

A Thirst for God

To Seek and to Know

To speak of “knowing God” or “thirsting for God” immediately raises several important questions: What does it mean to *know* God? How does one get to *know* Him in contrast to merely knowing *about* Him? And how is this universal thirst to be quenched? It is becoming increasingly popular today, not only in the East but now also in the West, to seek for God in mystical experiences. Before seeking for *experiences* of God or communion with God through the practice of certain guaranteed techniques, however, we ought to give our attention first of all to the written Word of God, which He has gone to such lengths to provide for all mankind. Jeremiah’s attitude toward God’s Word should be our own:

Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart. (Jeremiah 15:16)

Surely, for anyone setting out on a spiritual quest to seek and know God, the most logical place to start is with His Word, the Bible. Although it continues, year after year, to be the world’s number one bestseller, the Bible is, to many of its purchasers, not an easy book to read, and it ends up largely neglected on their shelves. Far from being surprising, such reader reaction as this is exactly what one would logically expect if the Bible is in fact what it claims to be: the Word of God, given both to guide and to correct God’s often-rebellious creatures. When was reproof ever popular or easy to take?

Man’s reaction to Scripture, however, raises an interesting question: If the all-wise Creator really inspired the writers of the Bible, why does it contain so much of a seemingly “negative” nature? Why didn’t God take into account the “psychological” harm that such an approach would (so we’re told today) cause to fragile psyches and self-images? In *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, James Montgomery Boice writes:

If Madison Avenue executives were trying to attract people to the Christian life, they would stress its positive and fulfilling aspects....

Unfortunately, we who live in the West are so conditioned to their very thinking (and to precisely this type of Christian evangelism or salesmanship) that we are almost shocked when we learn that the first great principle of Christianity is negative.

It is not, as some say, “Come to Christ, and all your troubles will melt away.” It is as the Lord himself declared: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

No wonder the Bible is losing its appeal and is being subjected to so complete a reinterpretation, now that self-affirmation and a positive mental attitude are

accepted by so many people as the universal panacea. On the other hand, there has always been strong opposition to the Bible. Could it be that current psychological theories are only providing a more sophisticated rationale to justify a long-standing attitude of rebellion?

Facing the Evidence

That its claims of inspiration, infallibility, and doctrinal purity are not simply dismissed as absurd but have been vigorously attacked down through the centuries attests to the convicting power with which the Bible speaks. It is, in fact, its claim to be the Word of God to man (and its blunt condemnation in the most “negative” terms of all other religions and their scriptures and their gods) that arouses such strong resentment and angry opposition. Rare indeed is the person, whether atheist or religious zealot, who finds it easy to admit he has been wrong, particularly on that most controversial and emotional of all subjects, religion.

Harvard University Professor Simon Greenleaf, who together with Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story was credited with “the rise of the Harvard Law School to its eminent position,” abandoned his agnosticism only after months of careful study and heart searching. Recognized as America’s greatest authority on legal evidence, Greenleaf found himself logically forced to conclude, after lengthy and critical examination, that the literal and historical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as the Son of God in payment of our sins was established by undeniable and overwhelming evidence. In full agreement, Professor Thomas Arnold, who held the chair of Modern History at Oxford, wrote:

I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.

Many other eminent authorities have come to the same conclusion, among them Lord Lyndhurst, recognized as one of the greatest legal minds in British history. He wrote, “I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the Resurrection has never broken down yet.” In *A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, Irwin H. Linton argues that because they are trained “in sifting and weighing evidence about disputed matters,” a higher percentage of his profession than any other submits to the claims of Christ when they take the time to honestly face the facts. For the majority of mankind, however (and that includes lawyers), what the evidence proves to the head is not readily accepted by the heart, because the Bible seems to contain so much that is “negative.” Writing to his colleagues, Professor Greenleaf minced no words:

The religion of Jesus Christ aims at nothing less than the utter overthrow of all

other systems of religion of the world; denouncing them as inadequate to the wants of man, false in their foundations and dangerous in their tendency....

These are no ordinary claims; and it seems hardly possible for a rational being to...treat them with mere indifference or contempt.

Confronting Self-Deception

Unfortunately, the more convincing the evidence, the more opposition it arouses in those who refuse to accept its implications. It is therefore not surprising that no book in history has ever been so viciously and persistently attacked as the Bible. Such attacks have only proved the Bible's claims. As Tim Stafford, editor of *Campus Life* magazine, has written, "We cannot knock the real gospel down with a few clumsy questions. Only our illusions will crumble so that truth stands out more clearly."

The reaction of the overwhelming majority of humanity has always been to reject the Bible's message. That rejection manifests itself in two ways: Some people openly admit their refusal to submit at all to God's correction; many others, however, cloak their rejection of God's Word with the pious pretense of religious zeal and devotion. As though deceived by their own hypocrisy, they protest their innocence: "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?" (Matthew 7:21-23)! They have selfishly contrived to "interpret" the Bible as saying what they want it to say rather than what God intended it to say. That common tendency, which anyone who studies the Bible must guard against, prevents us from knowing God.

Never have so many given so much honor to a book they apparently have so little genuine intention of heeding. Until we have been set free from our innate self-centeredness, our natural interest is really in ourselves, no matter how loudly we protest our concern for God's kingdom and our desire to know Him.

The Cross and Self

It is through faith that we come to know God. What stands in the way? It is the fear of the death of self, of giving up life as one would live it in exchange for the life that Christ offers. Biblical Christianity is not *religion*; it is a *relationship* to God through Jesus Christ that begins at the cross. Through accepting Christ's death in my place for my sins I admit that I deserved to die. In that admission, I give up life as I would have lived it in order to experience Christ's resurrection life as my very own. My will has been surrendered once and for all to His will.

Jesus said, "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:25). He is telling us that if we clutch at life selfishly, we have at best a few short years to live as we please; but if we surrender self to Him, the far more abundant life we receive in exchange in fellowship with God will never end. Jim Elliot, one of the young missionaries martyred by the Aucas in Ecuador, said: "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to gain that

which he cannot lose.”

The fear of *death* that keeps us in bondage (Hebrews 2:14-15) is the fear of losing everything that life involves—all the ambitions and pleasures that revolve around self. This includes the fear of losing the approval of contemporaries at school, work, or even church, fear of losing that promotion, of missing out on some pleasure or ambition if we stand true to our Lord and to His Word. But those who have been crucified with Christ are no longer bound by such fears. Sin has lost its hold.

When we have accepted Christ’s death as our very own, since He died in our place, then we are set free from the fear of losing our life, and Satan’s hold is broken. This is a major theme of the New Testament, the very heart of the solution offered in the gospel. Consider the following verses:

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him....

Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. (Romans 6:6-8, 11-12)

The Only Real Barrier

Here we confront the only real barrier to understanding the Bible and knowing the Lord, who authored it. The big problem is not intellectual but moral. It is not that we cannot understand but that, in fact, we *do* understand that the Bible is intended to correct us—but we are not willing to accept the consequences of letting God have His way in our lives. Let the reader not imagine that this indictment applies only to others. No one is immune from self-centeredness. Our hearts are all the same (Proverbs 27:19); yet we can each allow God to effect in us that transformation to which Paul testified:

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

When we approach the Bible, we must be very careful to do so with an honest and submissive heart and a teachable spirit, eager and willing to have our thinking and desires changed to conform with God’s will. We must beware of imposing our preconceived ideas upon the Bible—of trying to use it to justify our prejudices, of searching for verses here and there that can be made to support our own ambitions and desires. And we must beware of interpretations of Scripture that depend upon a knowledge of customs peculiar to certain cultures or the prevailing opinions of a certain era, especially our own.

We must also take care not to fall into Modernism in our sincere desire to communicate the gospel to modern man. As Oswald Chambers pointed out, we must beware, in our desire for people to accept the gospel, of “creating a gospel that is acceptable to people.” It is one thing to communicate the unchanging faith of God in today’s language. It is something else entirely (and distinctive of truth) to take the latest ideas from the world, dress them up in biblical language, and pass them off as gospel truth. Man must come to God on His terms.

God Has Spoken

If, as the Bible claims, God has actually spoken to man, that is awesome! That fact, which the evidence supports, demands an earnest and honest and individual response. And the response that is made will determine for each person his eternal destiny. We ought to tremble at God’s Word, as did men of old. But that reverent sense of holy awe is little known today. Churches have become entertainment centers.

How vastly different from today’s average church service were the Biblical scenes of God’s mighty encounters with prophets and apostles of old! Consider Moses on the Mount at the giving of the law, or Isaiah crying, “Woe is me!” or John the apostle falling as dead at the feet of the resurrected Christ, whose voice was as the sound of many waters and His eyes as a flame of fire. How very appropriate today is Tozer’s earnest rebuke:

The Christian’s conception of God current in...the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually constitutes for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.

If we would know God, we must thirst to know Him as He really is, not as our fantasy or self-interest would portray Him. We must believe that He is perfect and desire to reflect that perfection in our lives by His power and to His glory. In knowing God as He is, the One who loves us infinitely in spite of our unloveliness and who came as a man to die for our sins, we will love Him in return. Eternal life is in knowing God and Jesus Christ (John 17:13), and those who “know not God” (have rejected Him and His love) will suffer His eternal judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:8).

—*Dave Hunt* 1998