

Understanding God

I often tell the saints I preach to that “God has never told us to **understand** Him; He has told us to **trust** Him.” The fact is that it is impossible to fully understand God and His ways because He is infinite and we are creatures and finite. We are much more limited in our understanding than we probably realize. God tells us in Isaiah 55:8-9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

In some of the most majestic language in the Bible the apostle Paul writes in Romans 11:33-36, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

We are limited in our knowledge. God is not. He is **omniscient**. He thoroughly knows the past, the present, and the future. Not only does He have a complete knowledge of outward events; He also knows what goes on in secret. He reads every mind and knows what the thoughts, intentions and motivations of all people are. He knows when people say one thing but they mean another as they attempt to deceive. We are limited in our span of time on earth. We live a very short period of time compared to history. God is **eternal**. He has always existed. He made Job keenly aware of this when He asked him in Job 38:2-4, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding."

We are limited to being in only one place at a time. There are many places on this earth where we will never have the opportunity to visit. This is not true of God. He is **omnipresent**.

We could go on and on but the point has been made: We are greatly limited. God is not limited at all. Therefore, we need to be very careful when we question Him. There is much more that we do not know than we do know.

Some Things We Do Know

God has graciously revealed many things about Himself. He was not obligated to do this. He is the Creator and all human beings are mere creatures. He could have made us and left us totally ignorant, but He did not do so. There are some things that He has revealed about Himself that all human beings, saved and unsaved, should be able to plainly see. One way He has revealed some of Himself is through His creation. We read in Psalms 19:1-3, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard."

This natural revelation is so plain that Paul tells us that there is absolutely no excuse to deny that there is a God and that He is incredibly wise and powerful. He wrote of this in Romans 1:18-20,

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse..." The word translated "hold" here is *katecho* and means to "hold down or suppress."

As great as natural revelation is, God has chosen to graciously reveal much more of Himself and His doings in the Word of God. The Bible tells us things about God that we could not learn from nature. We have no idea how grateful we should be that God has given us the inspired word which is "a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." (Ps. 119: 105). Without the Bible we would be shut up to ignorant speculations about the being and nature of God and would know no more than the pagans with their worship of idols. The Bible tells us much about God. Just for a sample we learn of Him in Psalms 103:8-14, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."

The ultimate revelation of God is in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is written of Him in Hebrews 1:1-3, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high..." Christ is here said to be "the express image" of God. Christ is also said to be God "manifest in the flesh." (1 Tim. 3: 16). If we want to know something about God, we should look at Jesus Christ. For example we can see something of His infinite compassion when He wept out of sympathy at the tomb of Lazarus. (John 11: 35).

Walking by Faith

What all this means is that we must walk by faith. We have to first have faith or we cannot walk by it. Faith is a sovereign gift of God, given when we are born from above. (Eph. 2: 8, 9). Faith functions as eyes of the soul. Faith gives us the ability to believe the promises of God given in the Bible. Faith acts as a set of eye glasses from which we view and interpret the world and the events of our lives. Speaking of the fact that the saints in the future will be glorified, even though we do not see that now, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:7, "(For we walk by faith, not by sight)."

Questioning God

Does all this mean that we cannot question God? When things happen that mystify and dismay us are we simply to adopt a stoical attitude, “tough it out” and not ask any questions? Being stoical means to be indifferent to joy, grief, pleasure, or pain. The answer to this question is a resounding “no!” God is not indifferent to our joy or grief. He also does not want us to be indifferent to the grief and joy of others. He has plainly told us in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.” God is a caring God, much more so than we can comprehend. He has told us to be “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” (1 Peter 5:7).

The key to questioning God is the **attitude** in which we do it. Some people are belligerent and irreverent as they “call God into question.” They have certain standards that they think God must meet, and if He does not do so they will either disbelieve in Him or will despise Him. This is dangerous business indeed. In fact it is good to question God and ourselves when things go badly for us. Are we being chastised for some particular sin? Are we displeasing God in some way that we are not aware of? Is God correcting us for some defect in our attitude or behavior? These are legitimate questions that must be considered.

However, it is also possible to carry such questioning too far. Satan would like to throw us into despair. God is a God of great mercy. If anyone of us got what he or she deserved, we would have been destroyed long ago. Not everything unpleasant that happens to us is a direct result of some specific sin. That is the mistake that Job’s self-righteous friends made when they accused Job of some secret sin in his life being the cause of his troubles. God strongly rebuked them for this kind of thinking.

In Job’s situation God was showing Satan how strong the God-given faith of a child of God is. Satan thought that Job would curse God, but he did not. It is true that Job cursed the day of his birth, but he did not curse God.

Proper Principles and Attitudes

When we are undergoing severe trials there are several things we must remember. One is that God is good, merciful, forgiving, and caring. This is made so very plain in Romans 8:32, “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” God has abundantly proved His infinite love for His children in giving His own beloved Son for them to die the cruel death of the cross. Every blessing beside that is just “gravy” as the expression goes. We may not understand God, but we can unconditionally trust Him.

We must also remember that God does not operate capriciously. This means that He does not do things erratically or without a reason. When He does something in our lives, or allows something to happen in our lives, there is a reason He has done so. We do not live in a fearful world guided by chance, fate, luck, or fortune as the pagans thought. He has numbered the hairs of our head and not a sparrow falls without our Father. This does not make God the Author of sin. He has

plainly told us in James 1:13, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man..." However, it is good to know that God can and does overrule sin for our good and His own glory. This is another thing we do not presently fully understand. Some people have twisted and abused this truth. Paul wrote of them in Romans 6:1-2, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"

Another thing we must remember is that God does everything for His own glory. That is a question we must settle in our own hearts. Are we willing to glorify God in any way He wants us to? Paul had reached this lofty height of attitude when he wrote in Philippians 1:20, "According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death." If Paul lived he wanted to glorify God in his life. If he could better glorify God by dying the death of a martyr he was willing to do that. If he had good health, he wanted to use it to God's glory. If he were infirm he wanted to glorify God in that condition.

Yes, God does everything for His own glory. He is glorified in the salvation of the elect as well as in the damnation of the ungodly. (See Rom. 9: 22, 23).

Some Partial Explanations

Having said all the above let us now examine some of the reasons God allows His children to suffer. One reason is for the development of their character. There are certain Christian graces that will not develop in the absence of difficulty and suffering. See, e. g., 2 Cor. 12: 9, 10; James 1: 2-4; Rom. 5: 3-5.

Suffering tends to purge us from our sins. When we really hurt, sin does not seem so attractive to us. See Ps. 119: 67, 71; Heb. 12: 5-14; 1 Pet. 4: 1-4.

Suffering weans us away from this sinful world and causes us to long for heaven. See Rom. 8: 14-18; 1 Pet. 1: 6, 7; 4: 12, 13.

We glorify God in our sufferings. See Phil. 1: 20; John 21: 19.

We can better sympathize with those who are suffering when we ourselves have suffered. See 2 Cor. 1: 3, 4; James 5: 10, 11.

Our Great High Priest

Let us never forget that one of the reasons Jesus took human nature was so that He could fully, from an experiential standpoint, understand and sympathize with us in our sufferings. This is a glorious truth and we must lay hold on it when we are being sorely tried. This great truth is plainly taught in Hebrews 2:14-18, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were

all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted." This truth enables us to persevere in the face of incredible troubles. We read in Hebrews 4:14-16, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

Trust Him

We began by saying that we must trust God, rather than completely understand Him. We close with the same thought. We will never have all our questions answered in this present life. Many learned and devout Bible scholars have tried to answer some of these questions. It is right that we try to do so. It is also right to recognize our limitations and to know when to go a little slower on the asking and speed up on the trusting.

We close with a quotation from William Jeyes Styles, a minister of the Strict and Particular Baptists of England. He was a very learned and clear writer and we quote from his *A Manual of Faith and Practice*, written in the late 1800s. He, like all serious-minded believers, wrestled with questions such as the ones we have been considering. He had many answers, but was honest enough to admit that he did not have all the answers.

Every scheme of Divinity must admit the existence of mysteries, which no ingenuity of explanation can remove. The introduction of moral evil, and its dire results confront all who give attention to Theology, whatever may be the sentiments they are led to adopt. These difficulties we neither deny nor seek to explain. We admit their existence, and confess our present inability to cope with them. We, however, leave them with God, considering them to be necessarily enshrouded in the mystery that must ever attach to the doings of an inscrutable Being of infinite goodness and wisdom.

May God bless each of us to have the same attitude as this good man. May we be able to say from our hearts, "Dear God, we do not understand all your ways. We do not always understand our present situation. However, we know that you are always good and you are always wise.