



What We Believe God & Man

In September we'll begin to look at the life of Christ as we study Matthew's gospel together, verse-by-verse. We'll start with His birth and move on through His ministry including the famous Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer numerous parables and miracles, and we'll come to His death, burial, and resurrection for the sins of men. It's going to be an encouraging study and I'm really looking forward to it personally.

But before we get there, this morning we begin a four-part series on some of the essentials of the Christian faith. These are the core beliefs that define us, the things we hold tight and dear. We're going to look at who God is and how we relate to Him as human beings. We'll look at who Jesus is and what the gospel is; how to live and grow as Christians, and what the church should be about. It's Christianity 101.

We begin with a task both that is both essential and impossible at the same time – that is, for me, to tell you, about God. But how can I tell you all that is worth saying about God? Especially when I'm still learning Him myself! And how can I do it in under an hour? No one could do this. And yet I must try because, God has told us to tell others about Him – it's the Great Commission and we'll find it in the last verses of Matthew's gospel, when we get there. In some of His last words to His disciples, Jesus said if we know Him, we're to make Him known, to share what we have learned. God does not want to be kept a secret.

But how do you do that? How do you explain God to someone? I chewed on that question this week. If someone were to ask, "So, you worship God. What's that all about? Tell me about Him." How would I respond?

And I thought, well, you probably wouldn't turn to technical terms, would you? You wouldn't use the vocabulary of theology or philosophy books. You probably wouldn't talk about immanence and transcendence or omniscience and omnipotence. You wouldn't talk immediately about the ontological, or teleological, or cosmological arguments for God. At least I hope not. Those things are all well and good. There are times when we need precise language and specialized vocabulary.

But if I was asked, in normal, casual, conversation to tell someone about God, I'd probably say: "He's the foundation of my life. He forgives me and saves me. Everything good in my life has its roots in Him and comes from knowing, believing, and following Him. And so, because of that, I try to know Him more and see what else He wants me to do, what else He wants me to know."

And then, if the conversation went a bit longer, maybe I would work at unpacking some of those ideas. So that's what I want to do this morning: to remember, and rejoice, with you

about who God is. To remind you of things you already know, or tell you more, or perhaps, tell you for the first time.

The first thing I would say is: God is. He is there.

He met Moses in the desert at the burning bush and commissioned him to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and become the nation of Israel in the land of Israel. And in response to all of this, Moses was stunned. He wasn't seeking the position, he was out taking care of sheep – living as a shepherd on the backside of the desert, when God interrupted his life and said, "Moses, I'm going to send you to lead My people." And Moses said to God:

Exodus 3:13 [...] "Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What *is* His name?' what shall I say to them?"

14 And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 Moreover God said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'The LORD 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 this *is* My memorial to all generations.'

God told Moses, "My name is: I AM." Before you come up with a word to call Me, you have to recognize that I AM. I am here. I am real.

Friends, everything starts and ends right there: God is. It doesn't matter what you or I think, it doesn't matter what we feel. It doesn't matter what we would prefer. God is. And He sits there authoritatively, unmoving, unflinching, and waits for our response. There's no getting around it, no avoiding it. Sooner or later, we must all respond to the God who says, "I AM." We either bow in reverence like Moses, accepting the calling He puts on our life, even if it makes us uncomfortable or seems impossible, or we resist and wait and see how that plays out. But God offers no excuses, no explanations, He simply insists: I AM.

This is the name He is known by throughout the Bible. It's the idea behind the name Yahweh, also pronounced Jehovah; it's translated in our English Bibles as LORD. You see that there in Exodus 3:15. We find other names for God, nicknames if you will, but God's primary name is simply an insistence, first and foremost that we understand: He is.

And He is in a category all to Himself. Nothing made God; He didn't come from something or someone else. He doesn't depend on anyone else or exist to please anyone else. He's not afraid of anything else. He is spirit, and He is totally and completely self-existent.

He is also self-defining. He can't be fully explained in terms of anything else. He doesn't fit in other categories. We might explain what a woolly mammoth is by saying, "it's like an elephant covered in hair." Or a zebra "is like a horse with stripes." But God is not simply another example of divinity. There is nothing and no one like Him.

He asked the prophet Isaiah:

Is 40:25 “To whom then will you liken Me,
Or to *whom* shall I be equal?”

Now, that causes us some problems, because it means, that in some ways, it is *impossible* to fully know God. He is. He is there. But He’s also incomprehensible. You could devote your entire life to studying God and you’re never going to master Him. The Psalms say:

Ps 145:3 Great *is* the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
And His greatness *is* unsearchable.

Job and His friends spent a lot of time thinking about God and why certain things happen on earth, and Job said:

Job 23:13 “[...] He *is* unique, and who can make Him change?
And *whatever* His soul desires, *that* He does.

We go back to the prophet Isaiah and find this famous passage where God tells the man,

Is 55:8 “For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts,
Nor *are* your ways My ways,” says 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.

God says, “You don’t think the way I do. You don’t know what I know. You don’t have all the pieces; you can’t see the whole picture. There’s so much you’re missing, you don’t even know what it is that you don’t know about Me.”

But this is not a reason to despair! When we turn to the New Testament we find the apostle Paul reveling in the vastness of God and bursting out in praise:

Rom 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out!

34 “For who has known the mind of the LORD?
Or who has become His counselor?”
35 “Or who has first given to Him
And it shall be repaid to him?”

36 For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things, to whom *be* glory forever.
Amen.

You hear the excitement, the enthusiasm this greatness produces in Paul. He doesn't want a god he can figure out. He doesn't want a god you can control. He doesn't want a god that sits quietly over your fireplace or stays put in the temple. He wants, and we have, a God who IS. Who is unstoppable, uncontainable, untamable. A God who wasn't raised by anyone else, doesn't owe anything to anyone else, and isn't afraid of or respectful of anyone else. Paul wants, and we have, a God who is central to everything, absolutely EVERYthing!

We have a God, who is there, who is past our ability to pin down and categorize and dissect, and we have a God who is Holy. Our God is holy.

Holiness is not just one of His attributes; Holiness is His essential nature. God IS holy. And the only reason anything else is holy is because it has a connection to Him.

Going back to that encounter with Moses, God got his attention by setting a bush on fire. Moses came near to see what was happening, and God said:

Exodus 3:5 "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." 6 Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father-the God of Abraham the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.

The ground was holy because God was associated with it and that holiness compels us to respond. Notice, Moses **hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God**. There is something compelling and simultaneously paralyzing about the beautiful, yet terrible, holiness of God. We want it, but we know we're not worthy of it. We are drawn to it, but only if we can stand in the corner or the shadows and look on from a distance. We want to see, but not get too close.

CS Lewis in the famous Chronicles of Narnia books pictures Christ as a lion. A lion the characters described as good, but not safe. That's a great way to put it. God cannot be tamed. He is holy. He is splendid. He is attractive and compelling, but He'll also expose you and confront you. The closer you get to God the more you realize your true condition. He is wholly and entirely better than us, supremely superior to us. Angels and elders bow down in heaven and say:

Revelation 4:8 — "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

In fact, what we call 'evil' could be described simply as the absence of Him and His holy goodness. Something is evil because it does not reflect God's character, design, and intention.

The question "Why does God allow evil?" may be an honest one, but it also reflects a lack of awareness of what evil is – it is what happens in the absence of God's holiness. And it is, most often, the result of sin: perhaps specific sin, or the general, lingering, pervasive, effects of our rebellion against God. We commit evil and evil is committed against us, but it is

never pleasing to God or representative of Him. It is the sucking, vacuous, absence or abandonment of God. It is what is wrong, and it shows us what His exclusion means.

So, God is. He is too complex for us to master. He is holy. And, He is supreme in knowledge. He knows all things because all things work according to His rules and plans. A person writing computer code knows how her program will work, because she wrote the lines of code. Well, in those terms, God wrote the code of the universe. He knows all the options, and all that is happening. There is nothing hidden from Him. Paul told the Christians in Corinth:

1 Cor 4:5 judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts.

There is nothing hidden from God – even things that happen in our hearts and minds. That can be terrifying to you, or it could be tremendously comforting. Because if God knows everything, that means He has taken everything into account, and nothing can come up that He didn't foresee or plan for. You can trust Him.

Isn't this why we turn to other people for advice? We turn to people we think might know something, someone who might be able to help. Friends, that is God. He has all knowledge, He knows what is best and good and right. He will lead you to it and He will see you through it.

It also means He knows your heart and your motives, He knows what you really meant to say, or how you really wanted that to turn out. And God is always WAY more concerned with motives than outcomes, which only He can entirely control anyway.

Which brings us to another of His attributes, and that is, His supreme power. I love this verse from the Psalms:

Ps 135:6 Whatever the LORD pleases He does,

That's my God. He does whatever He pleases. Frank Sinatra may sing "I Did It My Way," and others may boast about doing whatever they want, but it's all a lie. At some point, every human being is under constraint. We all face limitations – physical strength fades, power is taken away or lost, money runs out, or you die. But God does whatever He pleases.

And God pleases to be creative and do good. The Bible opens with the words:

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now, I want you to think about something – have you ever seen one of those suits the bomb disposal guys wear? All that padding is designed to protect the wearer from fragmentation, heat and fire, and the pressure waves generated by the blast from a relatively small amount of explosives.

But God, who is supremely powerful, holds together all the atomic energy ever created – He spoke it into being. The energy of tens of millions, and hundreds of millions, and millions of millions of stars – God created that – all the energy of yellow dwarfs and red giants, of supernovas and pulsars.

Col 1:16 by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

And we know that, we know it intuitively. No one has to tell us. When we are confronted with nature – whether in the mountains or at the beach, whether staring up into the sky or looking down into the water, our souls begin to awaken from the concrete coma we are surrounded by most days, and we see, we *feel* the beauty, the splendor, the sheer size and scope and, at times, the uncontrollable, unconquerable, power of it all reminds us: there is a God.

We tend to be most aware of Him when we are closest to what He has made or in special “natural” moments like the birth of a child. God uses all of these things to get our attention and communicate to us. And when He does, do you know what He says? He says, “I AM. I’m here, and I want you.”

This God, whom we can never reach on our own, whose holiness and power keep us from being able to approach, says to us: “I want to close the gap between you and Me. I want you in My presence, I am offering myself to you. In fact, I have come to you.”

When I was serving down at Pope Air Force Base, next to Fort Bragg in North Carolina, we had a photo on the wall in the chapel. It was a picture of a lunar landing module on the surface of the moon. Jim Irwin, a former Air Force pilot and astronaut – the 8th man to walk on the moon – had come to chapel to speak and signed the photo with the words: “Jesus walking on earth is more important than man walking on the moon.”

Think about that – the God who created the world, the solar system, and the Milky Way Galaxy, the Andromeda galaxy, and everything else out there in space, came down to our tiny little planet in human flesh because, even someone like Jim Erwin, walking on the moon could never reach God on his own. God knows that – He has supreme knowledge, remember – and so, He came to us.

Jesus Christ, left His throne in Heaven and came to earth to die on a Roman cross as a sacrifice for our sins because not only is God there, not only is He beyond our ability to comprehend, not only is He holy and supreme in knowledge and power, He is also undeniably, unmistakably good. And, we are the beneficiaries of that goodness. The Bible says:

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Romans 8:28 "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Think of how the Bible describes God to us: as a Shepherd, as a Father, as our defender – God uses terms of kindness and personal relationship. He wants us to know that He is close, caring, and capable.

According to the last estimate there were 7.44B people alive in 2016.

- 24 million of them live in Shanghai – how many of them know you?
- 23 million of them live in Karachi – how many of them know you?
- 18.4 million of them live in Mumbai – how many of them know you?

And yet Jesus says:

Matthew 10:29 Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. 30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

The sun and the moon and the solar system, they don't care about you. The elements of the periodic chart, they don't care about you. Scientific theories and laws don't care about you.

But there is a God, and He is good. And He cares. He cares about the poor, the sick, the lonely, the victims of oppression and injustice, anxiety and despair. He cares about people suffering the effects of His absence through sin, and so He sent Jesus Christ to suffer in our place on the cross SO THAT we could be re-united with Him.

And once He has forgiven you, and redeemed you, there is no separating Him from you. He tells those who have been born again in Christ:

Heb 13:5 *"I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

In fact, at the moment of our salvation, He comes to dwell within us: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27).

So, we know that God is, that He is more than we could imagine, that He is holy, supreme in knowledge and power, the creator of the universe who stoops down to engage with us, because He is good. There is so much more we could say about Him, but let's end with this: He is eternal.

When it comes to technology, I loathe updates. Not because I'm afraid of learning what they contain, just because I'm just tired. Right now, we're on Microsoft Windows 10. I hit

the ground running with 3.0. Then there was 3.1, Windows NT, Windows 95, Windows 98, 2000, ME, XP, XP Pro – and that was all before my kids were born.

God on the other hand, may be infinitely more complex, but He's also eternally consistent in the most comforting way.

He told the prophet Malachi:

Malachi 3:6 "I am the Lord, I do not change."

The Psalms say

Psalms 102:12 But You, O Lord, shall endure forever, and the remembrance of Your name to all generations.

And Hebrews declares

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

God does not change. He is the same God as He has always been and always will be. You can trust Him, you can depend on Him, you can rely on Him. The same God that has forgiven you in the past is still there to forgive you today. The God you once felt so close to welcomes you back. The same God that got you through that thing a few years ago is still there to help you face this next challenge. He does not change.

That also means you won't catch Him on a bad day. Our lives change, but He does not. So,

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Friends, this is the God we serve. This is the God we worship. This is the God we know and love. So, Rejoice! Pray! Worship and serve your God! Know Him and make Him known. Taste and see that the Lord is good, and let everything else in your life fall in place around Him.

Let me close with this one challenge today: you know who God is, you've caught a glimmer of His glory today, but let me ask: are you available to God? Are you totally surrendered to Him? If He wanted to use you or change you in some way, are you available to Him? Think about that, and let's pray.