

## “How do I Know What God Is Like”

By: Doug Warren

### How do I know what God is like?

All of us have an idea of what we think God is like. We may not be able to articulate it in theological terms, but we have a sense of what we think the divine is or should be, even if we doubt the existence of this same being. Sometimes this gets expressed in moral absolutes: “God must be loving, or good, or forgiving, or \_\_\_\_\_.” While these are nice sentiments, they don’t help us know the reality any more than if we tried the same approach in relationships with people.

If I try to develop a friendship (or any relationship) with someone and constrain all my efforts to imagining what that person is like without ever engaging them in dialogue, how successful can I hope to be? We run into the same kind of problem with knowing God. But how are we supposed to proceed in learning what God is like? None of our means of investigation are up to the task. None of our disciplines of study can answer the question, but seem only to make the question more difficult. How do you evaluate the various deities that have been worshipped throughout the ages? Should we begin with such institutionalized religions or eschew them for a more immediate access?

Where do we even begin? This issue of beginning point is essential in any pursuit, but especially one of such significance. It seems to me that not only are our investigative processes hopelessly deficient, but that our very being makes the quest impossible. As finite creatures we by definition are limited in our abilities. So how do we contemplate, let alone evaluate, the divine and presumably infinite?

But what if the infinite God who is beyond our ability to map took the initiative and communicated with us? Someone who is beyond our limitations would be in a position to condescend to us even while we remained constrained by our finitude. Indeed if such a deity revealed itself to us, it would at least be reasonable to consider that such a god would be able to communicate in an intelligible fashion.

The Bible claims to be precisely this missing link between us as finite creatures and the infinite God of the universe. The word “bible” simply means book, but it claims to be much more than just any book. It claims to be *The Book of Revelation*, that is, God revealing Himself to us. The phrase “Word of the Lord . . .” is repeated as a self-designation throughout the Bible (see Gen 15:1; 1 Sam 3:1; 2 Sam 7:4; 1 Kings 6:11; 1 Chronicles 10:13; Ps 12:6; Isaiah 1:10; Jeremiah 1:2; Ezekiel 1:3; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 8:12; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). Perhaps one of the clearest self-attestations of the Bible as being God’s own word is in Second Timothy 3:16-17 which says, “All Scripture is inspired and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

If you can see the necessity of something like what the Bible purports to be, then considering what it says seems like a reasonable step in the process of learning what God is like. So who does the Bible say God is? What is He like according to His own testimony? Let's consider just one aspect of God's character.

God describes Himself again and again throughout the Scriptures by saying, "I, the Lord, am holy." Of all the adjectives used to explain God in the Bible, "holy" is the only one that is repeated three times in a row (a literary device to emphasize something really important). Isaiah records the angels of heaven declaring, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." Elsewhere it says, "Holy is His name" where name is used to mean the defining quality of a person's character.

What does holy mean? The word literally means, "separate" and has the connotations of moral purity and setting something aside for sacred use. In theological terms this gets at God's transcendence; in practical terms, it points us again to the ultimate distinction between God and everything else in creation. All things, except God, are created. They came from something. There was a time when they were not, but with God there never was a time when He was not.

What's more, the Bible goes on to say that God alone can make other things holy. In fact, He commands again and again, that we are to "be holy, for I am holy." It is not as if God is just out there, somehow so far removed from our limitations that He has nothing to do with us. He has entered into dialogue with us and calls us to enter into relationship with Him. He says, "I will be your God and you will be my people." That which characterizes God in turn teaches us something that is supposed to characterize us also.

Our initial question about understanding God, it would seem, is also wrapped up in how we are to understand ourselves also. That only makes sense as we see the Bible as not only a revelation about God in the abstract, but the demonstration of God's power and work *in relationship* to His people. Next month we will look at how this relationship reveals more about both who God is and who we are.