

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

THE NEED TO KNOW GOD ACCURATELY

- Knowing what God is like is foundational to knowing Him accurately and worshipping Him properly
- It is critical that our conception of God correspond as accurately to Him as possible
- People desperately need to know who God is...not some haphazard conjecture about God...not their own myopic concept they have created for themselves...but who God actually is
- This is because when your view of God is ambiguous and vague, everything else is distorted; however, a clear and proper vision of God brings everything else into focus
- Thus, a high view of God is always necessary for effective life and ministry...he must be the driving force!
- A. W. Tozer famously stated, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move towards our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God. Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow...That our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us...A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.”¹
- **Knowing God properly completely transforms a person...because nothing changes a person more than a right and deep understanding of who God is**
- “Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life’s problems fall into place of their own accord...What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?”²
- “Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.”³

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1-2.

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

THE CONTEMPORARY DISTORTION OF GOD

- Many people have misconceptions about what God is really like
- To believe the wrong thing about God is to engage in idolatry
- Idolatry is not simply bowing down to a statue or worshipping in a pagan temple; it involves thinking anything about God that is not true or attempting to make God into something He isn't
- Anyone who conceives of God in their own terms or entertains thoughts that are unworthy of Him is guilty of idolatry
- Idolatry was Israel's downfall in the OT as they exchanged a right view of God for a wrong one

The Golden Calf incident in Exodus 32

Psalm 50:21 ~ These things you have done and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.

Psalm 115:4-8 ~ Their idols are silver and gold, The work of man's hands. 5 They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see; 6 They have ears, but they cannot hear; They have noses, but they cannot smell; 7 They have hands, but they cannot feel; They have feet, but they cannot walk; They cannot make a sound with their throat. 8 Those who make them will become like them, Everyone who trusts in them.

Isaiah 44:9-11 ~ Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile, and their precious things are of no profit; even their own witnesses fail to see or know, so that they will be put to shame. 10 Who has fashioned a god or cast an idol to no profit? 11 Behold, all his companions will be put to shame, for the craftsmen themselves are mere men. Let them all assemble themselves, let them stand up, let them tremble, let them together be put to shame. 12 The man shapes iron into a cutting tool and does his work over the coals, fashioning it with hammers and working it with his strong arm. He also gets hungry and his strength fails; he drinks no water and becomes weary. 13 Another shapes wood, he extends a measuring line; he outlines it with red chalk. He works it with planes and outlines it with a compass, and makes it like the form of a man, like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house. 14 Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak and raises it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. 15 Then it becomes something for a man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. 16 Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he eats meat as he roasts a roast and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire." 17 But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god." 18 They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend.

- The idolatry that characterized Israel in the OT was a clear violation of the first and second commandments

Exodus 20:3-4 ~ You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

- Sadly, this same idolatry has continued to our day such that our society as a whole (and even many in the church) has a very low and inaccurate view of God
- The modern assault on God began when the Enlightenment replaced revelation with reason...resulting in scientism, skepticism, and liberalism...all of which robbed God of his attributes and glory
- This has resulted in many believers espousing a very low view of God in that they have allowed an inaccurate, nonbiblical view of God to distort the true image of who he really is
- Instead of worshipping the one true and living God, they have taken to serving a god that is a mere shadow of Who has been revealed in Scripture
- Low thoughts of God are as blasphemous as man-made idols which people bow down to

- This is the new idolatry: “It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity...Perverted notions about God soon rot the religion in which they appear...The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God. Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, ‘What is God like?’ and goes on from there. Though she may continue to cling to a sound nominal creed, her practical working creed has become false. The masses of her adherents come to believe that God is different from what He actually is; and that is heresy of the most insidious and deadly kind.”⁴
- “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...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, [and] his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news...That is weightlessness. It is a condition we have assigned him after having nudged him out on the periphery of our secularized life.”⁵
- “The tendency to treat God like a wax figure who can be reshaped according to human tastes and fashions is certainly nothing new. It is a form of idolatry that has been around at least since Sinai, when the disobedient Israelites portrayed Jehovah as a golden calf. A similar but subtler kind of idolatry is currently having a heyday in the church.”⁶
- “The god of American popular culture is an indulgent heavenly spirit who is little threat to our lifestyles and luxuries – a god consistent with a consumer culture and rampant immorality. This god might wish that human beings would behave, but he is powerless when they do not. A vast majority of Americans claim to believe in God but most believe in an idol of their own imaginations. This deity is always there to be called up in times of trouble, but he would never intrude upon our personal space, judge our sins, or hinder our happiness.”⁷
- “I believe that if there is one area of our theology that is most lacking in the church today, it is our understanding of who [God] really is. Our most rudimentary problem is that we do not fully comprehend who He is. Our thoughts about Him have become very unclear, fuzzy, and oblique. The result of this distorted view of deity is that it leaves everything else out of focus as well. Whenever we lose a right view of God, everything else gets out of perspective. Sad to say, we are suffering from a low view of God – an impoverished vision of Him as a god with manlike characteristics. A ‘user-friendly’ god has become the trend of the day – a god made in our image, an inversion of the truth of man made in His image. Human qualities and finite limitations have been assigned to the One who exceeds our comprehension.”⁸
- The primary problem for Israel in the OT was its lack of true knowledge of God

Hosea 4:1 ~ Listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel, For the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness **Or knowledge of God in the land.**

Hosea 4:6 ~ **My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.** Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Hosea 5:4 ~ Their deeds will not allow them To return to their God. For a spirit of harlotry is within them, And **they do not know the LORD.**

⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 2, 4.

⁵ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 88, 90.

⁶ John MacArthur, foreword to *Made in Our Image*, by Steven Lawson, 9.

⁷ R. Albert Mohler, preface to *Made in Our Image*, by Steven Lawson, 12.

⁸ Steven Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 15.

- The same problem plagues us today...ignorance of God and an anemic view of who he is lies at the very heart of the church's weakness today
- There is largely an absence of awe, wonder, and exultation in the church because God is no longer weighty and that we do not fully comprehend who he is
- This has resulted in the church being largely preoccupied with everything other than God
- A sample of the many wrong, diminished, "user-friendly" notions about God prevalent today:⁹
 - A celestial Santa Claus – God simply exists to meet our needs
 - A divine co-pilot – God is there to help and assist, but only when asked
 - A heavenly repair man – God can fix anything that has broken in our lives
 - A galactic grandfather – God is a doting deity who is there to give us what we want
 - A universal utilitarian – God is a disconnected deity who rules his creation with an iron fist
 - A clever magician – God works through signs and wonders
- Such caricatures of God result in a god of our imagination and stand in clear opposition to the true God of Scripture

Isaiah 55:8-9 ~ For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.

REASONS TO STUDY GOD'S CHARACTER

- Augustine wisely noted, "You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You."
- This is true for many reasons:

Because Knowing God is the Height of Human Privilege

- Knowing God is central and supreme for all of human life

Proverbs 9:10 ~ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 ~ Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.

Hosea 6:3, 6 ~ So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; And He will come to us like the rain, Like the spring rain watering the earth...For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Philippians 3:8-10 ~ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

- There is no greater privilege in all of life than knowing and being known by the one true and living God
- The highest good we can experience in this life exists in the communion we have with God through a right knowledge of him

⁹ From Steve Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 36-42.

- “To know God is more enlightening than an advanced degree from a prestigious school, more strengthening than a great army, and more enriching than a vault full of gold. Worldliness diminishes a man’s soul and makes him petty; knowing God ennoble a human being.”¹⁰

Because it is the Essence of Eternal Life

- While there is a quantity associated with eternal life (i.e. eternal), even more so there is a quality (i.e. life)

John 17:3 ~ This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

- It is easy to only think that knowing God through Christ is what grants us access into heaven for eternity but it is so much for than that
- Christ indicates that this knowledge is life itself...this is what real living involves...it means coming alive, not only in a new but also in an eternal sense
- The essence of life is bound up in knowing our purpose in life, how to be freed from sin and condemnation, how to be truly satisfied in this life, how to commune with God as we were created to do, and what it is that guarantees our future home in heaven

Because Only When We Know God Can We Rightly Know Ourselves

- It’s only when we truly understand who God is that we can rightly comprehend our own identity
- Issues like who we are, why we are here, how we are to live, what our basic needs are, and where we are going can only be determined against the backdrop of a clear understanding of who God is
- We cannot know ourselves until we know God
- “Man never comes to a right knowledge of himself, what a pitiful, abominable wretch he is, till he comes to a right knowledge of God, what an excellent incomparable majesty he is.”¹¹
- This is what Isaiah came to learn when he was confronted with God’s holiness

Isaiah 6:5 ~ Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”

- This is what Peter came to learn when he witnessed the miraculous catch of fish

Luke 5:8 ~ But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

- On the one hand, a true knowledge of God is humbling in that it makes us painfully aware of the fact that we are not God, nor are we like him
- On the other hand, knowledge of ourselves through the knowledge of God is also reassuring and satisfying in that demonstrates that we are God’s creation, created in his image, and loved greatly by him
- As a result, a true knowledge of God does for us what psychology or psychiatry can never ultimately do
- Although these disciplines may provide some observations and answers about human behavior, “this alone is inadequate in the ultimate sense if it does not bring individuals into a knowledge of God against which their own worth and failures may be estimated.”¹²

¹⁰ Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 Revelation and God, 509.

¹¹ George Swinnock, “The Incomparableness of God,” in *The Works of George Swinnock*, IV: 474.

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 24.

Because it is What Fuels a Life of Holiness

- Whereas ignorance of God drives people into idolatry and immorality, the knowledge of God leads to godliness because to know God as he is, is to love him as he is and to want to be like him
- It is the engine of the true pursuit of holiness

Job 42:1-6 ~ Then Job answered the LORD and said, 2 “I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. 3 ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 4 ‘Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.’ 5 I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; 6 Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes.

Ephesians 5:1 ~ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children

2 Peter 1:2-3 ~ **Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God** and of Jesus our Lord; 3 seeing that 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.

- “The nearer a man gets to God, the greater he sees his sin.”¹³
- “People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure... The greatness and glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God.”¹⁴
- Because false ideas of God lead to an anemic spiritual life and because a true knowledge of God produces a deep and meaningful holiness, we must seek to know God as fully as he can be known

2 Peter 3:18 ~ but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Because it is What Makes Believers Stand Firm in Adversity

- It is only through the knowledge of God that believers can be strong when faced with trials and particularly opposition from the world
- Perhaps the greatest example of the effect the knowledge of God has on a person is found in the book of Daniel

Daniel 11:32 ~ By smooth words he will turn to godlessness those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people who know their God will display strength and take action.

- This courage in the face of affliction is what Daniel and his friends demonstrated throughout the book
 - Chapter 1 – commitment to not eat the king’s food
 - Chapter 3 – refusal to fall down and worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar

Daniel 3:17-18 ~ If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

- Chapter 6 – unwillingness to obey the command to not pray

¹³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones

¹⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 9, 11.

- Daniel and his friends demonstrate that those who know God have great energy for God
- Because they possessed great thoughts of God, they also showed great boldness for God and exemplified great contentment in God
- They were willing to stick their necks out and take great risks for God
- They had counted the cost and willingly faced their adversities with great confidence in God
- This is the spirit of all who know God...although deciding which course to take may at times be difficult, once they are clear on it, they embrace it boldly and without hesitation
- Sadly, however, “We do not have a strong church today, nor do we have many strong Christians. We can trace the cause to an acute lack of sound spiritual knowledge. Why is the church weak? Why are individual Christians weak? It is because they have allowed their minds to become conformed to the ‘spirit of this age,’ with its mechanistic, godless thinking. They have forgotten what God is like and what he promises to do for those who trust him. Ask an average Christian to talk about God. After getting past the expected answers you will find that his god is a little god of vacillating sentiments...A weak god produces no strong men, nor does he deserve to be worshiped. A strong God, the God of the Bible, is a source of strength to those who know him.”¹⁵
- The great need of the hour is the people of God to have a robust view of God which steadies them in the storms of life
- “To have God in his mind and thought is the believer’s constant source of strength. The martyr languishes in the flames but his mind flies upward to God his Savior and looks forward blissfully to the glory that awaits him even as his body sinks to ashes. The imprisoned Christian forgets the harsh regime of the camp, the daily grind and grueling labor, as his mind soars upward on the wings of hope to remember God. The weary missionary, struggling with unfamiliar syllables and convoluted grammar in his appointed sphere of service sees beyond the frustrations of the hours as he remembers God...The thought of God enlivens all actions. The thought of God should be the Christian’s panacea. It should cure all his ills at a stroke. And what an infinity there is in the thought of God! Nothing can approach in beauty to the idea of the true and living God”¹⁶
- “Panic is the sinful failure to apply our knowledge of God to particular problem...the degree of a Christian’s peace of mind depends upon his spiritual ability to interpose the thought of God between himself and his anxiety. When the dark cloud of trouble first looms up on the horizon of our thought, then is the time to apply our theology in downright earnest. For it is not outward circumstances that can drag us down, but our own reaction of despair to them, when we fail to perceive the hidden hand of God in all events.”¹⁷

Because it is What Paul Prayed For

- A robust understanding of the nature of God and his divine substance was the focus of many of Paul’s prayers

Ephesians 1:17-18 ~ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.** 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, **so that you will know** what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,

Colossians 1:9-10 ~ For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may **be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,** 10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and **increasing in the knowledge of God**

¹⁵ Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 26.

¹⁶ Maurice Roberts, *The Thought of God*, 4-5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Philippians 1:9 ~ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more **in real knowledge** and all discernment,

- Paul prays this way because a vibrant relationship with the triune God as well as a healthy body life in every church must be rooted in a firm understanding of who he reveals himself to be in his Word

OUR OBJECTIVE IN THIS COURSE

- Although knowing God accurately is essential to living rightly, our end goal is not simply to know more facts about God
- Pursuing theological knowledge as an end in itself has the potential to make us proud and conceited

1 Corinthians 8:1-2 ~ Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. 2 If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;

- “To be preoccupied with getting theological knowledge as an end in itself, to approach Bible study with no higher a motive than a desire to know all the answers, is the direct route to a state of self-satisfied self-deception. We need to guard our hearts against such an attitude, and pray to be kept from it...there can be no spiritual health without doctrinal knowledge; but it equally true that there can be no spiritual health *with* it, if it is sought for the wrong purpose and valued by the wrong standard. In this way, doctrinal study really can become a danger to spiritual life...”¹⁸
- Thus, our aim for this course is to know God better
- We desire not simply to increase our understanding of the doctrine of God’s attributes but to love and worship the living God whose attributes they are
- “It has been said by someone that ‘the proper study of mankind is man.’ I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly *improving to the mind* in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity...No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God...But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also *expands* it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe...The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity. And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently *consolatory*. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in its immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.”¹⁹
- The foundation of all of life is the character of God!

¹⁸ Packer, *Knowing God*, 22.

¹⁹ Charles Spurgeon, quoted in J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 13-14.