the Godhead and offers some basic perceptions with regard to the humanity of the incarnated Son, Jesus.

Chapter 7 resumes the discussion of the relations within the Godhead and provides a summary of what the Bible has to say about the Spirit, His person, and His role.

In chapter 8 we explore some of the major mistaken views of God that arose in the course of the centuries, briefly describing them and offering an evaluation of each.

The book draws to a close with “Concluding Thoughts,” emphasizing again our need to ground our understanding of God in His Word, not in our thoughts and imaginations.

My prayer is that this little book will serve you, not only to know about God but to personally come to know Him.

INTRODUCTION



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Studying theology is a distinctly Christian pleasure. It is like a lover studying the face of his beloved. But, unlike that kind of study, studying theology also requires effort. We have to concentrate. As we receive biblical truth, we often must wrestle with difficult and unfamiliar concepts. We need to understand and to be constantly willing to change our views as our study progresses. It is inevitable that we will discover again and again that we have been wrong on one point or another—sometimes terribly wrong.

The following comments are meant to help you clearly frame your conclusions by writing them out. To that end, each chapter closes with a series of questions for group discussion, preceded by your thoughtful, written answers. Why write? Simply because writing involves putting thoughts into words, and that is one of the most helpful steps toward clearer understanding. After all, the knowledge of God is what life is all about: understanding what we know about Him, we can love and obey Him whom to love and obey is our greatest privilege and our sweetest joy.

As you prepare to study, the first step is to be sure that you have all your materials with you: a Bible, preferably more than one translation; an open page on your computer or a notebook; and an eager, worshipful mind.

The next step is to read each chapter of this book carefully, at least twice. Don't hesitate to read again and again until

you understand. Pray over what you have read. Many terms will be new and will take some effort before you are used to them. It is helpful to summarize difficult paragraphs in your own terms. Note words such as “therefore” and be sure you are satisfied that what follows is a legitimate conclusion from what came before. While reading, I often find it useful to mark the most important statements in each paragraph so that I can skim over them later and get a sense of the whole, as well as to make notes of agreement or disagreement in the margins. When you come to a biblical reference, be sure to look it up! The Bible is the ground for all we have a right to say on theology. If the references do not support statements made, the whole structure may be mistaken.

While reading, have your notebook or computer page handy. Use them to write quotes, thoughts, questions, and relevant texts. What you have written will later form the substance of your conclusions.

The next step is to understand the questions. After you have read them carefully and prayerfully once or twice, put the thoughts you’ve written in logical order. There will be many gaps in your thinking at this stage, but don’t worry, these will be filled in a bit later.

Then pause and ask: Are there any other resources that could help your thinking—other biblical texts, a book or two? Do you know someone who has thought much on the subject and whose views you trust and respect? If so, make the most of these additional resources.

Add the new thoughts to those you wrote out previously, placing each in its logical place. Now it is the time for you to finalize what you have written. Turn to the questions. You will discover that much of what you have written will

aid you in framing your answers, even if some will be but seminal thoughts you will want to develop.

Do not forget that, while both the process and the logic of your arguments are important, neither of these are the object of our studies. We study in order to enlarge and motivate our love by way of understanding and to guide and instruct our obedience because we believe that everything we do should be to the glory of God. Don't be satisfied with an accumulation of facts without thinking or praying over them. Don't be satisfied with mere repetition of what you knew before or what other believers hold to be true. Dive deep! Think! Examine! Take nothing you read for granted. Try to understand and make sure your conclusions have a solid biblical basis.

Before you relax, go over your answers once more, summarizing the paragraphs much as you did when you read the chapter. That is a good way to discover gaps in your thinking. Your present task is now done, but don't assume you now have the final, full, and authoritative answer to all possible questions. Hold your findings loosely, as "true until proven otherwise," and don't be surprised if you are proven wrong to one extent or another from time to time. God teaches us humility by revealing our faults. One thing is sure: however valid your finding may be, one or more of your brethren can shed more light on the topic, so cultivate an open mind.

Theology is best done in the company of others who can challenge, correct, confirm, enlarge, and deepen our understanding. One important way in which understanding grows is through discussion—sometimes through argument if conducted graciously and with mutual respect. In many

cases the truth becomes clearer by being challenged by some error or by the beginnings of an error. A great part of the history of the church was a process of shifting one direction or another while growing in understanding of God's Word. Growth was often the result of false views that arose and challenged the church to think through issues once again and modify its own views while it rejected error.

The importance of discussion is the main reason why a great deal of your study should entail engaging with others.

CHAPTER 1



WHY WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOD

The purpose of this book is to help you think about what the Bible says about God, His ways, and what He has said. It is important to know God. If we know Him better, we will be equipped to be better Christians, better men and women of God. If we make biblical truths about God part of our thinking and our everyday conduct, we will be better equipped to glorify God by the way we live.

The knowledge of God affects the whole of life. It determines how we think about the universe in which we live and in which we are likely to die. It determines the way we look at life, its joys and its sorrows, its opportunities and its challenges. It determines how we relate to work, to family, and to the ultimate goal of life. It determines how we understand salvation, how we preach the gospel, and what we believe to be the most important thing in life. It is the most important kind of knowledge we can have. It is also the most wonderful.

By God's grace, it is possible for us to know Him. He has made it possible by the way He created us and by the way He revealed Himself. It is a wonderful act of grace and of divine humility that God would love us so much as to speak to us, and that He would do so in terms we can understand! The doctrine of revelation is not part of our present study. But

it is necessary for us to think about that subject a little bit because, in order to know, we need to know *how* to know.

People travel great distances to see beautiful or amazing things: the tallest building in the world, the beautiful architecture of Washington and St. Petersburg, Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, the Grand Canyon, the first airplane, Picasso's paintings, the Eiffel Tower, and so on. God is the most beautiful, the most amazing reality man can ever contemplate. Discovering more about Him is the most enriching discovery man can make.

Our present study has to do with God so you and I will know more about Him. We are not interested in theories for theories' sake. We want to know more about God so we can love Him more. It is just impossible to know Him without loving Him, as it is impossible to love Him without knowing Him. Only the most wicked, the most warped of God's creatures is capable of knowing God without falling at His feet to adore Him.

We also want to learn about Him in order to know more about what He wants of us. That kind of knowledge will help us serve God better. When we know what He is like, we can have a better idea of what He wants. Doing God's will makes us more like Him. God the Holy Spirit changes and shapes us as we obey, bringing us closer to what we will be one day in heaven: like God. There is no greater privilege in the universe that human beings can enjoy than being like their Maker and Redeemer.

Another reason for our desire to know God is that we want to do what pleases Him, what He commands us to do. "His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, *through the true knowledge of Him who*

called us by His own glory and excellence. Through these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world on account of lust” (2 Peter 1:3–4, emphasis added). The more we know the Lord, who called us to His glory (a wonderful topic in and of itself!), we will serve Him all the more fully, all the more faithfully.

We purify our souls by “obedience to the truth” (1 Peter 1:22). If we live as God wants us to live, we will understand increasingly more of God’s truth because heartfelt, loving obedience leads to understanding: “If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know about the teaching, whether it is of God, or I am speaking from Myself” (John 7:17). The knowledge of God leads to loving, joyful obedience, and obedience opens the door for more, truer, fuller knowledge. That is one of the ways we grow as Christians. Doing the will of God, we are transformed into His very image. The Holy Spirit shapes our hearts by means of our obedience. He leads us, step after step, toward the very image we will bear when we enter God’s eternal presence—the image of His glory and holiness. As we said, there is no greater privilege to which sinners are capable of than to be made like their Creator and Redeemer.

The reason why knowledge is so important is quite simple: Christianity is not a mystical religion. There certainly is a great deal of mystery in Christianity: there is more than a human mind can ever know or understand. Truth is greater than any man’s limited capacity. It is as infinite as God, as broad as His majesty, and deeper than any abyss. But Christianity is not the kind of Faith that

ignores man's ability to truly know and truly understand, although he cannot exhaustively know anything, let alone the infinite God. Christianity is not of the kind that calls us to experience what cannot be known. The Bible is made up of words that express concepts, all of which are meant to be understood and which introduce us to Christian experience. God spoke to us in a human language, the kind of language we can understand—our kind of language.

People today ask for “practical” sermons and books. They have little time for or interest in anything that is not immediately useful. We are drowning in so-called practical books that promise a resolution to our problems but often lead nowhere. What we lack is a warm, thoughtful, and informed acquaintance with God through His Word and the blessing of God's Spirit on that acquaintance. Theories are immensely practical if we only take the time to explore them. Columbus had a theory that said the world is round. So he traveled west to find the east and changed the course of history.

Christianity is a Faith that speaks to the will and emotions of people through their understanding. It is also a Faith that has made understanding an important aspect of the obedience it requires. Christianity teaches us that, in order to be faithful to God and to know Him better, we must understand the Bible. To be truly free, we must know the truth and thereby shake off mistaken views (John 8:32). We must understand the Scriptures. In other words, we have to think, examine, analyze, and come to a right understanding of what God has said in His holy Word about Himself, the world He created, and His relations with us.

Of course, we cannot manage without the help of the Spirit of God. We are limited to a painful degree in our ability to understand God. He is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:15–16). In addition, ever since the sin of our first father, Adam, we have an inborn tendency to twist and distort whatever we understand. The Holy Spirit does not reveal to us truths about God that are not in the Bible. He expands our understanding, brings truths declared in Scripture to our attention, helps us understand the relation of one truth to another, and overcomes our sinful tendency to distort the truth. All His work in this relation has to do with understanding what God has said about Himself in the Bible.

Nor is it enough to understand. We need to yield to the truths learned, to love them, and to respond to them in obedience. That is how we love and obey the God revealed by those truths. We must love and obey God in every area of our lives: in the family and in society, in our work and at times of recreation, with our art, in our thoughts and preferences, with our ambitions and prayers, in our attitude to the society to which we belong, in the way we conduct our church life, and in the style of our worship. There is no area of life in which we are free from the obligation to obey God. Nothing is secular. Everything is “holy to the Lord” (Zechariah 14:20).

Much of modern art (music and painting, for example) is an expression of rebellion. It screams: “We don’t want to think! We don’t want to understand! All we want to do is experience, feel, and feel good. Anything that provides us

with a good feeling is right. Anything that does not is wrong. So drugs and alcohol are right, and lying is right, and sexual immorality is right, because these things make us feel good. We do not want the restrictions that God imposes. We have no interest in harmony or beauty. Our art is a cacophony of angry rebellion and desperate confusion, and that's the way we want it to be."

Christian spirituality is different. It does not rebel; it obeys, and if hard work is necessary for spiritual growth, then it obediently takes up that work in order to know and love God better. Christian spirituality does not mean ignoring the truth but loving it. My wife and I live in the same house and eat at the same table, but I have a picture of her in my office and another is in my Bible. I love to study her face, the shape of her pretty little nose, her smile, her thin eyebrows, and her lips. I enjoy doing this because I love her. Well, when we love God, we love to study His face too, and His face is to be found with no greater clarity than in the pages of the Bible.

The Bible says, "Hate evil, you who love the LORD" (Psalm 97:10). That is what Christianity is like. It is a growing awareness, not some kind of spiritual coma in which we have no idea what is going on. It is clear and loving understanding, an informed ability to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. It involves love of good and hatred of evil. Christian spirituality can tell the difference between God's Word and man's feelings. Sharing Christian spirituality means sharing a growing understanding of and love for God.

"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

Knowing God and loving Him is the sum and substance of Christianity, a Christian's greatest joy and most important goal in life. That is why we are studying the doctrine of God.

Some people object to this view of spirituality. "The letter kills" (2 Corinthians 3:6), they remind us, "but the Spirit gives life." Exactly true. Quite apart from the question of whether the text quoted means what it is often taken to mean, we should not be satisfied with the mere words of Scripture. We need to *understand* them, to get at the spirit of the words. We need to be faithful to the Spirit by giving serious attention to what He has said. We need to note both the content of His words and the proportion of one truth He declared in relation to another. That is what we want to do in our present study of what God has to say about Himself in His Word.

Many today are striving to achieve no more than the minimal measure of understanding that is necessary. They deny the necessity of thoroughness or of depth. Theology is decried and experience exalted. But superficiality in any sphere is not worthy of a Christian. Whatever we do, we should make every effort to do it as well as we can—and continually strive to improve our abilities so that we do things better. That is also true of understanding. We should be continually striving to improve our abilities so that we better understand the Bible. Some Christians are not so much against knowledge as they are against certain kinds of knowledge. But they have put the shoe on the wrong foot! Many today know more about the battle of Gog and Magog than they know about the glories of Christ or the majesty of the Trinity, more about the rapture than about righteousness, more about healing than about holiness.

Important doctrines of the Faith are being neglected while people spend their time figuring out genealogies, hidden meanings in names, and the spiritual significance of the colors of the tabernacle materials. As a result, our spirituality is much, much weaker than that of most generations before us, much more superficial.

Our generation is a generation of feelings and of embarrassing biblical ignorance. All too few are acquainted with the facts of Scripture and even fewer understand them. Many Christians have no idea who Jerubbaal, Jehoiakim, Tamar, or Tychicus were. Few can find Bethel or Pisidian Antioch on the map. Still fewer are able to demonstrate from the Scripture how the death of Jesus works for the salvation of His people. They can show that His death saves, but *how* it saves is something they have never thought about. Christians who have spent little time in understanding the Bible get together to tell each other what they feel the Bible is saying to them—as if one can arrive at the meaning of a text by way of a “feeling” rather than careful study, prayer, and analytical thought. Few give thought to the fact that the first thing they must discover is what the Bible is saying to all and any. Only then can they apply those truths to their own lives.

Spirituality is thought of in terms of a general feeling of warmth and goodwill toward God and toward people, a kind of warmth that never objects, never disagrees, and never—but never!—dares to express doubt about the truth of another person’s opinion. A merely superficial reading of the Bible will show how untrue such a view is. The prophets were very clear in their rejection of other people’s religious views, even of those popular among the covenantal people

of God. Jesus was no less of one opinion, and anyone who thought otherwise was mistaken. There is not a single instance in which He conceded to a mistaken view in order to maintain unity or goodwill. When people were wrong, He found a way to tell them, sometimes very firmly. Just give a look at what He said in Matthew 23, for example!

There are important differences between the knowledge Christians have about God and the content of knowledge unbelievers have. Secular scientists, for example, learn about the universe with a view to controlling it. We Christians learn about God in order to love, worship, and obey Him. Real knowledge of God is never primarily objective. The facts, of course, are objectively true, but Christian knowledge of God is always far more than mere acquaintance with the facts. It is subjectively embraced. It is knowledge that leads to active love and adoration.

Such knowledge cannot be had only by acquaintance with mere facts. It requires more. Knowledge of the chemical makeup of one of my wife's famous chocolate cakes or the ability to describe the astronomy of a sunset is real knowledge, but it is also only partial. You need to sink your teeth into the cake or stand on the ridge of a mountain and watch the sunset. Only then you will really understand. In other words, for a true understanding, you need to experience the facts.

That is true about knowing God. The mere accumulation of facts about Him will do you no good. You need to meet Him, to experience His love and His wisdom, to have a sense of His holiness, and to experience the power of His hand before you can really know Him. Knowledge of Him makes your experience with Him richer because you can make sense of who He is, what He is like, and what He is doing.

To understand, we need to define, that is to say, we need to discover the meaning of the words used in the Bible and to ensure what is meant is very clear in our minds, that what we mean by the words we use to explain what we have read really expresses our understanding. This is not merely a play on words. God has spoken to us in human language. It is our duty to understand what He has said. If we do not discover the intended meaning of the biblical words in their context and define the use we make of words as we study, we open the door for many mistakes simply because most words have wide areas of meaning.

Take the word “day” for example. It is a very common word, but it means different things on different occasions in the Bible. For example, in Genesis 1, “day” obviously means twenty-four hours from evening to evening. But in Genesis 3:5 and Deuteronomy 31:17 it obviously means a period. In Psalm 95:8–10, the word “day” is used to describe a long time—40 years in fact—during which the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. In Isaiah 10:27, the word “day” refers to an undefined moment in history now past. So we must learn to understand what words mean in their given contexts in order to understand the message they convey.

We should not be put off by any effort to make the message of the Bible plain. Some people might protest my insistence on the meaning of words, but such an insistence is not nit-picking; it is love of and respect for God’s revelation. It is nothing less than loving attention to what God has said. After all, how can we understand God’s message unless we understand what the words He used mean?

In order to understand the Bible, it is helpful to summarize its truths with words that are not necessarily found in the

Bible. One example of that is the term “Trinity,” which is not a biblical word but is used by Christians all over the world and was used for many centuries in order to summarize an important truth the Bible teaches. There is nothing wrong with such practice so long as we are faithful to what the Bible says. After all, we use different words when we talk about the Bible in languages other than Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (in which the Bible was written). “But,” you might say, “we don’t understand Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek!” That’s just the point. We use words not found in the Bible in order to explain what the Bible says. Whoever denies our right to do so is wanting to deny or hide what the Bible is saying and is doing so under the false pretense of being faithful to the biblical text. Don’t believe him.

Another important means to help us understand the Bible is to put its various truths in relation to one another, like my wife does with her ingredients when she bakes a cake. She takes sugar from the shelf, flour from the cabinet, milk and eggs from the fridge, and chocolate from wherever she hides it (I wish I knew). She then mixes it all in a certain order, puts it in the oven and, presto, we have a cake! Truth is much that way. When we put the various parts of truth together and see their interrelations, their relative proportions, and their internal priorities, we are in a better position to understand the truth as a whole and can make more use of it in our daily lives. To use another metaphor: what use is a watch if its parts are not assembled or are not assembled in the right way?

There is more in Scripture than what lies on the surface. Take, for example, our Lord’s explanation in Matthew 22:32: God described Himself in the Old Testament as the

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Jesus understood from that description more than is explicitly stated: since God is not the God of the dead but of the living, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be still alive, even though they died. We previously agreed “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). So we should not be satisfied with the mere words of the Bible. We should work hard to discover what they have to say beyond the obvious. But (and this is important) never—never!—should we go beyond the actual meaning of the words. The supernatural is not unnatural. God is the most natural reality in the universe. The supernatural is accessible through the natural: human words used by God in the Bible to teach us about Himself.

Theology is no more than a summary and a description of what the Bible says on any given topic. It is the fruit of loving attention to details, careful investigation of meanings, and a devout desire to know and love God. Properly understood truth is necessary for spiritual growth. Small deviations may eventually develop into major ones. That is one of the reasons why the study of theology can be so useful.

We admitted that we are limited in our ability to explain all that God says about Himself, even though the Bible was written in human language. It addresses truths that are so far beyond us that we will sometimes arrive at the limits of our understanding, when all we can then do is stand and gaze in wonder and amazement.

We know in part and prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away with. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish

things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:9–12)

But we certainly should go to the very limits of our understanding so long as we are talking about understanding who God is and whatever else we can learn about Him. God has spoken. We worship and adore Him by doing our best to understand what He said. Someone said it before me: “we can touch the earth although we are not able to embrace it in our arms.”

And so, some of what we will learn from the Bible about God is beyond our understanding. We will not be able to know how or why something is so. All we are able to do is believe what God says about Himself. Our sense of logic and meaning must serve our confidence in God’s Word, not limit or condition it, because God is to be trusted in all He says and does. We understand as much as we can of what God said. But we never question the truth of His Word. There is a logic in the Bible that is sometimes within our reach and sometimes extends far beyond it. Logic is not contrary to the Bible. It is not unspiritual. It is part of the image of God in us. God is wise and we are able—we are duty bound!—to be as wise as we possibly can be. But our wisdom is smaller than an ant in relation to the universe when it compares with the wisdom of God’s Word.

There will always be mysteries. We will often be amazed. Our minds will be stretched to their limit, and still we will not understand. Is this surprising? Not at all, because we are speaking about God. There is much in Him to surprise, but

nothing contrary to reason—only beyond its reach—and everything to adore.

Christian spirituality is characterized by both breadth and depth. It is not satisfied with the minimum of understanding. It wants to worship without reservation and realizes that means it must worship beyond its understanding. It wants to worship God as He is, not as we might imagine Him to be. We do not trust the imagination or intuition of man. We must not create in our minds an idol, a divine character that meets our expectations and suits our prejudices. We must not rely on intuitions or accept only what fits into the framework of our understanding. We often have to admit we can go no further.

We are not put off by mysteries, certainly not when speaking of God. To the contrary. Many in this scientific age are distressed by the lack of mystery in most areas of life. That is why they are turning to the mystery religions of the East. The New Age belief has nothing to offer; it is simply the same old substitute for truth wrapped in new paper. As Christians, we do not depend on some guru to tell us about the truly spiritual—nor do we trust him. We hang with confidence on the Word of God.

That is the difference between a theologian who is true to the Word of God and a secular philosopher. A philosopher has ideas, thoughts, theories, and concepts. A Christian theologian has truth drawn from the Word of God.

We begin our study as believers who love and trust God and who recognize that only He can reveal what He is like. We also begin as believers in the Bible as the Word of God. There is nothing strange about beginning with such assumptions. All science is based on assumptions, without which scientific

investigation would be impossible. If scientists did not believe that a real universe exists regardless of whether or not they know and understand it, they would have nothing to study. If they did not believe in their ability to understand the universe and in what their senses tell them, scientific research would be impossible. After all, terms such as time, space, weight, length, and depth are no more than words scientists use to describe what they see. A meter, a kilogram, and a minute of time are no more than terms invented by scientists for the study of the universe.

Those who think that faith cannot be the first assumption of our study are mistaken. Faith is the basis on which every kind of knowledge is possible. All scientists begin, like us, with faith in axioms which serve as the basis for everything they know to pertain about the universe. A scientist who does not believe the results of his experiments is refusing to believe the truth. If he refuses to believe what he sees, there is no way he will be able to discover anything. By faith we understand—if our faith can be supported by the facts. We Christians have the tremendous advantage of beginning with axioms that are absolutely true, such as God exists. He reveals Himself in nature and through His Word. Everything He says about Himself is true.

Scientific knowledge can be obtained in a laboratory by scientific methods. But knowledge about God is not obtainable in these ways. Man cannot find God by himself because God is not the object of man's senses. You can't put God in a test tube, weigh Him on scales, or measure His length. We can only know Him if He reveals Himself. As Christians, we know that we can say nothing true about

God except what He has said about Himself and that we are obliged to believe everything He said.

There are two sources from which we can learn about God, but only one of them speaks with moral authority. The first revelation of God is in nature (Psalm 19; 104; Romans 1), including history (Psalm 105). But nature is given to more than one explanation. How should we understand, for example, a storm, the sinking of the *Titanic*, or Genghis Khan? Are these hateful expressions from a hateful God or of anger from a holy God who has been offended by mankind's sin?

The other source is the Bible. There God has spoken to us about Himself in the clearest terms possible. Of course, we are liable to misunderstand the Bible. Our sinful hearts deceive us. Our human limitations distort our view of things. So, time and again, we will come back to the Bible to check, correct, or confirm what we have understood. Time and again, we will seek the help of the Holy Spirit to overcome our sinfulness and our human limitations and enable us to understand. We will then need to return to the Scriptures, examine our understanding in their light, and either correct or confirm them.

It is also important we understand the Bible was not given at one moment of time. The Bible itself was given in a process of ongoing revelation. Each stage in God's revelation built on the previous stages, and each added information that was not available earlier. We must take this fact into account as we study the Bible and try to discover its meaning.

FURTHER REFLECTION

Complete this further reflection before moving on to the next chapter. Remember that you do not have to limit your work to the verses listed, but you must include them in your discussion.

1. From Psalm 19, 119; Romans 1–3; 1 Corinthians 2:7–16; Ephesians 3:3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17, and any others you may choose, conclude: how can man know God? (Summarize the many ways under two headings: from nature and from the Bible.)
2. From the same texts and Romans 8:5–7; 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16; 12:3; Colossians 1:21; and 2 Timothy 2:26, conclude: what does man naturally do with the knowledge he has of God and why?
3. What is the remedy for what man does by nature with the knowledge of God?