

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GOD?

God made the world and everything that is in it. He made it in such a way that we see clear evidence of His design. He did this so that everyone could come to understand that there is a God and so that they would then seek to worship Him. He also revealed His purpose through people who were given special powers of communication, and we now have that complete revelation in the Bible. From that we can learn much more about God than the created world can teach us. We can find out what sort of God He is and what He is doing to get mankind out of the mess we are in.

- ✓ We are dying, but He lives forever;
- ✓ We are failures, but God is successful in everything He does;
- ✓ We are weak, but He is immensely powerful.

❖ Finding out about God

Just from looking at the world God has made we can understand that His power and ability are amazing. The world He made is so wonderfully designed. Think about the way a tree works. It sucks up goodness from the soil so that it can grow, produce leaves, flowers and fruit and, when that cycle of activity is finished, its products fall to the ground. They then provide nutrients for next year's growth, while the seeds land in places where other trees can begin to grow. In the process the tree provides wood, which can be used for a large number of useful purposes; fruit that can be eaten by man, birds or animals; and leaves that give shelter and shade. And the whole process looks beautiful – both when the leaves are growing and when they are changing colour and falling.

That's the sort of insight the natural world can give us, but what more does the Bible tell us about the God who made all things? What in particular does the apostle Paul say about God in his Letter to the Romans? If you were to take your notebook and read again the first three chapters of the letter you would collect this information:

Romans	What we learn about God
1:1	God has a gospel – <i>good news</i> for mankind
1:3	God has a Son, descended from David, who was born by His power
1:7	God loves the believers at Rome and sends them grace and peace because He is their Father
1:10	God's will controls everything
1:18	God is angry with people who pay no attention to Him and His ways
1:20	God is not visible to human eyes
1:20,23	God is Eternal and Immortal – He is without beginning or end, and His realm of existence is far above that of mankind
1:24,26,28	God has left the world alone for the time being, to let human society go its own godless way
2:5,11,16	There will, however, come a day when God's righteous judgement will be revealed, and then He will reward people as they deserve. He will be even-handed and fair in that judgement
3:3,4	God is faithful and true in all His ways; He can never be otherwise

3:21	God has opened a way whereby we can be counted “right” or “righteous” in His sight
3:25	God made this possible by providing His Son to die for mankind
3:29,30	He did this for both Jew and non-Jew, because there is only one God (and hence the God of all people)

You can easily check these findings for yourself by looking at the listed passages. As you understand more and more about the Bible you will come to appreciate that it is full of information like this. It is a book from God, but it is also a book about God and His gracious purpose – it’s all about His good news for mankind. The very fact that He communicates with us in this way is a wonderful indication that He wants us to know about Him. He wants to share something with us. You wouldn’t write a letter to someone unless you wanted to share something with, or get something from, the person who received it. It’s the same with God. From the moment He revealed how the world was created, God began to explain why He made everything and what it is all about. And He did that with a specific purpose in mind.

From the very beginning, God is revealed as both **powerful** and **purposeful** – someone who knows what He is doing and has all the power needed to get it done. He only has to speak to make things happen and step-by-step He brings an ordered world into existence. Such is the power of His Word:

*“For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. **By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host ... Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm**” (Psalm 33:4-9).*

The world we know came into existence in a wonderfully ordered way. When His creative work was completed man and woman stood side-by-side in God’s new-made world and He told them of His purpose for them. His world was made to be awe-inspiring, as the Psalmist understood, but God’s purpose involved more than the creature living in reverential fear of the Creator.

❖ The Holy One

God’s Word of power was also a Word of instruction to Adam. He gave a Law by which both Adam and Eve were to live and He warned about the dangerous consequences of disobedience. This was the way in which God revealed Himself, in the second chapter of the Bible, as a moral God – One who is concerned about good and evil. It clearly matters very much to Him whether people do right or wrong. The seriousness with which God viewed this was very telling. For God is holy – set apart by His very nature from things that are unholy. For example, the prophet Isaiah said this about the nature and character of Almighty God:

*“Thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, **whose name is Holy**: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite’ ” (Isaiah 57:15).*

God is so much against sin and wickedness that –

- He warned Adam in the severest terms not to break His Law, and
- when that Law was broken He punished both Adam and Eve and excluded them from His presence;
- when mankind followed their way of disobedience, God destroyed that society, in the days of Noah, and
- rescued only a faithful few (and all this is recorded in just the first nine chapters of the Bible).

❖ Moral Purity

As the Bible continues we learn more clearly what God’s holiness really means to us. It is a characteristic of His very existence: He is Holy and can never be otherwise. It is because we are not holy that we cannot even see Him, or approach His presence. God has a level of moral purity which is far above us and our level of behaviour. Here are a few Bible verses that tell us more about God’s standards of morality:

*“I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, **his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he**” (Deuteronomy 32:3, 4);*

*“For **you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you**” (Psalm 5:4);*

*“**The LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him**” (Psalm 92:15);*

*“O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgement, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. **You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong**” (Habakkuk 1:12,13);*

*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for **God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one** (James 1:13);*

*“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that **God is light, and in him is no darkness at all**” (1 John 1:5).*

❖ **Knowing God**

We have just looked at one aspect of God’s character, the aspect of His holiness, and we have seen that the idea is found right through Scripture. That is true about every aspect of His person. It’s not just God’s *holiness* that is depicted in His Word. The Bible is all about God – His gracious purpose and His loving and lovely character. For the Bible is a revelation from God, given us so that we can get to know Him. Then we can seek to establish a loving relationship with Him.

It’s like that in life with all the people we care about: the first thing in any relationship is getting to know one another. In personal relationships we get to know someone by talking about things which are of common interest, by watching how they behave in different circumstances and seeing how they relate to other people. When we cannot see the individual in question all that often, we might exchange letters or speak on the telephone. If the person is someone we admire but cannot communicate with, for whatever reason, we might have to be satisfied with reading about him or her, or hearing from others what they are really like.

God is beyond our immediate reach and is far above our normal way of thinking. He is God and we are men and women; He is immortal and we are mortal. He is in heaven and we are on earth; He is holy and we are sinful. There are so many things that separate us from Almighty God.

*“He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, **who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen**” (1 Timothy 6:15,16);*

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, **so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts**” (Isaiah 55:8,9).*

Just those two Scriptures make our position seem fairly hopeless, for the gulf that separates us appears to be unbridgeable. Yet a moment’s thought will change that, for we are reading and learning about God in His Word. He is communicating with us and is telling us things we could never otherwise know. So He obviously wants us to know Him and is seeking to establish a relationship with us. That’s amazing! The Creator of the Universe is reaching out to His creation, seeking a response. He exists on a much higher plane than us in every respect, but He invites us to find the way up to His level. That last passage from Isaiah, for example, is not just a statement about the difference that exists. God’s thoughts are much above ours, but look at the setting or context of those words – something which is always important when reading and understanding the Bible.

*“**Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, **so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it**” (Isaiah 55:6-11).***

The God who is telling us about Himself in His Word – a Word which is both living and powerful, and which can certainly accomplish what God intends it to achieve – is a God who wants us to look

for Him and find Him. Doing so requires a certain attitude of mind, says the prophet on God's behalf: we must be willing to put aside unworthy thoughts and sinful practices, and we must come to God as people who need His help. If we come in this way we can be confident that He is willing and able to give us all the help we need (Hebrews 11:6).

❖ **God's Invitation**

Over and over again, the Bible invites us to use our lives for their intended purpose – to spend time getting to know God, by reading His Word, understanding its message, and living according to God's guidance. We are promised that, if we do our part, God will most certainly fulfil His side of the arrangement. Here is a small selection of what is on offer:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7-11);

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:5,6);

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

God wants us to ask, seek and find – but we must be sincere in that quest if we are to succeed, and we must be prepared to persevere. This may be why the Bible is such a long and sometimes complicated book. God wants us to work through it to find out its true meaning and that meaning is only gradually revealed. If God had wanted to get His message across in a very brief and easily understood way, He could certainly have done that. Instead He has told us about His person and His purpose through the lives of other people – the people who feature in the 66 books of the Bible. The result is a unique record of personal quests to know more about God. In the process, we get a growing appreciation of God's purpose and its meaning for mankind, as more and more of God's intentions are made clear.

❖ **Personal Testimony**

It is not simply that the men and women of Bible times got to know God in one way or another. They have also left on record their personal appreciation of what that meant for them, so the Bible is like a set of testimonials or personal recommendations.

Take Moses for example. He had a remarkable opportunity to live in Egypt, which was the most developed country at that time, and to enjoy the best that Egyptian life could provide, for he was brought up in the Pharaoh's palace. But he gave all that up. He spent the greater part of his life either as a shepherd – preparing to rescue God's people out of slavery in Egypt – or as an unpaid leader of a rebellious and difficult group of people who were wandering across the Sinai Peninsula, on the way to the Promised Land. Why did he do it, and was it a wise choice?

“By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

What impelled him to give Egypt up and to take his chance with the people of God? He got to know God and that made all the difference. Having been partly brought up in a Hebrew home he had been taught about God and the promises God had made to Abraham's descendants. Then, one day, Moses had a personal encounter which changed his life: an angel of God appeared to him in a bush which burned but was not consumed. Just looking at that phenomenon taught Moses that he was in the presence of someone who was far greater than himself.

“When forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt ...’” (Acts 7:30-34).

The angel had come from God, with His authority – note that he spoke as if he were the LORD – and he identified God as “*the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob*”. It’s a marvellous thing that Almighty God is prepared to be associated with His people in this way. The angel was doing more than reminding Moses that He had made gracious promises in times past. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were now dead which meant, as we have seen already, that they no longer had any conscious existence. But the angel used the present, not the past, tense. He said “*I am the God of your fathers*”, not “*I was the God of your fathers*”. This vital distinction was explained by the Lord Jesus Christ himself when, in debate with his opponents, he proved the authority of Bible teaching about resurrection by referring to the precise wording used and, in so doing, shows us once again his view of Biblical inspiration:

*“You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘**I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob**’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong” (Mark 12:24-27).*

❖ God’s Name Declared

That declaration of God’s association with the fathers of Israel was just the beginning of Moses’ spiritual education. The angel proceeded to tell Moses what He wanted him to do and what sort of a God it was that He was to obey and He did this by declaring God’s very special name. This is what he said:

*“God said to Moses, ‘**I am who I am.**’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I am has sent me to you.”’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Exodus 3:14,15).*

God has many ways of describing Himself – many titles which explain aspects of His person and purpose. He is the Almighty, the Holy One, the Most High and the Eternal. While some English translations of the Bible use just “God” or “Lord”, the original languages have over twenty different ways of describing Him and sometimes the English equivalent loses something of the original force. Take the expression translated “*I AM WHO I AM*” in the Exodus passage. The Hebrew – which when transliterated reads “*eh’yeh asher eh’yeh*” – carries a range of meanings, as many Bible versions acknowledge. It also means “*I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE*”. It is God’s way of declaring both that He is Eternal and that He is purposeful – He will accomplish what He intends to do. Of that there can be no doubt!

In this example God was rescuing a people for Himself, bringing them out of Egypt to be His people and by doing so was showing a new aspect of His character or personality. For the first time God declared the meaning of His Name, for although He has many titles, God has just one Name. That name, in the original Hebrew, is “Yahweh”, sometimes rendered “Jehovah” in English translations, sometimes just “GOD” or “LORD” (using block capitals). It conveys the meaning of a Covenant God who is both a Redeemer and a Deliverer, as the angel explained to Moses:

*God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the **LORD** [Hebrew: **Yahweh**] I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have **remembered my covenant**. Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will **redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgement. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD’ ” (Exodus 6:2-8).*

This lengthy extract tells us a lot about the character of God as He now reveals Himself further:

- ✓ *He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who was known to them as “God Almighty”;*
- ✓ *He made a covenant or agreement with those early believers, which included that they would inherit the land in which they then lived;*
- ✓ *God keeps His covenant promises, which is why He was acting now to rescue their descendants;*
- ✓ *He is a God of action and purpose – He was remembering, delivering, redeeming, bringing them out (of Egypt) and bringing them in (to Canaan), and giving them that land for a possession;*

✓ *He was doing all this because He is “the LORD” (Hebrew: Yahweh).*

Piecing all this together, we see that the big step forward in God’s revelation is that He had never before taken action to rescue a people for Himself in accordance with His covenant promises, but He was about to do just that. No wonder the angel briefed Moses so carefully prior to the Exodus that was about to take place. Israel was invited to become God’s people, an invitation it readily accepted, and so, after ten great plagues had smashed the opposition of the Pharaoh in Egypt, God indeed rescued His people from their slavery.

❖ **More of God’s Character Revealed**

Another step in Moses’ spiritual education took place when he led Israel out of Egypt, as God’s appointed leader. He took them to Mount Sinai, where God gave them His Law to keep and formally agreed with the new nation of Israel how they were to behave as His chosen people. It was anything but a smooth journey. Only two named individuals out of the original generation actually made it through the Wilderness into the Promised Land, because of the rebellious and unbelieving attitude of all the others. God kept His side of the agreement but the people utterly failed to fulfil their undertakings, however enthusiastically they had made them.

During this time Moses became increasingly familiar with the attitudes and characteristics of the people for whom he now cared. He asked God for more insight and understanding. He wanted to know God better and asked if he could see Him, but God explained that could not be, *“He said, ‘you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live’” (Exodus 33:20)*. But, to meet Moses’ plea, God said that he would show Moses more about what He is like and, placing him in the cleft of a rock, He allowed Moses to see something of His glory and hear the following declaration:

*“The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, **a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty,** visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation”” (Exodus 34:5-7).*

This is just the way that the Bible enlarges and amplifies our knowledge of God. As we get to know more about the sort of God we worship, He becomes more and more attractive and appealing to us. For now we learn that

- ✓ *God is merciful and gracious towards His people;*
- ✓ *long-suffering and patient;*
- ✓ *willing to forgive their faults – provided they acknowledge their guilt and come asking for forgiveness;*
- ✓ *determined to punish sin that continues unchecked (and, if need be, sinners);*
- ✓ *He does all this because He is abounding in love and kindness; for*
- ✓ *He is a faithful God who keeps His covenant promises.*

It’s little wonder that Moses responded to this further revelation of God’s character by bowing his head towards the earth and worshipping Him.

❖ **God of Love**

Exodus is only the second book in the Bible and already so much has been declared about the God of the Bible. No wonder there are 66 books altogether – there is so much to learn about the God we want to worship. By the time we reach the New Testament God has revealed Himself as a Father, and the extent of His love for mankind is more fully disclosed. This is what one apostle wrote:

*“**God is love.** In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. **Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:8-12).*

Notice that God is still the same God – invisible and unreachable by mankind – but He is reaching out to us, especially through the love that He shows in Jesus. Now we are invited to know God by knowing Jesus, who declared himself to be the way to God. As we shall see, Jesus Christ is God’s final and fullest revelation of what He is like, and the importance of understanding what God has shared with us is underlined in these words spoken by the Lord in prayer to his Father:



“He lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you

have given him. And **this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent**” (John 17:1-3).

Our eternal life depends upon knowing God and the Lord Jesus Christ and we can only know them by understanding what has been revealed to us in God’s Word, the Bible. But what a joy it will be to know them better and to establish a relationship with them, and what a transformation this will make in our lives. Just as a new relationship can enhance and change our lives, so knowing Almighty God is bound to be a transforming experience. One of the prophets of God expressed it like this:

*“Thus says the LORD: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but **let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practises steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD**” (Jeremiah 9:23,24).*

Things to Read

-  The two occasions when Moses encountered God are so significant that they are well worth reading. They are in Exodus chapters 3 and chapter 33 verse 18 to chapter 34 verse 9.
-  Read about God’s great love for us in 1 John chapter 3:11-24.

Questions to Answer

- 6.1 Psalm 90, which was written by Moses, tells us several things about God. Write down what those things are (but don’t just copy out the verses)
- 6.2 What is the one thing the Bible insists upon with regard to the nature of God? What would be the one word you might choose to describe that aspect of His nature? (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Isaiah 45:5-6 and John 17:3)