

LET GOD BE GOD (01).

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Introduction.

God created Adam physically and spiritually perfect. But a perfect spiritually alive Adam could not come to know God if God had not revealed Himself to him. In *Gen.2:15-17* we find God's first verbal revelation to man. On the other hand, whatever God revealed to Adam, he understood perfectly. Unlike this pre-fall Adam, fallen man is spiritually dead. (*Eph.2:1*). This has made it impossible for fallen man to come to know God by his own ability. *1Cor.1:21* tells us this is God's wise design and will. And this has made it impossible for fallen man to understand the things of God. (*1Cor.2:14*).

The problem fallen man is facing is clearly illustrated in the life of Pharaoh. In *Exod.5:2* Pharaoh asked Moses, "Who is the LORD (Yahweh) that I should obey His voice ... I do not know the LORD..." Pharaoh's problem is typical of fallen man. They do not know the Lord, the only true and living God. That which was true of Pharaoh was also true of the Galatians. Paul told them, "when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods." (*Gal.4:8*). They had no revelation knowledge of God. They had no experiential saving knowledge of God. As a result they were slaves of gods that were idols.

In *Jn.17:3* Jesus defined "eternal life" or salvation as knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom God sent. This saving experiential knowing of God must include a prior coming to know God as He revealed Himself through His word. In *1Thess.1:9* we are told that when the Thessalonians came to know God through the gospel that was preached to them (*vs.5*), they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." The gospel is revealed knowledge.

Who is the Lord? With the Lord's help, this is the question I want us to answer. The answers may cause us to rejoice and the answers may shock us and confuse us. My hope is that in coming to know God, we would let God be God. And, unlike Pharaoh, we would find in the truths we discover the reasons why we must obey the Lord.

God Has Revealed Himself.

Psa.9:16 says "The Lord has made Himself known." God has revealed Himself to mankind. Firstly, God has revealed Himself through creation. *Psa.19:1* says, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." Let us take note of the two verbs used here. They can be translated "*keep on telling ... keep on declaring.*" This is what creation has been doing and has not stopped doing and will not stop doing.

The verb "**tell**" also means "*to declare; to recount*". It refers to the communication of important information to those who do not know. It refers to the recounting of information to those who already know. As used in *Psa.19:1* it refers to creation's witness to the Creator and His wisdom and glory. The verb "**declare**" also means "*to proclaim; to make known.*". In *Gen.3:11* God asked Adam, "Who told you (**who made you know**) that you were naked?" *Psa.19:1* is saying that creation is making you know that it is the work of God's hands.

In *Rom.1:19* Paul said that "which is known" ("*that which can be known*"; "**that which is knowable**") about God is plain to mankind because "God made it evident to them." Paul's point is that there are some things in God's general revelation of Himself that fallen men can come to know. And they can come to know these things because "God made it evident to them". This may also mean, "God made it evident in them." God has made it clear to their minds.

Vs.20 added, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” *“The God who in Himself is invisible and unknowable has made Himself both visible and knowable through what He has made.”* (Stott). The verb “have been clearly seen” may be also translated *“plainly or distinctly seen”*. The verb is a Greek present tense which points to the fact that since the creation of the world the attributes of God have been continually seen in a very plain and distinct manner. The verb “being understood” also means *“to gain insight into”* and is also a present tense verb. These are the reasons why God said mankind is without excuse for failing to see Him and worship Him.

But what has been fallen man’s response to that which can be seen in a very plain and distinct manner? *Rom.1:18* says fallen man “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” **“Truth”** here refers to the knowledge of God which has been communicated to the human mind and conscience through creation. Fallen man would like to get rid of God. But since that is impossible, he has taken the decision within the context of his own evil designs to hold down, to stifle, or to cover up any truth about God which can be seen.

God has also revealed Himself through judgment. The context of *Psa.9:16* tells us that the Lord has made Himself known through judgment. “The Lord has made Himself known; He has executed judgment.” Pharaoh declared, “Who is the Lord ... I do not know the Lord.” (*Exod.5:2*). The Lord’s first response was that He would deliver the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage with great judgments (*Exod.6:6*), with signs and wonders so that the Egyptians would know that He is the LORD (*Exod.7:3-5*). With His second response the Lord said to Pharaoh, “I will send all My plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth.... and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.” (*Exod.9:14-16*).

The ten plagues that destroyed Egypt would bring Pharaoh to know the Lord. After the third plague Pharaoh's advisers came to know about the Lord. They warned Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." (*Exod.8:19*). They came to know that the Lord is too powerful for them and must not be trifled with. But Pharaoh didn't listen. On the other hand the other nations were paying attention.

Josh.2:8-11 tells us very specifically that Rahab was paying attention. She told the Israelite spies, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and ... all the inhabitants.... For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan.... When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God is heaven above and on earth beneath." Rahab was paying attention. She embraced the clear fact that "the Lord your God, He is God." In other words, "*our gods are not god.*" And when she got the opportunity to get on the Lord's side, she grabbed it firmly with both hands.

Secondly, God has made Himself known through special revelation. *Heb.1:1-2* says, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son." God has spoken. God has revealed Himself. Then God moved men to record for posterity these revelations of Himself. (*2Tim.3:16; 2Pet.1:20-21*). The result is that we have in our hands the revealed inspired inerrant written record of God's revelations of Himself. God's special revelation was given to us over a period of approximately sixteen hundred years. Moses was the first writer and the apostle John was the last. The Exodus from Egypt is estimated to have taken place about **1447 BC** and John wrote Revelation about **96 AD**.

Now, by careful study (*2Tim.2:15; 2Pet.3:16*) finite man can come to know the infinite God. Finite man can come to have **accurate** knowledge about the infinite God. But

finite man cannot come to have **exhaustive** knowledge of the infinite God. This is called the doctrine of “*God’s incomprehensibility*”.

Millard Erickson wrote, “*When we speak of the incomprehensibility of God ..., we do not mean that there is an unknown being or essence beyond or behind His attributes. Rather, we mean that we do not know His qualities or His nature completely and exhaustively. We know God only as He has revealed Himself. While His self-revelation is doubtless consistent with His full nature and accurate, it is not an exhaustive revelation. Further, we do not totally understand or know comprehensively that which He has revealed to us of Himself. Thus, there is, and always will be, an element of mystery regarding God.*” (cf. *Deut.29:29*).

The Problem.

The problem that is faced in the world and also, very sadly, in the church, is that finite man simply refuses to let the God be God. There is an unholy desire to control God; to want to know, understand and be able to explain everything about God. There must be no mystery about God. Finite man is too proud to humbly acknowledge, “*I do not understand this about God*”; “*I cannot explain this about God*”. Finite man believes he is too wise and logical to say, “*I do not understand, I cannot explain, but I believe because I know God and trust God.*” To trust and believe God without this so-called complete understanding is described as blind faith. So it is blind and irrational faith to believe the doctrine of the Trinity. It is blind and irrational faith to believe God is good when there is so much suffering in the world. It is blind and irrational faith to believe **Rom.8:28** when you cannot understand what God is doing and why.

Behind this unholy desire is **Gen.3:5** – Satan’s promise to Eve, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Ever since man believed Satan’s lie and fell into sin, man has never given up his arrogant quest to be like God, to be equal to God. This is the primary

reason why man will not humbly bow to God and acknowledge Him as God, as the God who is mysterious and who can never be fully known nor fully understood.

Having failed to become like God, man took another foolish path. He has been trying to bring God down to his own level. God created man in His own image. Fallen man wants to recreate God in his own image. In *Psa.50:21* the Lord brought this charge to the wicked, “You thought that I was just like you.” Let me ask you this question : when you think about God what comes to your mind? What concept, imagery or picture comes to your mind? When a person chooses a path of sin to live in and then says, “*I know I am wrong, but I know God understands*”, this man is saying, “*God is like me*”.

God is fully aware of the problems we face when we try to think about Him apart from His revelations of Himself. And so He brought the problem to the fore with three questions. In *Isa.40:18* the question is asked, “To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?” In *Isa.40:25* the question is asked again, “To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal?” says the Holy One.” In *Isa.46:5* the question is asked a third time, “To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal and compare Me, that we would be alike?”

The context of *Isa.40* has a very interesting verse. In *vs.27* the Lord asked, “Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from God, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God?’” “**Why do you say**” is literally “*Why do you keep saying*”. This is no one-time incident. This was an ongoing expression of bewilderment and frustration with God. **Motyer** suggests that “my God” conveys the idea, “*How can my God do this?*” **Motyer** added, “*The first question is theological, touching the nature of God* (‘He cannot see it’), *whereas the second is experimental, touching the experience of people* (‘My prayers are never answered’).” Can you identify with this? I am sure you can.

Isa.40:18 introduced a question that is actually the conclusion to the arguments that were set forth from *vss.12-17*. The arguments are as follows :

Vs.12 – God is the sole Creator.

Vss.13-14 – God is the omniscient One. He is self-sufficient in wisdom. His wisdom is unaided (independent).

Vss.15-17 – God’s glorious greatness. Nothing is of worth next to God.

The arguments are basically repeated from **vss.21-26**.

Vs.21 – God the Creator & Revealer.

Vss.22-23 – God’s supremacy in power and absolute rule.

Vs.24 – God’s supreme authority.

Vs.26 – God’s creation manifests the greatness of God’s might, strength & power.

John Oswalt wrote, *“If it is true that God is absolutely alone in His creation and maintenance of the world, and if it is true that the nations of humanity simply disappear in comparison to Him, how can one represent Him? What thing from creation will one use for that purpose?”* Note carefully the problem : God is absolutely unique. What can you use to represent God? What one thing can you take from creation and declare : *“God is like this”* and be completely correct?

The word for “God” (Hebrew **el**) in **vs.18** is not the most common term for God. **EL** points to the absolute superiority of the Lord. **Alec Motyer** says that **el** is the most transcendent of the God-words and points to God’s dominion over all, His absolute deity, uniqueness and inscrutability.

Oswalt wrote, *“If God’s transcendence is the most fundamental truth of OT theology, its immediate corollary is the next most fundamental : one cannot make an image of God. Any likeness of Him that we contingent creatures attempt will of necessity be wrong. Furthermore, it plays directly into the hands of our passionate desire to make God controllable by making Him part of our cosmos. Thus the OT throughout wages a never-ending battle against making images of God.”* We need to take very careful note of what **Oswalt** said.

The question is : “To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?” (*vs.18*). The incredulous answer in *vss.19-20* is : An idol!!! An idol which a craftsman has fashioned!!! Regardless of whether the idol is covered with gold or silver or made from the best wood, it is utterly useless. Idols are made and set in places so that they do not totter or topple over. They are designed for immobility. Their immobility is the crowning expression and exposure of their utter uselessness.

I have never forgotten the astonishing scene in our country of a temple on fire and the people (devotees) rescuing their immobile powerless gods from the fire. This brings to mind one of the amazing questions a man ever asked. Laban asked Jacob, “why did you steal my gods?” (*Gen.31:30*). The question is asked within the context of Laban’s confession to Jacob, “the God of your father spoke to me last night...” (*vs.29*). The irony here is just too much to miss.

Vs.25 – “To whom then will you liken Me that I would be His equal?’ says the Holy One.” “**The Holy One**” is not descriptive. It is God’s name. (cf. *Isa.57:15*). The verse could read, “To whom then will you liken Me that I would be His equal?” says Holy.” “**Holy**” emphasizes God’s otherness, that which separates Him from all of His creation. **Motyer** said “**Holy**” *“is the killing blow to any thought of comparison! It is not only His power, wisdom, dignity, sovereignty and authority that put Him beyond compare. Of far more significance is His unattainable, unassailable moral perfection.”*

This brings us to *Isa.46:5*. The question is repeated a third time : “To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal and compare Me, that we would be alike?” The incredulous answer in *vss.6-7* is once again : An idol! An idol lavishly made with gold and silver! *Haggai 2:8* says, “The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,’ declares the Lord of hosts.” In *Ezek.16:17* the Lord charged Israel with taking “My gold and My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourselves males images....” Note carefully the absurdity here : taking that which God created and which belongs to God to make their own gods.

Vs.7 further emphasizes the utter absurdity of worshipping and praying to an idol. The point in the verse is not on the prayer being unanswered but on the fact that one would even think to pray to something that cannot move itself but needs to be picked up, carried and set down, or as we noted already, something which can be stolen or must be rescued from a fire.

Note the irony in *vs.9*, “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.” What God is saying is : *“I alone am el. I made you. How then can you make el?”* **Michel Montaigne** (1533-1592) wrote, *“Man is surely stark raving mad. He can’t make a worm, but he makes gods by the dozens.”*

The reality is that when fallen man seeks to answer the question, *“What is God like?”* apart from God’s revelation of Himself, he ends up with idolatry. When fallen man tries to think about God apart from God’s revelation of Himself, he ends up with idolatry. When fallen man tries to make comparisons to God apart from God’s revelation of Himself, he ends up with idolatry.

This reality has been demonstrated in the history of the nation of Israel. Moses clearly warned the Israelites that when the Lord came and spoke to them they saw no form. (*Deut.4:12, 15*). And they were warned, “So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form ... lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. And beware, lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.” (*Deut.4:15-19*). Each time the Israelites turned away from God, they turned to the very idolatry that was expressly forbidden.

What was true in the OT is re-emphasized in the NT. Paul tells us that when fallen men turn away from the true and living God and His revelation of Himself they will exchange “the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.” They will exchange “the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” (*Rom.1:23, 25*).

When you think of God, what comes to your mind? To what do you compare God? Do you think of God apart from His revelation of Himself? The real question is this : **are you an idolater?**

It is not without very good reason that the first commandment forbids idolatry and the second commandment forbids iconolatry (the worship of the true God with the aid of images, pictures, etc.). (*Exod.20:1-6*). God hates idolatry and iconolatry. These sins rob God of His glory. (*Isa.42:8*). These sins exchange the incorruptible glory and majesty of God for that which is corruptible. (*Rom.1:23*). Underlying the warning against these sins is *Deut.4:24*, “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God (*el*).” In *1Cor.10:14* Paul commanded us, “Therefore, my beloved, flee (**keep fleeing; keep running away**) from idolatry.” Why? “Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?” (*vs.22*). **Any form** of participation in idolatry or iconolatry is neither innocent nor amoral.