

Behold Our God (Isaiah 6:1-7; Acts 17:22-31)

Isaiah 6:1-7

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Acts 17:22-31

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'

²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God

overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

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THE CHALLENGE

As we start back with face-to-face meetings, we also start with a new series – Behold Our God. Over the next couple of months, we are going to look at God and seek to know Him better. Not only for our own sakes, but also so that we can talk about him with others.

The passage we read from Acts comes from Paul’s visit to Athens – the centre of the Greek philosophical and religious world. The people here prided themselves in knowing a lot about just about everything. Religion was extremely important to them and they had lots of ideas about the gods. If you had asked them if they believed in god, they would have said “Of course!” and then proceeded to tell you about the particular god they worshipped – and they had many to choose from! The challenge for Paul – and us – was to introduce people to the God of the Bible.

Today, if you asked people if they believed in a god, an increasing number would say “No”, but I suspect a majority would say “Yes”. But the god they believe in might not be the God who is revealed in the Bible. One author recently wrote that the popular view of God is “ A grandad who lives in the clouds, made the universe pretty, sends good people to heaven and bad people to hell, does the odd miracle here and there and pretty much leaves everyone be.”

But even among Christians, we sometimes struggle to describe God. As we start this new series I thought it would be interesting for us to take a moment to think about how we would describe God. With the few people right around you, I want you to take a minute and come up with some words you would use to describe God. Under the chair at the end of the row is a basket with some pieces of paper and pencils in it. Talk together and write down as many words as you can think of to describe God. Those of you at home do it as well! I’ll give you 2 minutes! When you are done, put the paper with your words back into the basket.

I hope that got you thinking about how to describe God. And maybe it raised some questions in your mind about God. As we go through this series, I’d love to hear those questions. I don’t promise we’ll be able to answer all of them to your complete satisfaction, but we can give it a try! If you have a question, please feel free to write it down on a piece of paper and put it in the basket today or after today you can put it in the offering box out on the sign-in table - or you can email it to me. It can be anonymous if you want. There are no silly questions when it comes to God – we are all on a journey of getting to know Him and none of us has all the answers. But we can help each other!

It is interesting that when Paul talks to the people at Athens, he begins his description of God with creation, for that is where the Bible starts. As we open our Bibles, the very first sentence points us to what the whole Bible is about. We read, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”. The Bible is about God – who He is and what He does. From this verse alone we learn that God existed before anything else and that He created everything else. This is a big statement! It shapes everything else that we read in the Bible and orders our world. If he made our world, then He controls and sustains it. Therefore, as much as we might like to think differently, we are not the top of the ladder in the universe. We do not control it. There is someone above us and that someone is God. This makes a big difference to how we see things.

The first chapter of Genesis goes on to explain more things about God and His relationship with His creation. The Grace Group will look at this on Tuesday night and if you aren't able to attend, you might want to look at this on your own. We can learn a lot about God from what is said about Him in these first few verses of the Bible.

But the Bible doesn't stop there. Throughout the Bible, we learn more and more about our God. Sometimes it is through the things that He does. For instance, we learned a lot about God from the way he acted in the book of Joshua. We saw His justice and mercy working side by side. We saw his giving, His grace. And we saw His power and greatness.

Other times, the Bible gives us a glimpse of God in His heaven. For instance, our Isaiah passage shows us the very throne room of heaven. It is an overwhelming experience for Isaiah, and you sense his struggle as he attempts to explain in human terms what he sees. But most of all, Isaiah is overwhelmed by God's holiness and his own sinfulness. Only a few people in the history of our world have been given such a glimpse of God as He is in heaven.

This vision of the majesty and glory of God is a good reminder that our God is a BIG God – beyond our comprehension. We must approach the task of studying him with humility and recognise that we will never really understand Him in all His greatness. Theology (*theo* – God, *logy* – study of) is an attempt to take all we find about God in the Bible and put it into some kind of order so that we can get our heads around it. But in the end, all such systems are only partially successful because God is so much bigger than any system we could ever come up with. Our minds just aren't big enough to do God justice. This is why every book I looked at approached the subject differently. We all try to describe God, but we all ultimately fail to do Him justice. At some point, we have to admit that no explanation can fully describe our God.

This could leave us with the feeling that God is so far above us, so different from us, that we can never come to know Him. But this would be wrong. As Paul says, "*Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for 'In him we live and move and have our being'*". One of the amazing things about God is that He has chosen to make himself available to us. He wants us to know Him. Not just to know facts about Him, but to know Him personally and even intimately. He is actively reaching out to us to reveal Himself to us and enable us to have a relationship with Him.

One of the first classes I had in Bible College – many years ago now! – was the study of God. In that class, we organised all the attributes and characteristics of God and learned some big theological terms which are used to describe Him. I suppose I came away with a larger vocabulary (!) but I don't think the class really changed me or my relationship with God very much. However, a few years later I read this book, "Knowing God" by James Packer. That was revolutionary.

At the beginning of the book he shares the following experience:

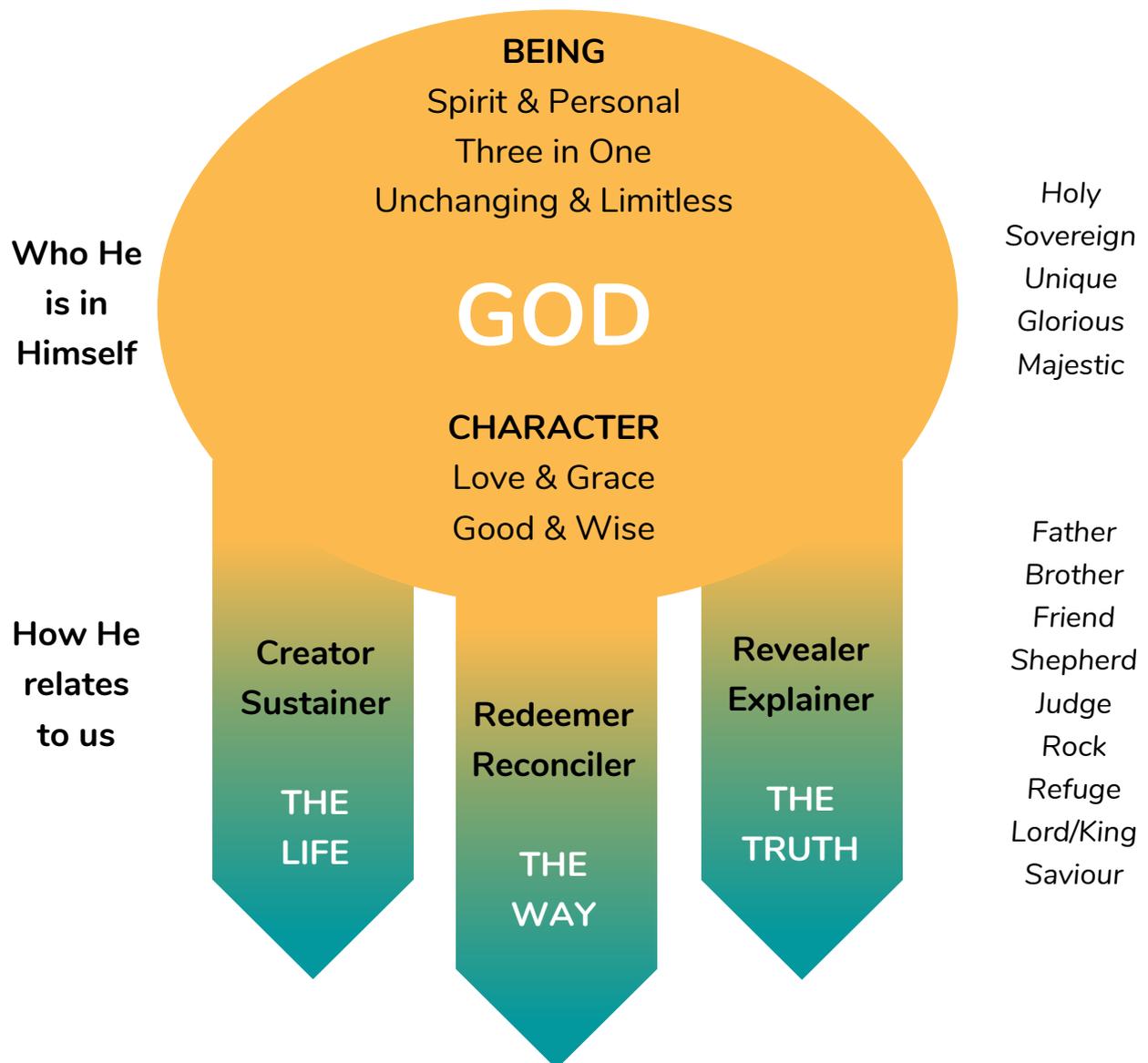
I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. "But it doesn't matter," he said at length, "for I have known God and they haven't." The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me, and set me thinking.

He goes on to sum up his thinking by saying, "A little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about Him" I had never really thought of it in that way and it began my journey to get to know God personally. My formal knowledge about God and his characteristics is helpful in this process, but it can never take the place of a growing relationship as I walk with God, day in and day out, through all life's ups and downs. This is what God desires more than academic expertise. This is why, as we look at God over the coming weeks, we won't use a lot of theological language or try to come up with a perfect system of describing God. They have their place, but what I pray we

discover is a stronger personal relationship with the God who created us, reveals Himself to us, redeems us and enables us to walk with Him in His world.

THE BIG PICTURE

So, we are not going to try to come up with a system which perfectly explains God. But we do need to organise our thoughts a bit. Because I am a visual person, I've come up with a diagram which will help to organise our thoughts over the coming weeks. It is not as comprehensive as I would like, and over the past couple of weeks, I've been constantly tweaking it as I read more and try to include more ideas or describe things better. It is far from perfect! But I hope it will help us to see how things fit together and where we are going.



First of all, we will look at who God is in himself. Before He created the world, these things have always been true about Him. There are two parts to this: His being or his form and His character. Under His Being are things like the fact He is a spirit (not a physical being) and a person (not just a

force, like the Force in Star Wars); he is three in one or a Trinity; he is unlimited and unchanging – he will always be the same and nothing limits His presence, his power, his knowledge, his existence. Under His Character we will see that He is love and grace; wise and good. All of these things together cause us to call Him Holy, Unique, Sovereign, Glorious and Majestic. This is what God is in Himself, for all eternity.

But then there is the way He acts towards us in time and space. This is the demonstration of who He is as it is revealed to us. First, he is our Creator and Sustainer. He caused our world to come into being and He keeps it going. We are totally dependent on Him for life. However, He is not distant and remote from us. He is a Revealer and Explainer, helping us to know Him and His ways. And finally, the most glorious roles He plays in our lives is that of Redeemer and Reconciler. When we as His creation turned our back on Him, He did not give up on us, but came after us and provided a way to restore our proper relationship with Him. As I looked at this, I realised it lined up with Jesus' statement, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*" (John 14:6). Because God is all these things in his actions towards us, we use a host of wonderful words to describe who he is to us: Father, Brother, Friend, Shepherd, Judge, Rock, Refuge, Lord/King, Saviour.

The study of God is a big topic! But I hope that as we break it down and look at one area at a time, it will not be too overwhelming. And in keeping with the desire to make it not just about knowledge, but also very relational, we will also be hearing from some of our other preachers in our church who will be sharing from their own experiences, their own relationship with God. This is so important because each person has a different relationship with God and as we hear from each other, our own relationship with God is expanded and enriched.

So What?

One of the things you have heard me ask often as I preach is "So what?". After we have learned God's truth, we need to ask ourselves what difference does it make to me and my life today? How does it change my thinking and actions? How does it engage my emotions and motivate my life?

As I was reading 'Knowing God' all those years ago, there was another idea which made me stop and think – a lot. Packer was talking about John 1:12,13 which says:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

One of the things that happens when we believe in Christ for our salvation, is that God makes us His children, a part of His family. He adopts us into His family. This results in many blessings to us, but it also brings responsibilities. Paul, in Ephesians 5:1 says, "*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.*". You've seen what this is talking about, haven't you? You've seen young children imitating their parents – in the way they walk or talk or in pretending to do things around the house that they have seen their parents do – cooking or cleaning or fixing things. We have a gorgeous picture of our son Ian when he was about 5 or 6 busily working on his tricycle the way he had seen Scott work on his bike. The important point which Packer made was that as God's children, we have a responsibility to display a family likeness; to study our God and then imitate Him. Who we are needs to be in line with or reflect who God is. Not reflect who He is in His being as spirit, trinity, etc, but who He is in His character and actions towards His world. We were made to be reflections or images of God. This has been marred by sin, but as we are redeemed and adopted into God's family, as we get to know God in all his love and grace, wisdom and goodness, we should begin to show a likeness to our Father in our own actions. We should begin to show a family likeness so that when people look at us, they see what God is like in some small way. But we can't imitate what we don't know. This is why we need to both know about God objectively and know Him personally,

relationally. It is through this that we will begin to show the family likeness as God intended when He made us.

The title of this series has three words and as we look at each, I think they are a good description of our journey over the coming months.

- **BEHOLD** – We will look at God intently and broadly – we want to come away with new understandings, a refreshed vision of who he is
- **OUR** – But we will seek to remember as we go along that we are ultimately talking about a God who wants to be in relationship with us. He will reveal himself to us as we search for him and it will not just strengthen our knowledge, but also our relationship with Him
- **GOD** – We will be focused on God in His being, His character and His actions. I pray that at the end, we will know Him better and walk with him closer so that others will see Him in us.