

WHO IS LIKE THE LORD?

EXPLORING THE
ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

DR. DEWAYNE BRYANT



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To Bobby and Shannon Davis

The best adopted grandparents our
five little girls could have ever wanted.

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INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING GOD

Who is God? An easy way to figure out what you think about him is to imagine what he looks like. How we think of him often showcases the attributes we prize most. We might think of him as a loving, grandfatherly figure; a beneficent creator; or a powerful warrior. We could think of him as a judge, never failing to be fair or just. Those who do not like him very much see him as a cosmic tyrant. So which description, if any, is correct? God, like beauty, sometimes depends upon the eye of the beholder.

An evangelist once told a story about teaching a lesson on the wrath of God. After his passionate lesson, a sweet, elderly lady approached and kindly informed him that her God was not like the one he described. Hers was not one of wrath, but of love. The God she served could never condemn sin or judge the unrighteous as guilty. As tenderly as possible, the preacher told her that his view of God was drawn straight from the pages of Scripture. Hers existed only by virtue of selective description.

It is more important now than ever to understand God as he is presented in the pages of Scripture. Human beings have a tendency to focus on what we like and dismiss or devalue what we dislike. This turns truth into a matter of person-

al opinion—and opinions about God always run the risk of being influenced by something other than Scripture. In the classic book *Your God is Too Small*, author J.B. Phillips explored a number of popular misconceptions about God.¹ In some cases, he may be nothing more than a guilty conscience, what Phillips called the “sleeping policeman.” Some see him as a “grand old man,” antiquated and outdated, useless for modern people with modern needs. He is meek-and-mild, a cosmic wimp, the ultimate pushover, the Big Guy upstairs, the eternal grandfather, or a cosmic Santa Claus. We could add a hundred other misconceptions to the list. By picking and choosing the attributes we value most, any of us can engineer a God to suit his or her individual tastes.

Custom-made versions of God are popular in the religious landscape of America because people often fail to use the Bible as a guide. Some may have ceased their investigations because they are happy with whatever mental fabrication they have constructed, or with whatever someone else has told them. Others may have stopped because they are afraid of finding something they do not like. Still others prefer only what they *do* like. In the end, we have failed to recognize God for who he is and prefer a God who does what we want or who meets our needs. This is nothing new.

A.W. Tozer lamented the state of the view of God in the mid-twentieth century, saying, “The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him—and of her.”² Theologian Arthur Pink had an even more caustic indictment:

The god of this century no more resembles the Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The god who is talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday school, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most

1. J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997).

2. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1961), 12.

of the so-called Bible conferences, is a figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their carnal minds.³

COMING TO KNOW HIM

The basis of our understanding of God lies in how we understand the Bible, in which he has revealed himself to his creation at various times and in different ways (Heb. 1:1). Theologians speak of this in two categories: general and special revelation. General revelation refers to the fact that all of creation serves as a witness to the existence of its Creator (cf. Rom 1:19-20). A fad for theologians in ages past was looking for special signs in nature that verified biblical truths (e.g., three leaf clovers serving as a symbol of the Trinity). While nature can teach us that God exists, it does not reveal many specifics about him. That is why we must turn to the second kind of revelation, which consists of anything from the supernatural realm. In biblical times, this often took the form of the prophetic word proclaimed by God's spokesmen. For those living in the 21st century, it is the written Word of God.

Our task is to see God through the eyes of the biblical authors, writers whom he inspired (2 Pet. 1:21). It only makes sense that, to understand God best, we should consult his autobiography. This in itself is a unique phenomenon in the ancient world—an anomaly in the ancient world at a time when pagan gods were not believed to either inspire sacred literature or care much about their human worshippers.

The ancients had a variety of myths and legends, but virtually nothing by way of direct revelation from the gods in written form. They believed their gods could speak to individuals in dreams and natural phenomena, but had almost no interest

3. Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975), 28-29.

in personal interaction with humans. Few believed their gods cared enough about mankind to reveal much about themselves. In the ancient myths, the gods wanted people to supply food and worship, but little else mattered. As long as humans performed their religious duties, the gods had no reason to intervene. Generally, it was better—and less calamitous—when the gods left people alone. This stands in stark contrast to the Bible. God expects his people to read his Word, come to know him, and to be involved with him in a personal way.

SETTING THE STAGE

Why should we study the nature and attributes of God? It is vitally important to know the nature and character of the God we serve. As Christians, our knowledge of God only increases our appreciation for him; we do not want to cheat ourselves of the enjoyment of knowing, loving, and worshipping God properly. At the same time, we do not want to be guilty of fashioning the kind of mental idol described by Pink.

We can think of our enterprise in terms of operating an automobile. Knowing how to drive a car is much different than knowing how to change a tire—except that both require some knowledge about an automobile. But knowing how to drive does not help much if we have a flat tire. If we do not know how to change a tire, we will not be able to go anywhere. Likewise, should we run out of gas, knowing how to change the oil will not help us if we do not know how to put fuel in the tank. To effectively operate an automobile, everything must be considered.

God's attributes are often classified in two categories: incommunicable and communicable. Incommunicable attributes are those that he alone possesses. Man has no functional equivalent of such attributes as omnipresence (existing in all places at the same time), aseity (self-existence), and self-sufficiency (needing nothing for existence). Communicable attributes are those that both God and man share. Love, truth, mercy, and justice are a few examples of the qualities possessed by both in some capacity or another, although God will naturally possess them in

greater abundance and in purer quality than human beings.

Six blind men are brought in to describe an elephant in an Indian story made famous by poet John Godfrey Saxe. The first man feels the elephant's side, concluding that it must be something like a wall. The second feels one of the creature's tusks, and states that it is like a spear. The third grasps the elephant's trunk, leading him to think that it must be like a snake. The fourth touches the elephant's leg, so he says that it is like a tree. The fifth touches an ear, and claims it is like a fan. The sixth and final wise man takes hold of the elephant's tail, stating that the elephant must be like a rope. Although each was partly in the right, all were wrong. Each man only knew of a part of the elephant, but did not have knowledge of the whole being. In attempting to reach an understanding of God, we must not be like these wise men who thought the elephant could be described by the understanding of just one part.

To truly know God, we need to realize that each one of God's attributes must be considered as part of the whole. If we believe that he is only a God of wrath, we cannot draw close to him for fear of punishment, and we will remain afraid of him. However, if we see him as only a God of love, then we have no fear of punishment. We may live our lives doing whatever we want while believing God will do nothing more than shrug his shoulders, wishing we would be more obedient but completely unable to do anything to compel us to do better. A God who is only omniscient is little more than a huge brain, good for nothing but knowing every possible fact and outcome of every event in human history—cerebral, but no more personal and loving than a laptop computer. We can see that emphasizing only one attribute of God diminishes the importance of the others. A

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God who is sentimental, cruelly vindictive, weak and powerless, emotionally-driven, or all-knowing but unresponsive cannot be worshipped.

How we think about God influences what we think about him. There is a sense in which we must break up our understanding of God in basic building blocks so that we can gain a better understanding of him, but we must avoid emphasizing some of his attributes more than others. For instance, if we assume that the God of the New Testament is primarily concerned with love, then we downplay such things as wrath and justice. Likewise, if we believe that we are all just sinners in the hands of a wrathful God, then we will give little consideration to God's patience and mercy. The difficulty we face in this piecemeal approach is making sure to devote an equal amount of time to all of God's attributes.

THAT'S HEAVY

Weight was important in the Old Testament times. Abraham is described as "heavy" (*kabed*), but it had nothing to do with how much he weighed. Rather, it indicated that he was a wealthy man (Gen. 13:2). We use a similar idea of weight in common language quite frequently. If something is important, we say that it is "pressing." When we are relieved, we "feel as if a weight has been lifted" off of our shoulders. Someone "weighs in" when he gives his opinion. If he does it often enough or tries to use his influence to change the opinions of others, we say he is "throwing his weight around."

In the ancient world, the term *kabed* described a person worthy of recognition and respect.⁴ The term is often used of God, who is heavy, not in a literal sense, but a spiritual one. He deserves glory and honor. Our problem is that we have consistently put God on a very strict doctrinal diet. For many, he is theologically anorexic. He is given less respect, less honor, and less glory until he is a gaunt

4. John N. Oswalt, "כָּבֵד" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., & B. K. Waltke, eds. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 426.

shadow of the magisterial cosmic King painted by the biblical authors. David Wells describes this very phenomenon in his book, *God in the Wasteland*:

It is one of the defining marks of Our Time that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. He has lost his saliency for human life. Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertisers' sweet fog of flattery and lies. That is weightlessness.⁵

Our task is to make God heavy again by understanding who he is: the one about whom the psalmists sung for joy and the one whose footsteps evil dreads. Now we begin the journey of studying the character of the one who created the universe and everything in it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In your own words, who is God?
2. When you picture God in your mind, what does he look like?
3. What are some common misunderstandings about God?
4. In what ways do we think of God as “too human”?
5. How do we come to know God?
6. How should knowing God change you?

5. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 88.

7. Which one of God's attributes do you tend to value most and why?
8. Does God care what we think of him?

CHAPTER ONE

INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Knowing God is not an easy task. It takes time, patience, and an open heart and mind. We could spend our entire lives reading the Bible and meditating on the information he has given us about himself without ever getting close to understanding him completely.

Getting to know other people can be difficult enough. We can learn a great deal about others through personal interaction. Most all of us have private information that we are reluctant or unwilling to share, but we can come to know quite a bit about others by spending time with them. By observing their behavior and mannerisms, we can pick up on their likes and dislikes and understand their preferences and nature. Even pleasant conversation can reveal volumes about a person. Then again, we might spend years with another person, and one day he or she does something that contradicts everything we thought we knew. We then think to ourselves that we never knew them at all.

It goes without saying that God is much more complex than a human being. The impossibility of having a two-way conversation with him presents unconquerable challenges. Furthermore, if God is infinite and we are finite, how would we

be able to comprehend him? If we cannot know him fully, what can we know? At first glance, understanding the immensity of God seems like an ant trying to understand quantum physics.

Although substantial differences between God and humans exist, we share many similarities. If God were totally dissimilar from his creation, or “wholly other” as the German theologian Rudolf Otto once put it,¹ we could know absolutely nothing about him. He would defy our understanding from the very beginning. Thankfully, we have two aids to help us in our quest. He created us in his image, and in that likeness we find common ground between the human and the divine. Second, God speaks to us in language that we understand. He does not offer puzzles and riddles for us to solve.

CHASING A MYSTERY

Why study the incomprehensibility of God? It would seem our study is really just an exercise in self-defeat. Why bother trying to know a God who cannot be known? R. C. Sproul says,

When teaching theology proper, I always start with God’s incomprehensibility, because humility demands that we understand at the outset that we are like infants struggling to understand a genius who is speaking to us in our own terms. To whatever degree it is possible for his creatures to apprehend him, God has made himself known.²

We must understand that describing God as incomprehensible is not the same as claiming he is unintelligible—the two are quite different. If God is incom-

1. See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. John W. Harvey trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 25-30.

2. R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 41.

prehensible, we cannot understand him exhaustively. If he were unintelligible, we could not understand him at all.

God has communicated with mankind in a way that presupposes our ability to comprehend the message. God can be known, but he resists our attempts to reduce him to more manageable proportions (this does not stop some from trying, of course).³ If he did not, he would be finite—and would not be a God worth serving. We have limitations in our understanding of God due to the nature of our existence. Still, our understanding can still be true even if it is limited to the essential facts—basically, an approximation. We will examine three ways in which our knowledge of God is restricted.

We are limited by our minds. Unlike God, we are bound by physical limitations. If we are in one place, we cannot be somewhere else at the same time. We must travel from one place to another. We are also bound by linear time. While God sees all of human history at a single glance (cf. Isa. 46:9-10), human beings experience a progression in time. What has happened prior to the present moment is in our past and cannot be revisited. The past can be acknowledged and the present experienced, but the future remains unknown until it becomes the present. This goes far beyond our perception. We could explore just one attribute of God for a lifetime and still fail to conclude our study. Others could continue our work after our passing and not even they would be able to exhaust that one attribute.

We are limited by our own selfishness. Not only do we have a problem with our mental capacity, but a problem with our moral capacity as well. It seems that by nature human beings often value self first and foremost—something that is becoming more rampant in our culture today. The truth calls for a denial of our own selfish wants and pleasures. Some people prefer error to the truth (John 3:19-21), and self and Satan can prevent us from seeing it (Rom. 1:28; 2 Cor. 4:4). Too often people abandon the truth in order to do and believe as they please, twisting

3. This is usually done by making God more like us. It has been said in the beginning, God made man in his image, and mankind has been trying to return the favor ever since.

the biblical portrait of God to suit their own tastes.

We are limited by the revelation we have received. The apostle Paul warned others “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6). Human beings are not free to go beyond what Scripture states. Whatever is written has been recorded for our knowledge. Should we go beyond what has been revealed, we risk generating a mental idol. Instead of worshipping the one true God, we would instead worship a god who is like the God of the Bible, but with imaginative and forbidden additions.

THE GOD YOU WANT

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright tells a story about browsing in a second-hand bookshop when he discovered a book entitled, *The God I Want*. After thinking about it for a while, he said,

The God I Want? Left to myself, the god I want is a god who will give me what I want. He – or more likely it – will be a projection of my desires. At the grosser level, this will lead me to one of the more obvious pagan gods or goddesses, who offer their devotees money, or sex, or power (as Marx, Freud and Nietzsche pointed out). All idols started out life as the god somebody wanted.⁴

We often try to picture God in some way. People are physical beings, so it only makes sense that we would try to have a mental depiction of God. But the very attempt to wrap our minds around such an image would not do him justice. He is not a man, and we are not divine. No matter how great and powerful that image is, it is still a finite portrait of an infinite being.

Some people think of God as an old man, but he is neither human nor old

4. N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 23.

in human terms. Others envision him as a bright light. While he does sometimes manifest his glory in a brilliant radiance, that does not capture the essence of his being. Others view him as a shepherd—a very biblical idea, but an anthropomorphic image still. Some might suggest a picture of Jesus as the human face of the Father. This is not far off the mark, but then again Jesus is not identical with the God the Father. He is co-equal, but they are not one and the same in every respect. Regardless of the image, God transcends everything we have at our disposal to understand him completely.

We often describe God by comparing him to people. The Bible speaks of God's arm, eyes, hands, and even his nose. Language has its limits, but that does not mean that our language is useless, only inadequate. What does our image say to us about how we understand God? Does that image say something to us about who we are?

Earthy, concrete images fill the Old Testament, such as God's possession of the earth or its inhabitants, whereas we are more prone to using abstract phrases such as commenting on God's self-sufficiency. The difference between these two is that the first is a figurative expression. In using the second, we are no longer speaking in concrete terms, but the two are still relatively equal, since we understand sufficiency from a human standpoint of sufficiency. These terms are both expressions of human thought.

Doctrines are ideas or concepts expressed with words. Words themselves are symbols that serve to represent something. For instance, the word "apple" is not the same thing as a real apple. One is the object; the other is the word describing the object. Language cannot capture who God is, since the very nature of God defies description. We can only understand an approximation of what ideas, concepts, and images are able to communicate.

THE BIG REVEAL

Even though we run up against the boundaries of human language, we may

speak adequately and meaningfully because God is a God of revelation. Christianity is a revealed religion. Our faith and practice is rooted in the Word rather than in our own imaginations. Though the secret things belong to God, what he has revealed belongs to us. It is for our understanding and usage. We can understand enough to rejoice, adore, and serve him while looking forward to spending eternity with him.

God has volunteered an incredible amount of personal information about himself. In a sense, the Bible is his autobiography. But God cannot tell us everything—no number of library shelves could contain that much information. Despite the complexity of the brain, the human cranium simply cannot contain that much data. It would be like trying to fit a universe into a thimble.

We are not the first ones to struggle with the incomprehensibility of God. Apart from bringing up discussions of the problems of suffering and evil, Job deals with the difficulty of knowing the Almighty. Job did not understand the reasons for his suffering, but that is not the most amazing part of the story. In Job 38:1-40:2, God appears to Job in a whirlwind and asks the patriarch a series of questions that reveal the boundaries of his knowledge. Job has already said, “Who does great things beyond searching out, and marvelous things beyond number. Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him. Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back? Who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” (Job 9:10-12).

When appearing to Job, God says, “‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?’” (Job 38:2-5). Job cannot answer any of God’s questions. Neither can we.

Man cannot see God, number his works, or restrain his movements. God will do exactly as he pleases without any input from his creation. Paul echoes Job’s sentiments when he writes, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are

perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:18-21).

In the divine interrogation, the result is that Job and his friends are put in their places. They cannot answer the questions, and we cannot answer many more today than they could then because human reason is insufficient. Job bows before the glory of God and declares that the things the Lord has told him surpass his understanding. The New Testament counterpart to this confession of limitation is Paul's exclamation, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:33-34).

Other passages speak of the surpassing greatness of God. Paul tells the Ephesians that the love of Christ "surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). The apostle also tells the Philippians "the peace of God ... surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). Other things that defy our understanding are God's greatness (Psa. 145:3), understanding (Psa. 147:5), knowledge (Psa. 139:6), and his riches, wisdom, judgments, and ways (Rom. 11:33). Can human beings know about these things? Absolutely. We just cannot know them exhaustively.

There is a benefit in being unable to fully understand God. We will never exhaust our understanding of him. No matter how much we study and learn, we cannot ever sit back on our laurels and assume there is no more work to do. The pursuit of godly knowledge should be a delight to us. If it can never be known in its entirety, then we will always have a source of enjoyment as we search the unfathomable riches of God as he is revealed in his Word. There is no danger of us ever getting bored with him.

Once we experience something, we often grow tired of it. As the old saying goes, "familiarity breeds contempt." We get tired of repetition and of routine, and people today are often spiritually bored and have developed a "been there, done

that” attitude. We pick out classes at church based on, in part, whether we’ve heard the material before. Sermons that cover familiar topics are often quickly tuned out. Too accustomed to the media’s rapid-fire presentation of images, sounds, and information, we have little time for extended or carefully-developed treatments of subjects.

Children never seem to tire of what is familiar. The same books, songs, pictures, and stories seem to captivate them over and over again. However, as we get older, we quickly tire of such things. But what about a subject we can never master, a subject that forever eludes our complete understanding? That is God.

Scientists are forever interested in their respective fields of study because mankind constantly learns new things. We make new discoveries, push past old

The incomprehensibility of God should push us to ever-increasing intensity of investigation.

boundaries, and invent new technologies to make the world smaller, more comprehensible, more accessible. And yet the objects of scientific examination are necessarily finite. As things existing in time and space, these subjects of human inquiry could be exhausted. And yet we, as Christians, seem to bore easily of spiritual matters.

Strangely enough, we tend to tire quickly of the one limitless, boundless, infinite Being in the universe. The incomprehensibility of God should push us to ever-increasing intensity of investigation, and the unfathomable nature of his being should invite our curiosity. His indescribable holiness can cause us to weep rivers of tears, but the boundless limits of his love transforms that mourning into celebration. If we become bored of God, we can be bored of anything.

NICE TO MEET YOU

While God is ultimately incomprehensible, he also wants his creation to know him (cf. John 10:27). When we think of something as incomprehensible, we usually think of it being completely unknowable. However, this is not the case with God. He reveals himself in ways that can be grasped by the human mind. For instance, Psalm 19:1-2 says: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.”

Paul echoes this sentiment to Christians in Rome when he says, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:19-20).

The way a person approaches the study of God tells everything about his idea of God. Is he the God of the Bible or just another deity of human invention? The attributes of the deity involved will make the difference whether one holds to truth or opinion. Does the Lord reveal himself to man, or is it our duty to discover him through our own mental wrestling match? Is he unchanging, or do his characteristics change based on the perspective of each particular theologian? Is his nature absolute, or is it relative to the individual? The ultimate conclusion to this pursuit is the difference between truth and myth. Either God is true and deserves to be worshipped with every fiber of our being, or he is the world’s greatest lie, and we should be ashamed to worship him. So we begin our exploration of God’s nature and attributes, knowing that we cannot know him fully, yet left in a state of wonder and even excitement at this God whose greatness defies our attempts to put him in a convenient little box.

Having a relationship with God is predicated on our ability to know him. The inability of people to understand the divine was a common feature of pagan religion. People tried to placate the deities they served, but otherwise hoped that

their gods did not notice them. The revelation of God was much different. The very fact that he reveals himself to man indicates that he wants to be known. In the world of that time, the inspired biblical authors revealed a bright, shining light of truth to a world living in darkness.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What does it mean to know God?
2. What has God done to ensure we can know him?
3. What are some differences between getting to know God and another person?
4. What is the most incomprehensible aspect about God?
5. What is the difference between God being incomprehensible and being unintelligible?
6. Does the phrase, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you” apply to God? In what way?
7. In what ways can God be too familiar?
8. What is the difference between knowing God and knowing about God?