

H. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN MATURITY

When Moses ascended Mt. Sinai alone to intimately commune with God, we are told that, “the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.’ And Moses made haste to bow before the earth and worship” (Ex. 34:5-8). It appears that the attributes of God were so gloriously embodied before Moses’ eyes that they constrained him to quickly prostrate himself in worship before this theophany in a setting that was intensely private.

1. The primacy of the individual before God.

Now while the corporate adoration of God in the fellowship of the saints is of great encouragement to the Christian, yet it must be said that it is the individual and private encounter with God that is the most awesome and soul-enriching. To be alone with God forces us to throw away any pretense and come to grips with just how real is our faith and knowledge. Hence, having studied the attributes of God in some detail to this point, it is now suggested that nothing is so important as grappling with this truth alone in the depths of one’s soul. Of course the Christian is not alone, and his Savior has obtained for him a way of access to the Father calling for boldness. This was made possible, “¹¹ in accordance with the eternal purpose which He [God] carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him” (Eph. 3:11-12). Nevertheless, no Christian is to presume with regard to his newfound sonship, “for our God is [remains] a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29), even as He was for Moses (Deut. 4:23-24; 9:3), and Isaiah (Isa. 33:13-14). Therefore, with a sense of sober yet blissful anticipation, we ought to pursue God with such a singleness of purpose that He alone becomes the most serious and consuming interest of our life. We ought to so esteem and admire God, in this greatest of all quests, that we sing with Asaph: “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25-26). And the result will surely be that in this “aloneness” with God we will find heaven opened before our eyes.

a. The example of John Bunyan in solitude with God.

When John Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford jail for twelve years, he recounts that not only did his carnal weaknesses confront him, but also he had such intense blessings in that depressing and solitary place that they appeared to be

incomparably greater than those blessings enjoyed in liberty. He describes this experience in *Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners*:

So being again delivered up to the jailer's hands, I was had home to prison again, and there have lain now 'complete twelve years,' waiting to see what God would suffer these men to do with me. In which condition I have continued with much content, through grace, but have met with many turnings and goings upon my heart, both from the Lord, Satan, and my own corruptions. . . . I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now; those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before, are made in this place and state to shine upon me; Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen him and felt him indeed: O that word, We have not preached unto you cunningly devised fables (II Pet. 1:16); and that, God raised Christ from the dead, and gave him glory, that your faith and hope might be in God (I Pet. 1:21), were blessed words unto me in this my imprisoned condition. . . . I have been able to laugh at destruction, and to fear neither the horse nor his rider (Job 39:18). I have had sweet sights of the forgiveness of my sins in this place, and of my being with Jesus in another world. . . . I never knew what it was for God to stand by me at all turns, and at every offer of Satan 'to afflict me,' &c., as I have found him since I came in hither.⁹⁰

b. The example of the biblical saints in solitude with God.

What more shall we say then of Jacob wrestling alone with God at Peniel (Gen. 32:24), of Elijah alone in the wilderness of Beersheba confronted with God in, "a sound of gentle blowing [stillness]" (I Kings 19:2-14), of Paul isolated with God in Arabia (Gal. 1:17), of John the evangelist banished to Patmos, yet in fellowship with Christ (Rev. 1:9-18), of Jesus Christ alone in the garden of Gethsemane while his disciples slept, yet communing with His Father (Matt. 26:36-40),)? Only that we are not commending a mystical flight that beckons us to embark on the life of a silent recluse. Though while we take the overall pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ as our example, we should remember that he was frequently seeking to be alone in communion with his Father (Matt. 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12; John 6:15). For if God is really our Father, then the delight of His children will be to enjoy intimate fellowship with Him.

2. The priority of returning to God.

So we are calling for a vital, intimate, humbling encounter with, dare we say it in today's existential world, the definitive God of Holy Scripture, the God of propositional revelation who saves sinners out of this present evil age (Gal. 1:3-5), the only living God of Moses, Jacob, Elijah, Paul, and John. So Tozer cautions us.

But the God we must see is not the utilitarian God who is having such a run of popularity today, whose chief claim to men's attention is His ability to bring them

⁹⁰ Bunyan, *Works*, I, §§ 319-322, p. 47.

success in their various undertakings and who for that reason is being cajoled and flattered by everyone who wants a favor. The God we must learn to know is the Majesty in the heavens, God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the only wise God our Savior. He it is that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, who stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in, who bringeth out His starry host by number and calleth them all by name as vanity, who putteth no confidence in princes and asks no counsel of kings.⁹¹

a. The basis of revival.

While the plight of the Christian Church today is critical, and this is not to be forgetful of Jesus Christ's promise that, "the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18), yet if individual Christians will return to the primacy of the love of God, that is love towards God, by means of the constraint of gospel grace, then there will result not only a stemming of the tide of sterile, ineffectual religion, but also a contrary flood of holy, godly life that will astound a watching world. Surely the history of revivals has taught us that this is true. In Jonathan Edwards', *The Distinguishing Marks Of A Work Of The Spirit Of God*, which concerns his close observation of awakenings in eighteenth century New England, he concludes:

If the spirit that is at work among a people operates as a spirit of love of God and man, it is a sure sign that it is the Spirit of God. . . . When the spirit that is at work amongst the people brings many of them to high and exalting thoughts of the Divine Being, and his glorious perfections; and works in them an admiring, delightful sense of the excellency of Jesus Christ; representing him as the chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely, and makes him precious to the soul; winning and drawing the heart with those motives and incitements to love; . . . there is the highest kind of evidence of the influence of a true and divine spirit.⁹²

b. The basis of the great commandment.

Of course, in today's climate in which the language of belief is so often vague and plastic, the imperative of Jesus Christ, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37-38), needs careful explanation. Specifically, we are to exclusively love the only living God, who is the LORD, the God of Israel (Deut. 6:5), and no other. Where then shall we learn of this Hebrew God? First, in the Hebrew Scriptures, though subsequently in the New Testament. Why should we love the LORD as commanded? Because our accumulating knowledge of Him, both revealed and experiential, will constrain us to love Him. "For the love of Christ controls/constrains us" (II Cor. 5:14). What degree of devotion does this love call

⁹¹ Tozer, *Knowledge Of The Holy*, pp. 121-2.

⁹² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, II, p. 268.

for? Absolute and unqualified admiration that knows no rivals, and erupts as a fountain from the depths of our being with praise and obedience (Matt. 22:39). Thus, to love God as He requires is to know Him intimately, that is to know His attributes in such a way that we respond with the same passion and fervor as does David on numerous occasions: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; . . . O GOD, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Thus I have beheld Thee in the sanctuary, to see Thy power and Thy glory" (Ps. 42:1-2; 63:1-2).

c. The basis of every Christian concern.

In other words, Christians today have fallen away from the chief thing, and not merely some peripheral issue. With regard to biblical preaching, prayer, evangelism, justification by faith, Christian music, local church and individual maturity, we have, like the church at Ephesus in the midst of much legitimate activity, nevertheless neglected our first love. Therefore, the Lord Jesus calls upon this church of Asia Minor and us today, to turn our minds back to what is of primary importance, that is the worship and love of the triune God before all else: "I know your deeds and your toil and your perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent" (Rev. 2:2-5).

While this widespread decline in the precedence of God in all of our activities may not be so noticeable to many in this present man-centered generation, yet consider the mere nominal acknowledgement that the Almighty currently receives. Especially note the way we pray to God with quick patronage before getting down to our innumerable affairs and needs. Or recall our conversation in Christian fellowship that is so often light-hearted, lacking in seriousness, reverence and awe. Then think about our contemporary church music that is more concerned with a subjective, titillating sensuality rather than the objective glories of our Father in heaven. But further, look at our feverish activism by which we deceive ourselves into thinking that this exertion is an acceptable substitute for the quiet pursuit of God in the study of His Word. J. I. Packer gives us further illustrations of our diversion from the supreme issue of life as follows:

From current Christian publications you might think that the most vital issue for any real or would-be Christian in the world today is church union, or social witness, or dialogue with other Christians and other faiths, or refuting this or that -ism, or developing a Christian philosophy and culture, or what have you. But our line of study [concerning the attributes of God] makes the present-day

concentration on these things look like a gigantic conspiracy of misdirection. Of course, it is not that; the issues themselves are real and must be dealt with in their place. But it is tragic that, in paying attention to them, so many in our day seem to have been distracted from what was, is, and always will be the true priority for every human being—that is, learning to know God in Christ. ‘Thou hast said, ‘Seek ye my face.’ My heart says to Thee, ‘Thy face, Lord, do I seek’ (Psalm 27:8, RSV).⁹³

3. The primacy of God Himself.

When you study the Bible carefully with regard to the character of God, you wonder how we could possibly be distracted from something so incontestably foundational. But further when you plunge into the depths of His attributes, you wonder how anything else so soul-possession could be a rival for man’s attention. After all, if God be God, then nothing but nothing could be more important for man than, “the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy” (Is. 57:15). Henceforth, let us be more consecrated in our contemplation of the truth about God, more eager in our growing relationship with the person of God, and more spiritually fervent in our desire to worship, praise, and obediently serve God, for, “the people who know their God will display strength and take action” (Dan. 11:32).

O Lord, close to Thee we would cleave,
 And rest on Thy promise alone,
 Thy righteousness only receive,
 And never place trust in our own.

For Thou art our Shepherd divine,
 Whose word on our hearts we shall keep—
 ‘This flock has the Father made Mine;
 I lay down My life for My sheep.’

This God is the God we adore,
 Our faithful, unchangeable Friend!
 Whose love is as great as His power,
 And knows neither measure nor end!

’Tis Jesus, the First and the Last,
 Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
 We’ll praise Him for all that is past,
 And trust Him for all that’s to come.

Joseph Hart, 1712-68

⁹³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 254.

THE CHRISTIAN MONOTHEISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

"4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (I Cor. 8:4-6).

Here the Apostle Paul emphatically declares the exclusive nature of the God whose gospel he proclaims (Rom. 1:1; 15:16). In v. 4 he declares the monotheism of the revealed Hebrew faith upon which doctrine of God he remains grounded. In v. 5 he disclaims the polytheism of the Greek and Roman world in which he lives. Then in v. 6 he expands upon Christian monotheism in terms of its inclusion of "one Lord Jesus Christ" who mediates the existence of all things including ourselves as the Logos (John 1:1-3). So B. B. Warfield comments:

By as much as it is certain that he [Paul] did not intend to represent the Christians themselves as polytheists, worshipping, like the rest, deity in grades, but in contrast with all polytheists, as worshippers of but one Deity, it is clear that he did not intend to assign to Christ the position of one secondary deity. Obviously to him the "one God the Father" and "the one Lord Jesus Christ" were in some high and true sense alike included in that one God who alone is recognized as existing.⁹⁴

The specificity of Paul utterly does away with all abstract talk today concerning an ill-defined God. He is the God alone of Genesis, the only true and living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This same God the apostles confessed. He is the unique God who Paul distinguished at Mars Hill as the sole God of all creation (Acts 17:22-31, distinct from the multitude of gods that surrounded him in the idolatrous city of Athens.

The need of the hour is the clear and specific proclamation of this only true and living God, the glory of His person and works. ¹ Oh give thanks to the LORD, call upon His name; make known His deeds among the peoples. ² Sing to Him, sing praises to Him; speak of all His wonders. ³ Glory in His holy name; let the heart of those who seek the LORD be glad. ⁴ Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face continually."

⁹⁴ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, p.229. Cf. Charles Hodge, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 142-145.

