

Knowing God #2

by: Ronald L. Dart

What is the most important thing to know about God? Now you may not realize this, but the hardest things for people to understand about God, are not the most important things. I think it was Moses who said this, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). The important things to know about God are the things that are revealed. Now that makes sense. If you think about it for a moment, you will come easily to this realization. Most of the arguments about God, among theologians, preachers and teachers, have to do with things that are not revealed. In other words, there is no Scripture that says, God is this, or God is that, that makes this argument. If there were, they wouldn't be arguing about it. It's the secret things that people make all these arguments about.

God is a Person Acting in Space and Time

The God who reveals Himself in the pages of the Bible is a person who exists in a place, that's the way He presents Himself, and so I think we are safe in thinking of Him in those terms. Some religious people are fond of speaking of God as 'omnipresent' as being everywhere at once. God is present in every blade of grass, in every leaf of every tree, etc. etc. The problem with that is, they never seem to consider that when they do this, they are depersonalizing God. They are advocating a kind of pantheism, that God is sort of a mysterious force that is everywhere.

But no, the Bible does not reveal God as a mysterious force. It reveals God as a person, who presents Himself to us as a person acting in time and space. In fact, you can think of God as standing by a roadside talking to a man named Abraham about what He is planning to do, because this aspect of God is one of the things that is revealed. It's in the pages of your Bible.

God Has Personality and Character

Now if God is a person, then logically, He has personality and He has character. And, in point of fact, that is precisely what the Bible reveals to us about God. For us, the question naturally follows, okay, God is a person, what kind of person is He? What is He like? And for some strange reason people want to speculate about whether or not God has hands and arms and legs and this type of thing. But these are not the important things.

What Is The Most Important Thing To Know About God?

The most important thing to know about God is what kind of character does He have? What kind of person is He? Now God Himself tells us what the most important thing is to know about Him. In words given to Jeremiah in chapter 9 verse 23, God has this to say about Himself. "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." So God is loving and kind. This implies an affectionate person. He is a God of judgment and judgment implies wisdom and justice, fairness, and firmness. He is a righteous God. Righteousness implies He has standards and the existence of standards suggests that He is not whimsical, that He can be depended on and that He will be constant.

You know, this is really a lot to know about God, and these are really very important things to know about God, that He is kind, that He is just and that He has standards that He sticks to and stands by. These are important things to know. Everything else we learn about God has to be related to these primary traits of character. I say primary because God said, "This is the thing you really want to know about Me."

If what we think we know about God seems to be in conflict with God's basic character then we can safely put those things aside to be examined later because they cannot possibly be correct as we currently hold them.

Loving-kindness

Now about this characteristic that the Bible calls loving-kindness. How does that show itself in God? What does that actually mean? There is a story in the Bible that illustrates this in a charming way and the story is found in the book of Jonah. Nearly everybody that's ever been to Sunday school or Sabbath school knows who Jonah is and have heard the story of Jonah and the whale.

"Once upon a time, there was a great city called Nineveh and like a lot of great cities it had become very very wicked, so God told a prophet named Jonah to go and preach to that great city." Now, right here we come across something very important to know about God. A different kind of god, if he were powerful enough, and the city was wicked enough, would just rub it out. Why fool around? There is the city over here, it's a nasty wicked city, let's just nuke it!

Okay, so why did God send the prophet to tell Nineveh what was coming? The answer to this tells us something very important about God.

Now the first part of Jonah's story, the part about him fleeing to the west and being swallowed by a whale and spit upon the shore, is a story for another day. What will occupy

us today is the second part of the story, when Jonah at last finds himself in the suburbs of the city of Nineveh preaching, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4).

Why Is The Book of Jonah in The Bible?

Now I'd like to ask an important question. Why is this book of Jonah in the Bible? It is clean outside the storyline of the Bible, so there must be a singular reason why the book of Jonah is here. There is a reason and I'll tell you what that reason is.

So here comes Jonah walking through Nineveh, saying, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Now if you happened to be listening to this in Dallas, what effect would it have for you folks who are in Dallas? For an unknown prophet to show up in one of your northern suburbs, saying, "Yet 40 days and Dallas shall be overthrown." Now if you are a football addict, you might think he was a Redskins fan, but it has no effect at all as long as this guy doesn't start blocking traffic. Nobody cares, that you have some idiot up in the suburbs preaching "40 days and Dallas, or Kansas City or your city will be overthrown."

So what happened in Nineveh is really remarkable to say the very least. Jonah chapter 3 verse five says this after the preaching of Jonah, "So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. {6} For the word came from the King of Nineveh, and he got up from his throne, he laid aside his robe, and he covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes." Boy, he was serious about this. Somehow or other, by some incredible miracle, this man hears, believes, listens and tells his whole city, it was a huge city state, "Folks, we are in a lot of trouble and it is time for us to get right with God."

Verse 7, "He caused it to be proclaimed and published all through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything, do not let them eat or drink water, not even the animals, {8} Cover your cows with sackcloth, cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way, let's change the way we are living here, and get rid of the violence out of this town. {9} Who can tell, maybe God will repent, and maybe this won't happen and maybe we will not die."

And then, something not quite so remarkable, but still based upon the way some people look at God, it's remarkable. {10} "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil that he had said he would do to them, and he didn't do it." Now I know someone is going to say, "I don't understand this, God's not good for His word. He said He was going to kill them and He didn't kill them."

Now if you are quick on the pick up, you already know what's going on here. The reason why God sent Jonah to Nineveh in the first place with a prophecy was to change the outcome. If nothing else changes then Nineveh is going to be destroyed. God didn't want that to happen. He could've turned Nineveh to toast like He did with Sodom and Gomorrah, but He didn't want to do that.

Now this is an important thing to know. God doesn't like killing people. It is not something he wants to do. So why is the book of Jonah in the Bible? Because it reveals an important side of the character of God, and how He works. God doesn't like to hurt people, and He doesn't like to see us hurt people either.

The Future Does Not Now Exist

Now there are people who believe that prophecy in the Bible is a kind of fortune-telling and God is like a time traveler. They think that God looks into the future, He sees what's going to happen, then He sends us a prophet to tell us what is going to happen. Now if you think about that, I'm sure you're going to say, "I wonder why God would do something like that?" The presumption you see is, that the future is already written down. In other words, you get into a time machine and you could travel forward into the future. You could actually see what the future is going to be, and you could come back, make the right bets, and become a wealthy man.

Presumption: that the future already exists and is written. But here's the problem with that, if the future is already written, then Jonah lied to Nineveh. How can I say that? Well, look at the passage, Nineveh was not overthrown 40 days later, it didn't happen. The prophecy then would've been false. Now we know God did not send Jonah to lie to Nineveh because God doesn't lie (Titus 1:2, Hebrew 6:18). So the only conclusion left is: the future of Nineveh was not written in advance, but the outcome of the way they were living their lives was knowable. The future was not written, but if you're looking at the way someone lives his life and if someone is living his life in a self-destructive pattern, you know what the outcome of that is going to be. You would like to tell him so he could turn his life around, wouldn't you? Well, God is like that. He simply wants them to know.

We Can Change The Future

So here we come to the answer to another important question relative to prophecy. Why should God tell us what the future holds? The answer, so we can change the future. This is an act of great kindness by God who doesn't want us to fall down and hurt ourselves. That part is easy, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's get back to the story in Jonah chapter 2.

"God looked {10} and saw their works, that they turned from their evil way and God repented of the evil, that he had said he would do to them, and he didn't do it." Let's continue in chapter 4 of Jonah, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry."

Now I will have to confess to some mystification about that. I can't get my mind around Jonah in this case. How can a man come to the place where he has so much of himself invested in this prophecy, to where God Himself who gave him the prophecy, changes His mind and decides not to do it, and then Jonah was angry with God because somebody didn't get killed.

God Is Gracious and Merciful

Let's continue in Jonah 4 verse 2, "Jonah prayed to the Lord and he said, "I pray you Lord, was not this my saying when I was yet in my own country, I fled from before you, I did not want to come here in the first place. I got on that ship and I tried to flee to Tarshish because I knew that you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and that you easily relent from doing harm."

What in the world is Jonah saying here? He is saying that he knew that God was very likely going to change His mind on Nineveh before he ever went there. Now that, for some reason, was bad news for Jonah but boy is it good news for you and me. To know that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, of great enormous kindness and even when He has said He's going to do us in, if we will just repent, if we would just turn our life around, He will not do it.

We are told in the Bible that God does sometimes repent of what He is going to do.

Well Jonah is a little hard to figure, but I have known people like him. They take a certain relish in preaching about sin and the awful things that are going to happen to sinners and they can wax very eloquent from the prophets about the moral decay and the rampant sins in the country and tell us that God is going to really come down on us. You can easily imagine how someone might be a little disappointed if the worst predictions didn't come to pass.

Do you remember back when everybody was predicting disaster over the year 2000 because of some mistakes in computer programming? Some people were putting food under their beds and storing up water. They were filling up trash cans of water in their garage so that in case the water company failed because the computer didn't work, they at least would have water to flush their toilet with. Well it didn't happen. A day or so after January 1st. when we had sailed over the new year with no problems at all, one person who had previously been really forecasting complete and utter disaster and the collapse of our whole economy, wrote to some friends, "Let's not get discouraged, there is still time for something to happen." Well, I read that and I thought to myself, "What a man, what a prophet? He's just like Jonah." Jonah was that kind of guy.

Jonah said in verse 3, "Lord, take my life from me, it is better for me to die than to live." I don't think I'd really care to invest that much of my own self into a prophecy, although I trust God, I'll do what he says and if He sent me to tell Dallas that they are going to be overthrown in 40 days, I will go and do it, but, I am not going to be surprised if God changes His mind. One of the reasons that I will not be surprised is because of the book of Jonah.

God said to Jonah in Jonah 4 verse 4, "Do you have any reason to be angry? Are you in the right attitude here?" Jonah didn't even answer God. {5} "Jonah went outside of the city, and sat on the east side of the city and made himself a little shelter and sat under it in the shadow

until he might see what would become of the city." Let's not get discouraged. There is still time for something awful to happen. This was Jonah's approach to this.

Verse 6, "And the Lord provided a vine and it came up over Jonah that it might be a shadow over his head to deliver him from his grief." God wanted him to feel a little bit better and "Jonah was exceedingly glad of the vine." Even here we come across God who is so gracious, so kind, He loved Jonah and was kind to Jonah. Jonah is in an absolutely rotten attitude and I can see certain Greek gods striking him with a lightning bolt or crushing him with their thumb like an ant. God didn't do that.

God Sent A Worm

God decided to teach Jonah a little lesson. So He gave Jonah a vine to shade him, and Jonah really enjoyed that and appreciated it. Then Jonah 4 verse 7, "God sent a worm when the morning rose the next day and it smote the vine and it withered. {8} It came to pass, when the sun came up, that God provided a vehement East wind and the sun beat on the head of Jonah and he finally passed out and wished he was dead, and He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." Oh, poor guy.

Now there are some things that are going on that are good for Jonah because God will still talk to him. Then God said to him in verse 9, "Now are you doing well to be angry for the vine." This time Jonah answers God, "Yes, I am right to be angry, even to death." {10} Then the Lord said, "You had pity on the vine, for which you did not labor, you did not make it grow, it came up in the night and it perished in a night." This vine here is nothing.

The operative words in this sentence that strikes me is, "To Jonah, He says, "You had pity on the vine." Right? {11} "And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein there are more than six score thousand, that's 120,000 people, who cannot discern between their right hand or left hand and also a whole lot of cattle." Here we come to the point of this fine story, God's purpose is not to kill, but to save. Jonah felt sorry for the vine. God felt sorry for the children of Nineveh and even felt sorry for their cows.

The Second Important Thing To Know About God - God Is Just

And this is what it means to say, that God exercises loving-kindness. God is tenderhearted and that my friends is something well worth knowing about God. Now we come to the second important thing to know about God. God exercises judgment. Do you remember what God said were the important things to know about Him? The things He really wants us to know, it is back in Jeremiah 9 verse 23, He says this, "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."

Now this judgment thing makes us a little nervous. The loving-kindness, we are comfortable with, but when it comes around to the question of judgment, that's different!

Once upon a time, there was another prophet, in another time. This fellow's name was Ezekiel. God came to him one day and He had this to say, "Son of Man, I have made you a watchmen for the house of Israel. I want you to hear the word I am speaking and I want you to give them a warning from me." This is Ezekiel 33 verse seven. {8} "When I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you will surely die, and you, Ezekiel, do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sins and I will hold you accountable for his blood." In other words, "I'm telling you, you go tell this man, just like Jonah, you go tell Nineveh, that they are going to die in their sins."

If you don't tell them, and they die, then I will hold you accountable. {9} "But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways, and he does not do so, he'll die for his sin, but at least you have saved yourself. {10} Now Son of Man, Ezekiel, say to the house of Israel. This is what you people are saying, "Our offenses and our sins weigh us down and we are wasting away because of them. How can we live? How are we going to make it? This is what you people are saying. {11} Here's what I want you, Ezekiel, to say to those people, "As surely as I live," declares the sovereign Lord. "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways. Why would you die, O house of Israel"

Now this is God's message. He is saying, look, I don't take any pleasure in people's death. I'm not happy when people are hurt. I don't like it when people die for these things, so what I'm telling you is, change your life, turn around. Now you have to understand this, it doesn't take any intervention on God part for us to be destroyed. We are quite capable of destroying ourselves. We are quite capable of destroying our whole society. We are capable of bringing the whole thing down around our ears without any help from anywhere. And God says, "That's not what I want to see."

Righteousness

"I would prefer to see you turn away from what you are doing and live long and happy lives." Therefore, God says in Ezekiel in chapter 33 verse 12, "Say to your countrymen, "The righteousness of the righteous man is not to save him when he disobeys." In other words, you can live a good righteous life and then if you turn away from that, all your past righteousness is not going to help you.

"The wickedness," and this may be more important to most of us, "the wickedness of the wicked man will not cause him to fall when he turns from it." You can live a terrible wicked life and then when you turn from it, that previous wicked life will not be held against you.

"The righteous man, if he sins will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness." Now folks, I ask you, is this fair or what? God says, If you live a good life

but then in the end of your life you turn sour, I'm sorry that previous goodness is not going to help you. Your previous wickedness isn't going to hurt you if you repent.

What is going to make the difference is the way you are living right now! That's fair.

Verse 13, "Now if I tell the righteous man that he will live, but then he trusts his righteousness and does evil, not one of the righteous things he has done will be remembered, he will die for the evil he has done." Now this is kind of complicated reading in Ezekiel. It sounds a little heavy but at the same time it's a very simple principle. It is not how you start out in a race that counts, it's how you finish. It's how you do in the end of it all.

Let's continue in verse 14, "If I say to the wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but then he turns away from his sin and does what's right. {15} If he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, if he returns what was stolen. If he follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live. He will not die. {16} None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him, if he has done what is just and right, he will live." Then God said this to Ezekiel, {17} "Yet your countrymen say, "The way of the Lord isn't fair, but it's their way that is not fair. {18} If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he'll die for it. {19} If a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by doing it, {20} Yet all you people say, "The way of the Lord is not fair."

God Is Fair

But, you see, if we had known the important things to know about God, we could never have said that He is not fair. The objective that God has in coming and telling us the future is so that we can change the future, so we can turn things around. That's what Ezekiel is driving at, and his message to the house of Israel in his own time, and there is an important distinction in all of this. God is not a grandfather in the sky. God is a father. A grandfather can afford to be indulgent but a father has to be firm. He can be loving and he must be kind, but if he is not just, his kids will never come to understand right from wrong. A good father must be loving, must be kind, and must also be just.

The Third Important Thing To Know About God - God Is Righteous

Then there is that third important thing to know about God from Jeremiah 9 verse 24, where he says, "Let the man 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."

What righteousness means is that God has standards of right and wrong. There are things you do that are right and there are things you do that are wrong. They are called laws and since God is not a great grandfather in the sky, what is right today is not going to be wrong tomorrow. And what is wrong today, is not going to be right tomorrow. God is the one great constant in the universe and that is something about Him we must never forget.

God told another prophet, Malachi, "I am the Lord, I change not." It is for that reason you people have not been consumed." He also said through James chapter 1 verse 7, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." You see, you can take that to the bank. God is constant.

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