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A PLACE to Begin

SUPPOSE I SAY TO YOU, “Define God in twenty words or less.” And I give you thirty seconds to do it. What would you say? Could you do it? Does it seem unfair? Suppose I give you 200,000 words and thirty years. Would it be any easier? And would you come any closer to the truth?

Since God is the ultimate source of all reality, we can’t really “define” Him. But we can say this: *Knowing God is the most important thing in life.* If you live thirty or forty or fifty or sixty or seventy or eighty years and you don’t know God, then it doesn’t matter what else you have done with your life. If you don’t know God, you have missed the very reason

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for your existence. When we put God at the center of all things, then everything else finds its proper place. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Proverbs 9:10). If you want wisdom, know God! If you want knowledge, seek the Lord!

If you miss out on knowing God, you have missed the central reality of the universe. Compared to knowing the One who made you, everything else is just crumbs and nibbling around the edges.

Our Need— To Know the God Who Made Us

We were made to know God, and something inside every one of us desperately wants to know Him. We are incurably religious by nature. That’s why every human society—no matter how primitive—has some concept of a higher power, some vision of a reality that goes beyond the natural. On one level, that explains why science has not eliminated religion from the earth. Science can never do that because technological achievement can’t meet the deepest needs of the human heart.

We want to know the answers to the three most basic questions of life: Where did I come

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from? Why am I here? Where am I going? And we will spend money, buy books, watch videos, attend seminars, search the Internet, and travel great distances to find the answers. A book claiming to report one woman's after-death visit to heaven climbed to the top of the best-seller list. There are even TV programs featuring mediums who claim to be able to contact dead family members. People are hungry for spiritual truth, and they will reach for anyone or anything that claims to give them an answer.

It is the same in every country and every culture. On the surface we are very different in our appearance, background, language, and customs. But dig a little deeper and you discover that basically, we are all the same. Look beneath the surface and you discover no real difference between a person born in poverty in Haiti and a corporate lawyer on Wall Street; or between a schoolteacher in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and a computer scientist in Singapore. Everywhere we are the same—with the same longings, regrets, dreams, and hopes; with the same need to love and be loved; with the same desire to be remembered after we die; and with the same sense that there must be a God of some kind who made us.

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We were made to know God, and we need to know Him. God designed us so that we would want to know Him—and then He guaranteed we wouldn't be happy unless He Himself fills the emptiness within. This brings us face-to-face with the famous statement that there is a "God-shaped vacuum" inside each person. We can turn to God, or we can fill the vacuum with idols of our own making or the evil spirits of our ancestors. Something in us drives us to seek ultimate meaning. That "something" is put there by God. Augustine, an ancient Christian theologian, gave us this frequently heard prayer: "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."

God's Desire— That We Should Know Him

The whole Bible demonstrates that God wants us to know Him. In a sense, that is the theme of the Bible—how God loved us, how we rebelled against Him, and how God set about rescuing people who had turned against Him. The story is clear enough. God sent prophets, priests, and messengers of various sorts. He sent His messages in writing. But we (all the people on earth) didn't want anything

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to do with God. So we ignored His message and sometimes killed His messengers. Then He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, the ultimate expression of His love. And we killed Him, too. But through His death God made a way for each and every one of us to be forgiven.

Let's go back to the very beginning of the story for a moment. When God first created the world, He created Adam and Eve and made them "in his image" and "after his likeness." "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). These simple phrases are full of meaning for us. We were made in God's image, which means there is something in us that corresponds to who God is. You and I were designed to know God personally. Dogs don't pray, birds don't worship, fish don't praise—but we do. Why? Because there is an awareness of God inside every human heart. It is this "God-consciousness" that makes us want to know God and makes us eager to find out why we exist.

Father Hunger

But there's another part of the story. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, that image of God within each of us

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has been distorted by sin. I picture a piece of paper with the words GOD'S IMAGE in huge letters. Before Adam and Eve sinned, that paper was clean and smooth. Now for all of us that paper is crumpled, dirty, and torn. But it is never completely destroyed. Despite all our failures, we still want to know God, and we still want to find meaning in life but just don't know where to look.

To use a very modern phrase, we are left with a kind of "Father hunger." That's a phrase used to describe children growing up in a family without a strong and loving father figure. He may have died or he may have abandoned his family. Or perhaps he was so busy he had no time for his family. Because he barely knows his children, they compete desperately for his little scraps of love and approval. Children growing up in a home like this desperately want a father, and sometimes they will look for someone (or something) to fill that void.

On a much larger scale, that's the story of all humanity. We were made to know God and we want to know Him, but our sin has separated us from God. As a result, we are left with a deep "Father hunger" that won't go away.

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Our Search—
in All the Wrong Places

So what do we do? We look for love in all the wrong places. We can illustrate this using a pen and a piece of paper. Draw a cliff on the right side of the paper and label it “God.” On the left side draw another cliff and label it “Us.” Label the gap in between with the word “Sin.” That’s the problem we all face. We’re on one side, God is on the other, and our sin stands between God and us. Something deep inside tells us we belong on the other side with the God who made us. So we set out to build bridges across the great chasm.

Now draw lines that start on the “Us” side and move toward the “God” side, ending each line somewhere in-between the two cliffs. Each line represents a human “bridge” we build in our attempts to find our way back to God. One bridge is labeled “Money,” another “Education,” another “Good works,” another “Sex,” another “Power,” another “Science,” another “Success,” another “Approval,” another “Relationships,” and another “Religion.” You can make as many bridges as you like, but they never seem to reach the other side. Each one ends somewhere in the middle, illustrating the truth that you can never find God by starting

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where you are. No matter which road you take, you fall into the great chasm and end up being broken on the jagged rocks of reality.

That's what I mean by searching in all the wrong places. Nothing in this world can satisfy our longing because nothing in this world can lead us back to God. The answer we need must come from outside this world.

Three thousand years ago, a wise man named Solomon went on a search to find the key to the meaning of life. He recorded his findings in a book of the Bible called Ecclesiastes. In the first two chapters he tells about his grand experiment. He built buildings, planted vast gardens, tried the party scene, and built up a vast fortune. He gathered books and a great deal of human knowledge. Anything he wanted, he got for himself. Nothing was held back. He tried anything and everything in his search for meaning.

He reported his finding in three terse words: **"I hated life"** (Ecclesiastes 2:17). When nothing satisfies, when you've truly tried it all, when you can say with calm assurance, "Been there, done that" and you still feel the emptiness within, what do you do then? Solomon's conclusion could stand as an epitaph for every generation.

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Here is our problem in a nutshell. We were made by God to know God. There is a “God-shaped vacuum” inside each person that causes us to seek after the One who made us. Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God “has put eternity in their hearts.” Because we search in all the wrong places, we can never find Him. Our eternal longing for God is not fulfilled.

God’s Solution— He Has Made Himself Known

In the end we are left with this great truth: We can never know God unless He reveals Himself to us. Try as we might we always end up in the darkness, seeking a God we know is there but cannot seem to find. But God has not left us to live in darkness forever. He has revealed Himself in four primary ways:

- A. In creation—Everyone sees this.
- B. In the human conscience—Everyone has this.
- C. In His written Word, the Bible—Not everyone knows this.
- D. In His Son, Jesus Christ—Not everyone understands this.

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The last revelation is the most important. Jesus is “God incarnate,” that is, God clothed with human flesh. When Jesus walked on the earth, He was the God-man, fully God and fully man at the same time. Jesus is the supreme revelation of God. Jesus said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is the key to knowing God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

Some Facts about God

The Bible says a great deal about who God is and how He has revealed Himself. Here are six facts about God you need to know:

1. *He eternally exists in three persons*

The truth about God begins with the fact that He always exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we say that, we mean that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but they are not three gods but only one God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father, but each is God individually and yet they are together the one true God of the Bible. This is called the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Someone asked American statesman

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Daniel Webster, “How can a man of your intellect believe in the Trinity?” “I do not pretend fully to understand the arithmetic of heaven now,” he replied. That’s a good phrase—the arithmetic of heaven.

The Trinity should cause us to bow in humility before a God who is greater than our minds could ever comprehend. We have a God who has provided everything necessary for our salvation. When we were lost in sin, our God acted in every person of His being to save us. The Father gave the Son, the Son offered Himself on the cross, and the Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus.

2. He is the Sovereign Lord

To call God “sovereign” means that He is the Ultimate Ruler of the universe. There is no one higher than He is. He answers to no one but everyone must one day answer to him. God is the purest, simplest, most basic being in the universe. He is a personal God—not an impersonal force. Because He is infinite, He is not subject to time, corruption, or decay. Because He is eternal, He is always present everywhere in the universe. He is the “unmoved mover,” “the uncaused first cause,”

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and the source of all that is. He is the power behind all other power.

His character is unchanging—and therefore entirely dependable. What He says, He will do. Because He has the only truly “free will” in the universe, He does whatever He pleases, yet He never acts in an arbitrary fashion, but only in conformity with His own perfect character. “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Psalm 115:3).

God is holy, which means He is utterly pure, free from all evil, totally without blame or error. Holiness is what makes God God. He never lowers His standards, never compromises, and makes no “deals.” All that He does is right, just, and good. “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just” (Deuteronomy 32:4). There is no falsehood in Him or from Him. He makes the rules, and no one can object. He Himself is the final standard of right and wrong. Therefore, everything He says about you and me is true.

3. He created all things

God designed everything that is; He initiated creation and personally brought all things into being. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The uni-

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verse did not happen by chance, accident, or by the random collision of cells. It is not the product of random evolution. God spoke and the universe came into being. He is so powerful that He is the source of all things—living and nonliving. All things were made by Him, and all things exist at this moment by His powerful word (Hebrews 11:3). This means that He personally created you, that you were put on this earth for a reason, and that the highest purpose of your life is to know the God who made you. Think about that for a moment. The God who can create anything—created you! And He wants you to know Him personally.

4. He made you in His image

You were made to know God. Something in you truly wants to know the God who created you. That desire may be hidden deep within, or you may feel it burning inside you at this moment. Perhaps you have tried to cover it up or to satisfy your longings with the things of this world. But that doesn't work. You were made with desires that nothing in this world can satisfy. Only God can fill the hole in your heart. Only God can love you the way you long to be loved.

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5. *He knows all about you*

Theologians call this “omniscience,” which simply means that God knows everything—the past, the present, and the future. He is never caught by surprise by anything that happens anywhere in the universe. Nothing is hidden from Him. That includes your secret thoughts, your dreams, and your unfulfilled desires. He knows your words before you speak them and your thoughts before you think them. “Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord” (Psalm 139:4). He knows where you were last night and who you were with. He knows the whole story of your life—the good, the bad, and the ugly. What about those secret things that no one else knows about? He knows them all, and He knows them completely.

6. *He cares about you*

The Bible tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:16). He is perfect, infinite, unconditional love. His love is freely given. It is not a reward for good behavior because no one can ever “earn” God’s love. The greatest gifts in life are the ones we don’t deserve. No gift could be greater than the love of God. The Bible declares that God loves the unlovely. We

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shook our fists at God and sinned against Him. The amazing news is that God even loves His enemies (Romans 5:6–8). While we were sinners, God demonstrated His love by sending His Son to the earth to die for us.

We need to know a God who loves us like that. To miss knowing this God is to miss the central truth of the universe. It's like visiting Rome and seeing everything but St. Peter's Square. It's like traveling to Washington, D.C., and seeing everything but the White House. It's like going to Paris and seeing everything but the Eiffel Tower. Or it's like going to the Super Bowl and watching everything but the football game.

The Only Thing that Matters Is God

Let's wrap up this chapter with a story about a young man I knew who was only twenty-six years old when he died. Although he grew up in a Christian home, during his teens and early twenties he went through a period of rebellion and spiritual searching. His life changed when the doctors discovered a brain tumor. Surgery brought a brief remission, but then the cancer returned.

As the months passed, his faith increased

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even as his physical condition worsened. He began to seek the Lord as never before. The Word of God became sweet to him. He became very bold in sharing what God had done in his life, especially to his many friends. He asked God to use him to reach others so that he could point people to Christ, no matter how long he lived.

During the funeral, his younger sister talked about how much she loved him, how as a young girl she wanted to be like him, and how annoying he could be at times. Then the cancer came. She saw a difference so profound that it changed everything. Her brother had figured out what life is all about. Then she said this sentence: *Life is nothing without God*. He had shown her that it doesn't matter how long you live or how much money you have or even how well you do in your career. His faith at the end spoke one simple message: Life is nothing without God. She marveled that someone so young—her brother—had figured out the meaning of life. And she thanked him for leaving her with that all-important truth: Life is nothing without God.

When I stood up to deliver the message a few minutes later, I didn't have to say very much. I simply repeated what she said one

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more time: Life is nothing without God.

I then made this application. If you live for eighty years but don't discover that truth, you've missed the very reason for your own existence. If you should earn a million dollars—or \$10 million—and have hundreds of friends and the praise of your closest friends, if you have all that but don't figure out this basic truth, you're still in spiritual kindergarten.

Have you discovered what life is all about? Life is nothing without God. Everything else is just details. Knowing the God who made you is the most important thing in life. It gives meaning and purpose to everything else. If you don't know God, nothing else matters.

So the question we need to ask is this: Do you know God, and if you don't, would you like to know Him? The good news is, you can know Him. But before we can get to the good news, we have to face the bad news. And that's what the next chapter is all about.

A TRUTH TO REMEMBER

If you live for eighty years but don't know the God who created you, you've missed the very reason for your own existence.

Going Deeper

Which of the following best describes where you are on your spiritual journey right now?

- Seeker
- Honest Doubter
- Frustrated Skeptic
- True Believer
- Casual Onlooker
- Spiritual but Not Religious
- Former Believer
- Mostly Confused
- Hopelessly Lost

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Read Jeremiah 29:11. What does this verse tell us about the importance of seeking God?

Which is harder for you to believe—that God loves you and wants a relationship with you or that God will someday judge you because of your sins?

What do these Old Testament passages tell us about who God is?

Exodus 34:5-7

Psalms 103:8-13

Isaiah 6:1-3

Daniel 4:34-37