

God: A Self-Portrait

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Have you heard of the lemming? The lemming is a small mouse-like creature that lives in the Arctic feeding on grass, moss, and other small plants. If you've heard of him, it's probably because of the deadly trip he takes every few years. When their population grows too large, lemmings migrate in huge numbers swarming over highways, farms, and ditches searching for food. The problem is they multiply so quickly that there isn't enough to feed them all. So they travel all the way to the sea where they rush headlong into the water and drown.

People used to think this was intentional—a kind of mass suicide ritual. Now we know better. Lemmings drown themselves not because they want to die. They do so because they are confused. Lemmings are terrific swimmers who cross many lakes and rivers in search of food. So when they come to the edge of the sea, they just assume it's another river to cross and dive into the water attempting to swim to the other side. But unable to see what is ahead of them, they soon grow weary, lose the strength to keep paddling, and drown in the sea.

Why talk about lemmings? Because they picture our condition apart from Jesus. The Bible says we are spiritually hungry and in constant search for something to satisfy us. But with no one to lead us, we look in the wrong places growing tired, discouraged and doubtful that we'll ever find what we need. Said to have become deeply depressed at the end of his life, Mark Twain wrote: "A myriad of men are born. They labor and sweat and struggle. They squabble and scold and fight. They scramble for mean little advantages over each other. Age creeps in. Infirmities follow. Those they love are taken from them, and the joy of life turns to aching grief. Death comes at last—the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them—and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence, a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever."

If you weren't discouraged a moment ago, you may be now. But that is the human condition apart from Christ. And yet, there is great hope because it's a condition that can be transformed—not through a better paying job, a more secure investment plan, a better political philosophy, or a more disciplined self-help program. The solution is found in a person—knowing our Lord Jesus Christ. He said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly...(for) this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 10:10; 17:3) To know Him, however, requires that we believe the right things about Him.

This led A.W. Tozer to make the following statement: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason, the gravest question about the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at any given time may say or do, but what he in his deepest heart thinks about God."

Because I believe that is true, the next several posts will be about God Himself—who He is, what He's like, and what He thinks about you and me. And the way I plan to begin is by offering an overview of the benefits of knowing God better as well as the dangers we could encounter along the way.

The Benefits of Knowing God

Imagine plucking an Amazonian tribesman out of the jungle, flying him to New York City, and plopping him down in the middle of Times Square. How well do you think he'd do? He'd be lost because he has no understanding of the world he's in. So it is for those who try to live life without an adequate knowledge of God. This world is a strange and scary place because they do not know the One who made it. Consequently, those of us who know God have a great advantage over those who don't. Daniel 11:32 gives us the first reason why—

1. Those who know God have great energy for God. Referring to the coming Antichrist, Daniel says: "By smooth words he will turn to godlessness those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people who know their God will be strong and take action." It isn't my intention to give a full exegesis of this passage here. Suffice it to say that Daniel is peering into the future seeing events that will take place immediately prior to Christ's return. One of the most tragic events will be another great persecution of the Jews greater than the Holocaust of World War II. However, this time rather than passively submitting to their persecutors, the Jews will fight back with great courage and strength. What will make the difference this time? Now they know their God!

There is no question about it. The greatest motivating factor in life is knowing God. It turns cowards into heroes, dullards into visionaries, and sluggards into men and women of action. The first thing that changed in my life was my grades in school. Prior to my conversion, I envied those who got straight A's, but I hated to study. Then I met Jesus and I suddenly found myself doing what I never did before—studying 4 or 5 hours at a stretch—and from that point on (all the way through college and seminary), I never got a C or B again. That in turn led to even greater steps of faith. Perhaps the problem for you is not school but your job, your marriage, your health, financial debt, or sharing Christ with your friends and family. Whatever the challenge, let your new relationship with God energize you to be the best student, the best employee, or the best spouse you can be. For those who "know their God will be strong and take action."

2. Those who know God have great boldness for God. Daniel's friends are the best example at this point. When Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole world at that time, set up an idol and ordered everyone in his kingdom to bow to it or be burned alive, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow, they failed to bend, and they would not burn. They said, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16) They counted the cost. They weighed the risk. And then, as Oswald

Chambers puts it, “They smilingly washed their hands of the consequences.” They didn’t care what happened to them personally because they knew their God, and to them that was worth more than anything this world could offer them..

Do you have that type of faith? You will if you know your God. He has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you so that we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my Helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6)

3. Those who know God have great contentment in God. If you had to pick one word to describe our generation, what would it be? Busy? Selfish? Materialistic? Those are accurate terms, but my choice is “discontent.” We are the driven generation, calendars packed with activities in a mad pursuit of some sense of meaning and accomplishment, but never content with who we are or what we’ve done. The reason is we’re looking in all the wrong places. One man admitted, “I’ve been climbing the ladder of success for years only to find I’ve had it leaning against the wrong wall.” A graduate student, on the other hand, helped me put it in proper perspective. After toiling for years to earn a Ph.D. in his chosen field of study, he found that because of the position he’d taken as a Christian, the professors on his graduate committee would not let him defend his doctoral dissertation. What was his reaction to this devastating news? “It doesn’t matter for I know God and they do not.” Knowing God makes all the difference in how we respond to life’s disappointments. As Psalm 119:165 puts it, “Great peace have those who love Thy law, and nothing causes them to stumble.”

Perhaps you’ve had the opportunity to watch an eagle soar overhead. Did you know that some have been seen flying as high as the top of Mount Everest? As you watch them soar, it may appear that they have escaped the force of gravity. But that is not the case. Gravity still exerts a tremendous downward pull on the eagle. So how does he fly so high? Because of an even greater force lifting him up. So it is for those of us who know our God! Knowing God doesn’t shield us from the trials of life. This world may in fact seek to pull us down with even greater intensity. But those of us who know our God are able to soar above it all with great energy, boldness, and contentment because of an even greater power lifting us up—the resurrection power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for He who is in us “is greater than he who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4) And yet, there’s a danger in learning about God.

The Dangers in Studying about God

Did you know it can be dangerous to study about God? Some time ago I came across a survey taken among children, asking them to fill in the blank: “God is _____.” One boy wrote, “God is the smartest one of all, and He didn’t even have to go to school, because there were no schools in His time.” A little girl said, “God is always around when you need help, but only with important things, not your homework.” Another wrote, “God is the only one without a birthday because He was the first one.” Finally, a fourth child said, “God is everywhere...like the air. We breathe Him in and out. He don’t mind.” As cute as their answers may be, they point out the first danger in studying about God—

Danger #1: Imagination and Speculation. Why is imagination dangerous when studying about God? Because that's the stuff heresies are made of. Star Wars is a good example, for what happened when George Lucas speculated about God? He came up with a god that is very different from the God of the Bible. He came up with the Force—the idea that instead of being a personal God who loves us and made everything out of nothing, god is an impersonal force that fills the universe with power. That allowed him to craft a fascinating story but it is contrary to what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that rather than being part of creation, God is holy and distinct from everything He made, and that the only way to have Him living inside us is by repenting of our sins and inviting His Son Jesus to come and live in our hearts as our Savior.

Or to say it another way, you cannot find God on your own. Instead, what has to happen in order to know God? He must reveal Himself to you. Like a window with the shades drawn, you can speculate as to what's on the other side of the curtain, but it's not until God lifts the blind that we are able to know Him in spirit and in truth. But the good news is He has done that. He has revealed Himself to us through creation, then more precisely through the Bible, but most important of all, He has shown us what He is like through the Person of His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:46) So in all our studies about God, the first thing we must do is seek Him through the revelation of His written Word, not through human speculation and imagination.

Danger #2: Pride. The temptation, as we learn more about God, is to become proud of what we've learned. The Apostle Paul warned, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies." (1 Cor. 8:1) You've met people like this. Know-it-alls with big heads and small hearts who like to compare themselves with the less learned growing more impressed not with the goodness, grace, and glory of God, but with themselves and their own finite knowledge. As a result, their hearts grow ever colder toward God and harder toward others.

Danger #3: Knowledge without Relationship. This is the tendency to collect more and more data about God without meeting Him in a personal way. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for this. For though they knew much about God and were proud of all they knew, Jesus said it did them no good. They were like white-washed tombs—bright and shining on the outside, but dead on the inside because they hadn't opened their hearts to His Spirit. For that reason, He calls us not to be mere hearers of His Word but also doers of it. And to become doers of His Word, we must pursue the qualities that go far beyond knowledge—qualities like faith, humility, patience, and compassion. So let me caution you before we continue our study. Go beyond the facts to the fundamental issue. Make sure in all your learning that you remember the most important thing of all—knowing Christ and being transformed by His Spirit.

One of the things I've had a chance to do a lot in recent years is travel, often to unusual places. Moldova is such a place. I've traveled there to teach the Bible. I do not enjoy traveling to Moldova. It is hot, dirty, smelly, and when I teach there, I usually sleep on someone's couch and eat food that does not agree with me. So when asked to teach my last class there, I tried to get out of it. But with no one else able to go, I finally agreed. Guess what! Instead of being miserable, it almost turned out to be fun. Did

conditions change? No. Things were worse than ever—no indoor plumbing, 100 degree heat, 90% humidity, and no screens on the windows which meant either roasting in the heat or fighting dive bombing mosquitoes all night long. So what made the difference? I took a friend along, and rather than letting the unpleasant things we encountered make us miserable, we turned them into a source of humor. We laughed about everything!

I share that not to bemoan my travels into Moldova, but to underscore what I've been learning in recent years. I don't have to make the journey through life alone. There is Someone eager to go with me wherever I travel, and His presence makes all the difference in my life. Knowing Him gives me a peace, a courage, and a strength that transforms every unpleasantness into a new opportunity to know Him better and grow more like Him. That's a journey I plan to continue as long as I live, and I invite you to join me with this promise. If you use this learning opportunity to go beyond collecting data to seeking His presence, you'll find yourself becoming a different person because no one who has ever experienced God in a personal way has remained the same.

(Next week's study: "Stendahl's Syndrome: The Holiness of God.")