

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