

2

THE NATURE OF GOD

A Contract

Throughout this book we aim to explore the nature of God with special reference to what the Holy Bible reveals about His nature. This should not be thought of simply as an academic exercise, where we put God under a microscope, twist Him around a few times and see what He looks like from different angles. We are embarked upon a study of Almighty God, and how He has chosen to reveal Himself to the human race that He has made. This, then, is a subject that should be approached with genuine reverence, a sense of awe and in a spirit of expectation, *if* we really want to see and experience God in a new way. God *does* want us to know Him, and to know Him intimately, but we must always remember that ultimately we are but dust, as created beings, whilst He is holy and majestic. Ultimately He will judge us, not the other way around! In preparing this book, the author was struck by the willingness and casualness with which humans are prepared to judge God, and to try to recast Him in ways that they find comfortable. If the reader is a Christian, then they might want to pray (if they have not already done so) that God will bless them in some new way as they reverently and diligently look into His nature and at who He truly is. If the reader is not

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

a Christian, or is unsure of what he or she is (perhaps as an ‘agnostic’, or someone belonging to one of the various religions) you may also want to pray at this early stage that *if* God exists, then He will graciously reveal Himself to you through the pages that follow. If you already have fixed views about the nature of God, you may want to pray that He will graciously reveal to you any errors that there may be in your present understanding, for we all have limited understanding of God. That is quite inevitable — we are finite and He is infinite. The author would make no special pleading to be an ‘expert’ in the study of God, but only to be one who is willing to talk about God on the terms that God has clearly set down in Holy Scripture. In other words, in this book we seek to look at God on His terms, and with the clarity already set out in those Scriptures, rather than to try to construct an indentikit image of ‘god’ from various philosophical viewpoints.

Readers will note that in this book we do not set out to defend the Holy Scriptures as the definitive word of God. There are many good books that examine the Holy Bible in that context and no doubt someone who is genuinely interested in this subject will readily find what they need without having to look too hard. If the reader comes to this study with the objection that the Bible *is not*, or *may not be*, the sole revelation of God then he or she is invited simply to ‘park’ that objection for the time being. There surely can be no great problem in looking closely at what the Scriptures have to say about God so as to acquire a clear understanding of the argument being put forward in this book. In a court of law a witness is called and a judge or a jury will form an opinion as to the trustworthiness of that particular person, and the validity of the testimony they offer. The author invites the reader to adopt the same attitude towards the

THE NATURE OF GOD

Bible. Readers can always ‘call more witnesses’ at a later stage if they feel that the witness of Scripture is incomplete or invalid. The key suggestion made by this author is that a doubter holds on to his or her doubts but proceeds from this point onwards with the basic working assumption that the Scriptures *are* valid and trustworthy. If at the conclusion of these studies the reader finds the testimony is finally un-compelling, then he or she is free to take up their doubts once more. Maybe we should consider this as being a sort of ‘contract’ between the reader and the author: the contract may be considered as discharged once the reader turns the last page of this book! Until then, let us use those Scriptures as the platform from which to review what Almighty God has revealed about Himself. Allowing that many readers will be Westerners, then we might as well also ‘park’ the gender issue: some may feel that reference to God as ‘Him’ and ‘He’ represents some form of gender aggression. If so, you too are simply invited to park that objection for the time being. We use those terms because the Holy Bible uses those terms. You can always return to your objection later if you feel that the gender issue remains a challenge for you personally.

But God does invite us to examine Him in minute detail. Only by so doing can we hope to begin to understand Him and to draw closer to Him, closeness being the ultimate objective, logically, of any such study of the Almighty. ***Taste and see that the Lord is good*** it says in Psalm 34:8. We *are* invited to taste, to sample God. That the Lord is good is a basic tenet of the whole of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. So why not take God at His word and, in a sense, sample Him? The foolish thing in this life, surely, would be to reach its end and have to say, ‘I never even bothered to sample God, let alone to draw close to

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

Him.’ That would be an absolute tragedy, especially when there could be an eternal blessing, or indeed an eternal curse, that finally depends on the decision we make about God in this life.

Inherent Characteristics of God

The normative Christian view of God, held by Roman Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox traditions — and that means by the vast majority in this world who call themselves Christian — is that God is revealed as being three co-eternal Persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — in One God. This is known as the doctrine of the *Holy Trinity*, or the *Trinitarian* doctrine. We get a strong sense of this from the following Bible texts which are suggested as a starting point in understanding this doctrine, *although they should not be taken as proof-positive of this doctrine*. Readers may want to check them out in the Bible itself and if so, possibly to read a little around those key verses, so as to get a sense of the context in which they are written.

Key attributes of God

One and only — Isaiah 44:6 (and Galatians 3:15–20)

Unchangeable — James 1:17

Invisible — Colossians 1:15

Infinite — 1 Kings 8:27

Holy — 1 Peter 1:15-16

Spirit — John 4:24

His unity

Deuteronomy 6:4

Galatians 3:20 (see also verse 16)

1 Timothy 2:5

James 2:19

THE NATURE OF GOD

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Matthew 28:19 (name, not names!)

2 Corinthians 13:14

Hebrews 1:8

1 Peter 1:2

“I AM”

Exodus 3:13–15 God reveals His name to Moses

The inherent characteristics of God as displayed throughout the Scriptures are characteristics equally, it is argued, of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And they are characteristics *always* displayed in the way that God acts in biblical history. According to the Bible, the whole of creation displays God’s glory, His eternal power and His deity:

**The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament shows His handiwork.**

**Day unto day utters speech,
and night unto night reveals knowledge.**

**There is no speech nor language
where their voice is not heard.**

**Their line has gone out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.**

**In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,
Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his
chamber,**

and rejoices like a strong man to run its race.

**Its rising is from one end of heaven,
and its circuit to the other end;
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.**

(Psalm 19:1–6, NKJV)

For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20, NKJV)

Both passages suggest that we can obtain a clear sense of God simply from looking at what He has created — the world in which we all live. The Scriptures similarly tell us that God’s ‘providence’, in other words the way that He deals with the human race on a day to day basis, also displays the consistency of His nature. So we read:

. . . that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:45 NKJV).

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. (Luke 6:35, NKJV)

. . . who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:16 – 17, NKJV)

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:22 – 31)

God's Attributes

These texts begin to suggest to us the consistency of God in His dealing with people, as well as His love and mercy to all mankind. The attributes of God are today understood by scholars as focusing around attributes that are His alone, as well as attributes that He shares with those people who become His followers. Inevitably there is some debate

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

and variance of views around these questions, but the following can be considered as a normative Christian understanding:

There are things that we can say of God alone. He is Spirit; He is: sovereign; eternal; infinite; immutable (or unchangeable); omnipotent; He is One in three persons. There are also characteristics which He may impart to His adopted children. Thus we may grow in knowledge of Him; we may grow in wisdom; holiness; love; truthfulness. We are meant to be transformed by the renewing of our minds as we study His Word; we are to be bearing fruit — the fruit of the Spirit — and so we are to grow more and more in the likeness of Christ, displaying more of the character of the one who is the only-begotten Son of the Father. It goes without saying that not all His children display these characteristics, all the time, or in equal consistency. And sadly even some professing Christians will stray far from the character that God would impart, in which we should be growing. That is a sad reflection of the sort of people that we often are, but to share some of the character of their Lord is the expectation of a Christian and their general desire. It is also a fact in the author's experience of observing Christians over many years that, as those years roll by, faithful followers of the Lord Jesus do seem to display more and more of the character of Christ, who they love and worship.

By now, of course, readers will have a sense of the sheer magnitude of the subject that we are investigating. If God exists at all, then logically He will be well out of our ability to comprehend in a natural and unaided way, and that is before you take into account our nature as sinners who 'naturally' live blind to God! Readers are encouraged to persist, however, as God *does* make it possible to know Him, and to know Him indeed as Abba — or Father, and

THE NATURE OF GOD

this is more correctly translated as ‘daddy’.

How do the Scriptures express the characteristics of God? We can look first and briefly at the divine names by which God revealed Himself. In Genesis 1:1 we hear the name of ‘God’. In Genesis 2:4 he is described as the ‘Lord God’. In Genesis 17:1, simply as ‘the Lord’. In Exodus 3:6, as God calls Moses for the first time, He describes himself in the following way. **“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”** The Bible goes on to tell us that Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. In the same chapter of Genesis, as this foundational encounter between Almighty God and Moses takes place, God also reveals Himself as **“I Am”** (verse 14). Readers may want to pause to read the whole of Exodus chapter 3 as it is so key to the Christian understanding of how God dealt with his chosen people, the Hebrews, and how in turn He introduced Himself to Moses who was to become the godly and God-fearing leader of the Jewish nation.

Some of God’s attributes are seen implicitly in the biblical accounts of the creation, the fall, the flood and the exodus. And these attributes are emphasised in the ‘covenants’ that he made with His chosen people. By the time that the Hebrew people had reached Mount Sinai, as part of their long and drawn-out escape from slavery in Egypt, God’s self revelation had become more explicit. In Exodus 34:6–7, **I the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion and pity, who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness. I keep my promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin; but I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents.** (GNB)

To the ‘liberal’ and post-modern West, this idea of a

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

God who punishes children for the sins of their parents may immediately seem unfairly harsh and indeed the very opposite of forgiving! However we need to take God at His word on this: He is honest about the effects of sin and of how He deals with it. Taken in context with the nature of God as revealed in other places in the Scriptures, we need to understand this apparent harshness in the light of His other attributes. But there is perhaps a more straightforward way to understand this apparently harsh promise of God. It is not so much that He sends the punishment, but rather that we humans create the awful reality of sin seeping from generation to generation. In the UK for many years we suffered in the province of Northern Ireland what became universally known as ‘The Troubles’. This was the political conflict between the left wing (culturally ‘Catholic’) and the right wing (culturally ‘Protestant’) that outworked itself in 30 years of political turmoil and terrorist outrage.¹ Whilst not wishing to over-simplify this sad and difficult period in UK history, it must be noted that one vital component of the problem was the willingness of the protagonists to hate their neighbours with a venom that defied rational explanation. Men and women, fathers and mothers, were too willing to pass on their antagonisms to the next generation. The history of Ireland, if it suggests nothing else, shows that hatreds can so easily be ‘visited’ from one generation to the next. Each generation must take its share of responsibility for stoking the fires of hatred, which in turn pollutes the chances of the next generation to live in peace. So we should, perhaps, reflect upon God’s candour about the reality of cross-generational punishment with the understanding that we

¹ Sadly, within 48 hours of writing these lines, two British soldiers were murdered in Ulster after a dozen years of ‘peace’ which had followed an exacting political process aimed at securing a lasting settlement in Ulster.

THE NATURE OF GOD

humans are wholly the problem. The ‘Troubles’ of Ulster are sadly replicated right across this planet, perhaps with different labels, but always with the same self-justification, the same self-righteousness, the same desire to get even with our assumed enemies. Not for nothing did the Lord Jesus tell His followers to love their enemies and to do good to those who abuse them (Matthew 5:43). So God does indeed reluctantly allow us to pass from generation to generation the sin that so easily pollutes — and in this we begin to see the practical outworking of that clear statement in Exodus. And it must be read in the context of the preceding clause, that God is in practice full of compassion, where all too often we are full of hatred. He is full of pity, where we are full of venom. He is not easily angered, where we have very thin skins! God shows great love and faithfulness, where we show a capacity for hatred. It might be added, God knows that we need God!

We must bear in mind our inability to fully understand God as mere humans. Reading this book will not lead to a full and complete understanding of Almighty God, however much the author may wish otherwise! But through His revelation God is truly known through faith, even though no creature can fully understand Him. To Christian believers, Scripture presents God’s attributes as being *the* standard for living. So, we are to be holy because God is holy. We are to be loving because God is loving (see for examples Leviticus 19:2 and 1 John 4:8, 11). A sober acknowledgement that we cannot fully understand God in this life should lead us to a certain sense of humility every time we consider God and His attributes. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 139:6, such knowledge **is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain**. This is emphasised again in 145:3 **Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one**

can fathom. And again by the major prophet Isaiah:

**Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.**

(Isaiah 40:28, NKJV)

Readers who want to follow this idea through the Scriptures are directed to Isaiah 55:8–9; Matthew 11:25–27; Romans 11:33–36; 1 Corinthians 2:6–16; and 1 Corinthians 13:8–13. The incomprehensibility of God is a fact known throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible, as the above Bible verses demonstrate. And yet, as noted earlier, God has indeed invited us to know Him. *Taste and see that the Lord is good* says God (Psalm 34:8), and of this we need to remind ourselves constantly as we look at His nature and His attributes in this book.

God's unity is the key expression of Christian monotheism — the fact that the God of the Scriptures is the only, living and true God. From the biblical perspective, therefore, all other 'gods' are figments of imagination. This attribute of unity is reflected in the first of the Ten Commandments — **"You shall have no other God before me"** (Exodus 20:3 — confirmed by the Lord Jesus Himself in Matthew 4:10). These Bible verses emphasise the same point: **"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."** (Deuteronomy 6:4–5, NKJV)

Having affirmed that God is One (as above), He

THE NATURE OF GOD

immediately commands that we should love Him—unstintingly. When Jesus was asked which of the Commandments was the most important, He replied: **“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”** (Mark 12:29–30, NKJV). And Jesus went on to add the supplementary requirement for men to love their neighbours as themselves. We note especially in verse 29 that Jesus acknowledged the unity of God. Jesus prayed for His future Church shortly before His crucifixion. He said: **“..... this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”** (John 17:3, NKJV). We note again Jesus’ teaching that God the Almighty is the only true God.

The fact that God is Spirit reminds us that He is not a physical being and He is invisible. God is shown to be personal, living, self-conscious and self-determining. The invisible God, it must be clearly understood, cannot be seen by human eyes (Ex 33:20) and the second of the Ten Commandments forbids every visible representation of God (Ex 20:4). From the Godist viewpoint, this must be a particular challenge, as so many of the world’s religions do have physical representations of ‘god’. It really is for the Godist to show why God gives one instruction in the Holy Scriptures and then countermands it by allowing and approving of physical images of ‘god’ by *the religions*. Inconsistency is certainly not an attribute of God indicated in Scripture! Because God is Spirit He must be worshipped in spirit and truth, said Jesus in John 4:24. This is a helpful and valuable passage in John’s Gospel, telling us about the Lord Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan woman as they

discussed together the need for a spring of ‘living water’ to well-up from within a person and how such a spring could provide ultimate and life-giving sustenance. Jesus confirmed that a time was coming when *true worshippers* will not worship in particular geographical locations, but rather they will worship God anywhere, *in spirit and in truth*. (See John 4:1–26 for the full context in which this statement was made by Jesus).

God’s immutability or constancy demonstrates His faithfulness to Himself, to His holy laws, to His promises, and to His works. God remains forever the same God who undergoes no change in Himself either from within or from outside of Himself. So it is in that we read: **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.** (James 1:17, NKJV)

God’s promises made to Abraham express His immutability – or changelessness – so that His covenant people (the Hebrews) could be sure of the unchanging nature of His purpose (Hebrews 6:17, NIV). King Saul in the Old Testament was told by the prophet Samuel that “**He who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind**” (1 Sam 15:29, NIV — see also Numbers 23:19). In Malachi 3:6 we read “**For I am the LORD; I do not change. Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob**” (NKJV). This message is reinforced in the New Testament in regard to the Lord Jesus as we read in Hebrews 13:8 — **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever**. Accordingly, Christians were warned not to be led astray by ‘strange doctrines’. This again, it is suggested, must be a challenge to the Godist position, especially where the Godist is someone who considers themselves also to be a Christian.

THE NATURE OF GOD

God's immutability or constancy does not in any manner suggest that He is static or immobile. The God of the Scriptures is seen as being one Who is constantly working (John 5:17) and Who is dynamic. Sometimes God is described in the Bible as being sorry, of 'repenting' or changing His mind (see Genesis 6: 6–7, 1 Samuel 15:11 and Jonah 3:10). Read within context these figurative expressions show the constancy of God who, in holiness and righteousness, always hates sin and responds in outright opposition to it. But in His mercy and grace He actively forgives those who repent (that is, have a complete change of heart and turn to Him for forgiveness). God carries out His stated purposes and His promises, without fail. So we read: **“The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,⁸ if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.”** (Jeremiah 18:7–10, NKJV)

Plainly this text suggests that we should try to deal as consistently with God as He deals with us. Promises to God should not be made lightly, especially if we are in two minds about whether we will fulfil them.

“I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” (Isaiah 46:10)

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. (Ephesians 1:11)

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

This final verse, from Ephesians, is found in the apostle Paul's great letter to the early church located at Ephesus (in modern Turkey). Paul's letter is concerned first and foremost with: **God's plan to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head**" (Ephesians 1:10, as above). In the first part of the letter, Paul explores how God has chosen His people, how they are forgiven and set free from their sins through Jesus Christ, God's Son. Paul reminds us (again from the GNB version) that **even before the World was made, God had already chosen us to be his through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him.** Another amazing statement that speaks of God's immutability and His constancy of purpose.

We have begun to explore in this second chapter, then, the nature of God. Whether the Godist's vision of 'god' matches the sheer majesty of God as revealed from the pages of Holy Scripture is a constant theme throughout this book. Whether the Godist position, that 'god' can be found in a range of manifestations and worshipped in a range of ways, can be reconciled with what God has so consistently revealed about Himself in the Holy Bible is, it is suggested, problematic at the very least! Readers will by now recognize what a huge task that we are undertaking, but they should feel encouraged that the Holy Spirit of God can and will enable them to achieve the understanding that they need. For it is the Spirit who provides both wisdom and knowledge (1 Corinthians 4:8).

Up to this point we have looked at certain facets of the nature of God. It must be said that we have not exhausted these by any means, but we should now have some sense of God's sovereignty, His unity, independence and immutability. We will explore at a later stage the centrality

THE NATURE OF GOD

of His attribute of holiness to the whole of our argument. In the next chapter we shall begin to explore how God revealed Himself with progressively greater clarity through His dealings with His chosen race, the Hebrews.

