

Knowing God #1

by: Ronald L. Dart

If I only had a short time to tell someone about God, what should I tell him? What is the most important thing to know about God? In a way, we may think that we don't know much about God, that God is ineffable, He's this great mystical secret being that we only have the faintest idea of. But you know, I found that when I had to answer this question, and I had to choose among the things that I know about God, I found that I know a great deal about God that is really quite important to know.

Now if you think very long about this, you're liable to find that some of the things you think you know about God, are contradictory and it is not long,, when you are in a discussion with someone that you start finding some of these things out, that some people think this thing about God, other people think something else about God, and often these things are contradictory.

There Are Things We Can Know About God

Now it's possible that we've taken a wrong turn someplace. We've developed an idea of God that is too complex, that allows contradictions to enter in, and that led me, as I was thinking about this, to a very important principle in the Bible. It is in Deuteronomy 29 verse 29, it says this very simply, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." Now what does that say? It says there are things we can know about God, and there are things that are unknowable for us, secret things that belong to Him. It's only the things that are revealed that belong to us.

So naturally, as human beings with inquiring minds, we busy ourselves about the secret things and we create dogma around our ideas of the secret things, and based upon our dogma, we decide who is a Christian and who is not and we are doing this on the basis of things we cannot possibly know for sure. It was Paul writing to the Romans in chapter 11 verse 33 who said, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! {34} For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has been his counselor?" You know, what this says to me is, that a little humility might be helpful as we try to answer this question.

I Am the Lord who Exercises Loving-kindness, Judgment, and Righteousness

Now one thing, also that is important to know, there is an answer to this question. Jeremiah in his ninth chapter verses 23 and 24 sites, straight from the mouth of God, this little passage,

"Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: {24} But let him that glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." And here we have it right from the mouth of God Himself. God Himself says that the important things to know about Him are the things that have to do with His character, His loving-kindness, His judgment and His righteousness. God exercises these things.

These are not merely the things that God is, these are the things that God does. Note the word, He exercises loving-kindness in the earth. You know this is really a lot to know about God. Loving-kindness implies an affectionate person. Judgment, a wise person who is firm. Righteousness implies a person who has standards and the existence of standards suggests that He is not whimsical, that He can be depended on to be constant. Now this is something that's very important to know about God.

If a person can come to understand and believe these simple things about God, a lot of bad ideas will never gain a foothold with him. If you think about it, here is something you can depend on. Here is something you can take to the bank, as the old saying goes, and once you have this banked, if someone comes along in the area of things we can't know for sure, with theories about God, about ideas about the God that we can't see and can't ever really know, and there's something different from what you do know, you don't have to listen to that. You don't have to be disturbed by it.

God Changes Not

For example, if someone comes along and argues that God did away with the law and what he is saying is. "Well, Yes, God has standards, but He'll change those standards if it suits Him to change them. Their arguments about the covenants of the Bible suggests that God having made a deal with you, would go back on the deal. But the fact of the matter is, you have to understand God is constant. He doesn't change (Hebrews 13:8, 1:12).

Some people believe that God will stop loving them when they have made a mistake and they take it when God chastises them as rejection not correction. Along comes God and He gives you a smack across the backside and says "Square up fellow," and instead of saying, "Hey God loves me and God has not stop loving me because I made this mistake," they think that God has rejected me, and there is no hope for me, but you see that's because we are not sticking to the basics of the things we can know about God.

We Can Know and Understand God

Now back to my question, if you only had a short time to tell someone about God, of all the things you know about God, what would you tell him? Well, I think that Jeremiah has made a real good start.

"Let him that glories in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, which exercise lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth, and in these things I delight" (Jeremiah 9:24). God Himself reveals something also very important here. He reveals that it is possible, both to know Him and to understand Him. If it weren't for this one verse in the Bible, I think in some ways I might despair a little bit about whether or not I can really know God or whether I could even trust any understanding of God at all, but I know I can. I really can, because a man can glory in the fact that he understands and knows God.

Someone once said, speaking of the Western man, compared to the Eastern thought, that the Western mind explains everything and understands nothing. I think that there is a lot of truth in that. We spend way too much time explaining things, many things that we really don't know, and much less time than we should in understanding. So God says it's possible to know Him and to understand Him. And this in spite of all the mysteries surrounding God, and we all know that those mysteries exist. So a person has to ask himself, what is it you want to know? Do I want to speculate about the unknowable? Or am I prepared to understand what can be known?

Fundamentals of the Character of God

The things that are revealed to us are the fundamentals of the character of God. If you can nail these down, you can safely conclude that anything that seems to contradict these basics has to be a misunderstanding somewhere, something you can resolve later.

These are the things you can know and you can understand. So, since I only have a short time to tell someone about God, I have to decide what is the most important thing?

God Has Loving-kindness

Here is what God says is important to know. "I am the Lord, who exercises loving-kindness" (Jeremiah 9:24). This raises the question, is there a difference between kindness and loving-kindness? The New International Version, and the King James translators struggled with the Hebrew word that comes out loving-kindness. The NIV translates the word in some places as 'love' and other places as 'kindness'. The King James version translates the word 'mercy' in some places and 'loving-kindness' in others, but the fact is, the Hebrew word means not just kindness, it means loving kindness, and I think that's an important thing to know about God. I suppose, it's the difference from the kind of kindness you may show to a stranger and the kindness you would show to someone you really cared for.

Men Who Encountered God

In history, there have been men who encountered God, men who knew Him, men who interacted with Him, men who understood Him, and they have told us their story in numerous places in a book we call the Bible.

One of these was a man named Lot. Lot had the misfortune or the lack of judgment, we will leave it to God to say which, to live in a city called Sodom. After he escaped the city, he describes the actions of God in getting him out of Sodom as 'loving-kindness'. The King James version translates it 'mercy', but it's the same word, it was God's 'loving-kindness' toward Lot that got him and his kids out of Sodom. Now the story about this is so revealing about the 'loving-kindness' of God, that it really deserves special attention.

Lot's uncle was a wealthy man, named Abraham, and if you are a reader of the Bible that name resonates immediately. He is one of the great characters of the Bible and a man who is called 'the friend of God.' Now that's fascinating all by itself, because it reveals the simple fact that God has friends. Now I know in a way that sounds silly to say that that's important, but I daresay there are a lot of people who would never think of themselves as a friend of God or God is a friend of theirs. God's up there and I'm down here. God's awesome. He's great. He's all-powerful or they believe that He is everywhere, in every blade of grass and to think in terms of God as a friend, as somebody who might come by your house and sit down, have a cup of coffee and talk things over with you, never crosses most people's minds.

Abraham Was a Friend of God

Now you can pick up the story in the 18th chapter of the book of Genesis, "The Lord appeared to Abraham in the plains where he lived and he, Abraham, was sitting in the door of his tent in the heat of the day {2} And he lifted up his eyes and he looked and there were three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran over to meet them from the tent door and bowed himself to the ground." Now it will turn out in the story that these three men were actually, two of what we would call Angels (Genesis 19:1), and a third who just happened to be God himself (Genesis 18:1). It's a truly strange encounter until you begin to understand that there was a relationship that existed here. God and Abraham were friends and God on his way to do, and look into a most distasteful circumstance, said to the two angels, "I want to stop by and speak to Abraham on the way."

Well, Abraham went out to them and he said to them, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. {4} Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest yourselves under this tree. {5} I will fetch a morsel of bread," and we can have a meal and after that you can pass on, because I have a feeling that's why you've come here. "And they said, "Very well, do as you say."

God Enjoys Eating with His Friends

So Abraham goes and gets his wife, sends a man out into the herds and prepares a meal with butter, milk and veal and sets it before these three men, who happen to be Angels and God himself. Now this is a little hard to get your mind around it. But God ate a meal, He enjoyed it, washed His feet. All of those good things.

Now there are a lot of things, a lot of by-plays in this passage, all of which are very revealing as to the kind of (God) person we're talking about, and that's why I'm taking the time to develop this because after all, I don't have a lot of time, and I want you to understand and know something very important about God. One of them is, God enjoys eating with his friends.

Sarah Laughed

Well while God is there, He says to Abraham, in Genesis 18 verse 9, "Where is Sarah? Abraham said, "She is back in the tent." {10} God said, "I will surely come back to you again, according to the time of life, and Sarah your wife, when I come back, will have a son." Now Sarah was standing in the tent door behind them {11} Abraham and Sarah were both old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was way past the age of childbearing. {12} And when Sarah heard this she laughed within herself (not out loud, she just quietly laughed) saying to herself, "Oh, big deal, after I've grown old. I'm going to have pleasure with my husband, being old also." They apparently had stopped having sex and she is going to have a baby?

"And the Lord said to Abraham, {13} Why did Sarah laugh saying, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" "Why did Sarah laugh? {14} Do you think that anything is too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time, according to the time of life and Sarah will have a boy," {15} And Sarah then denied it, saying, "I did not laugh" because she was afraid, but the Lord said, "Oh, You did laugh." And God was going to have the last laugh because she was going to have a child in her old age.

I read this story and I think God enjoyed this little encounter. Instead of getting mad because He made a pronouncement or gave a prophecy about what was going to happen and Sarah laughed at it, why a petty tyrant would have punished her for that, "Well you laughed, okay, you're not going to have a kid," but no, I think God thought it was funny too. He said, "Oh you laughed, you'll see, I will have the last laugh. I'll be back here a year from now, and you are going to have a boy."

God Looked Upon Sodom

In Genesis 19 verse 16, God and the two angels, went and looked toward Sodom and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way, {17} And the Lord said to himself, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do?" Now this is very interesting because we are not talking about someone here who doesn't need anybody's advice, doesn't want anybody else's involvement, has His mind made up about whatever it is that He is going to have happen and just goes on and does it. No, He said, "Should I hide from Abraham that which I'm going to do, after all he is my friend." And then He says this, {18} "Seeing that Abraham is going to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him, should I hide this from a man like that? {19} I know him. He's going to command his children, he's going to tell his household and they are going to keep the way of

the Lord to do justice and judgment, so I can bring upon Abraham all I have spoken. I know what kind of man he is, and I want posterity to know what happened here. So I am going to tell him."

Verse 20, "So the Lord said to Abraham, "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, their sin is very grievous." I think it's hard to interpret just how grievous the sin of Sodom was. {21} The LORD said, "I will go down there and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, and if not I will know." Now this is interesting. What on earth did the God of all the heavens and the earth need to go down to Sodom to see for himself? Couldn't He sit in heaven and see it? Couldn't He have sent Angels down there to see it. No, if you recall, one of the things He said that's important to know about Him was not just loving-kindness, but judgment. Good sound judgment.

A leader doesn't pronounce sentence from afar. A good judge doesn't pronounce sentence from over the hill somewhere without all the facts. In this case, God felt it was important, that He go to the city Himself. To listen to the sounds, to smell the smells, to see the sweat on men's bodies, to actually see what kind of people they were. It was not right for Him to destroy the city of Sodom until He had actually gone there Himself.

Abraham Bargained With God

Continuing in Genesis 18 verse 22, "The men (Angels) with Him, turned their faces and they went on toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord" and Abraham knew that his nephew Lot lived in the town, and he knew that when God got down there and looked at the town and what He had heard about it, that the worst that he heard about it was going to be true that God was going to destroy it. {23} "Abraham drew near to God and said, "Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked? {24} What if there are 50 righteous people in that city? Will you spare the place for the 50 righteous that are there? That's not like you to slay the righteous with the wicked, that the righteous should just be like the wicked. That's not like you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"

Now, remember, what we are talking about here is what's important to know about God, for He said that He has loving-kindness, but He also has judgment and that He is righteous.

Abraham very boldly comes to God and says, {25} "Can't I depend on you to do what is right? It's not right for you to destroy righteous people right alongside wicked people, {26} And the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom 50 righteous people, then I'll spare the place for their sakes. {27} And Abraham answered said, "Look I've taken it upon myself to speak. I'm only dust and ashes. {28} Suppose there are five missing of the 50, will you destroy the city for the lack of five?" God said, "If I find 45 there, I will not destroy it."

Abraham tried a little harder. {29} "He said, "Maybe if there is 40?" and God said, "No, I will not destroy it if I find 40." {30} And Abraham said, "Now, don't get mad at me. Maybe there be 30," and God said, "No, I will not destroy it if I find 30." {32} And finally Abraham

said, maybe if there's only 20 or perhaps if there are only 10?" and God said, "No, I will not destroy it for the sake of 10."

You Can Talk To God

Now why am I telling you all of this? I am telling you all this because if you want to understand God, you have to understand He is someone you can talk to. You don't just have to roll over because God is headed in one direction, you can ask him about it. The New Testament writer, James, describes this kind of character and he says this, it is in James 3 verse 17, "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy." When we are dealing with God, we are not dealing with some petty Oriental tyrant, who would just as soon take your head off as to listen to you. God will listen to entreaties from ordinary men. He is a kind person, peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated. That's something I want everyone to know about God.

God Had to Deal with Sodom

Now I have to acknowledge there's another side to this coin, that other side is a city called Sodom.

Sodom turned out to be, every bit as bad as the worst of the stories that had come up about the city. It's corruption, its vice and so something happened to Sodom, not unlike a nuclear weapon. It was showered with burning sulfur and brimstone and the city was burnt with fire and cauterized from the face of the earth. It was a bad deal.

But God rescued righteous Lot out of the city. He was a clean man, he was profoundly disturbed by the unrighteousness of the city and so God, by a miracle, saved the life of one man in the face of complete and total disaster.

Now it's important to understand that God had to deal with Sodom, if he's going to be a God of loving-kindness and of judgment and of justice, something had to be done about rottenness like that on the face of the earth. In the process of doing that justice, against that rottenness, Abraham's question is, "Will you wipe out a good man right along with these wicked men" and God said, "No, I don't want to do that."

God Extends Loving-kindness Towards People He Cares About

In the aftermath of the 911 World Trade Center terrorism catastrophe, there are so many stories that have come out of this, that one has to realize that God may well have been in the process of saving some people from what was happening in that building. I know you can ask why did he allow the whole thing to happen in the first place, and the answer to that is little tougher.

God does allow evil things to happen in this world. There are evil men and they have freedom and they can hurt people.

I can't help thinking about the story about the guy who for years on end always made his coffee the night before, without fail. He always put the grounds in the pot, always put the water in, set his timer, and always got up to the smell of fresh coffee, grabbed his cup of coffee and went out the door on his way to work in the World Trade Center on one of the floors that was going to be destroyed that day. But on this day he went to bed for some reason, and did not make his coffee, so when he got up in the morning, he had to brew his coffee and he had to wait for the coffee pot to percolate all the way through, before he could grab his cup and run out the door and because of that, he missed the ferry that he normally took, which threw him, even later getting to work, and so he finally got to the World Trade Center, caught the elevator up until about the 70th floor, where he had to change elevators to go on up to his soon to be destroyed office and when he got off the elevator to go to the other elevator, the building shook with a great thunder because the airplane had hit the building. He went down the stairs, barely escaped out of the building with his life, by the hair of his chin as it were. I saw him interviewed on Television and with misty eyes, he said this, "You know the rest of my life, I'm going to be spending trying to find out what God spared my life for? He had no doubt in his mind that God had miraculously spared his life, and who am I to argue with that.

His was only one of hundreds of stories of people who through strange circumstances, strange interventions, running into people that helped them, who managed to save them alive out that terrible inferno and the final crushing collapse of the building.

God in His justice does allow freedoms for people to do the things they want to do, but because He is gracious and because He is kind and He has a kindness toward people He cares about, He saves lives, rescues people so that they can in turn, do good to others. That's the kind of a God I want you to know about. It's the kind of God that told Lot, Genesis 19, "Look, get your family and anybody you care about in this city and get out of here." And Lot fooled around, until finally the two Angels grabbed him and his wife, and his daughters by the hand and drug them out of the city and told them, "Get out of here and don't look back!" They did. Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. And the cities were destroyed.

The Angels told Lot to get away from here. Go up into the Mountains, lest you be consumed of the fire and Lot said, verse 19, "Oh please, not so my Lord, look I found grace in your sight and you have magnified your loving kindness which you have showed me in saving my life." He made a plea, could he just go over into this city. verse 20, "See, there is a small village nearby. Please let me go there instead; don't you see how small it is? Then my life will be saved." "And the Angel said, {21} "Okay."

Now I know I haven't had much time but this is one thing I wanted you to really understand about God, that He can be entreated, that you can make pleas, He will let you off the hook if you will repent and turn to Him.

The apostle Paul said, "The Most important thing to know was Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), and I can think of no greater example of the loving-kindness of God than giving His own Son (John 3:16) that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Until the next time, I'm Ronald L. Dart.

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