

CHAPTER 3

GOD'S CHARACTER – WHO HE IS AND WHAT HE IS LIKE.

*Great is our LORD, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.*

Psalm 147:5 (RSV)

³"For I proclaim the name of the LORD; Ascribe greatness to our God! ⁴"The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.

Deuteronomy 32:3-4 (NIV)

*The LORD is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.*

Psalm 145: 13b (RSV)

The aim of this chapter is to prevent some misunderstandings that might arise in the chapters that follow. In the first part of this book I will say a lot about the severity of God's judgment. He is going to punish our sin and send the majority of the human race to Hell and then from there to the Lake of Fire for eternity. I have had to devote a large proportion of this book to explaining those awful things. We therefore need this chapter at the start of the book to provide some balance, so that people do not misunderstand God's character. Let me say, right at the start, that God is infinitely loving. Love is so important a part of God's nature that apostle John goes so far as to say that He is love:

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:7-11 (NIV)

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

1 John 4:16 (NIV)

What's more, God is good and is full of loving kindness and compassion which never end:

*Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good,
For His loving kindness is everlasting.*

Psalm 136:1 (NASB)

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23(RSV)

The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

Psalm 145:17 (RSV)

He is also gracious, merciful, just, compassionate and slow to anger:

*⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹He will not always chide,

nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰*He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor requite us according to our iniquities.*

¹¹*For as the Heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

¹²*as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

¹³*As a father pities his children,
so the LORD pities those who fear him.*

Psalm 103:8-13 (RSV)

*Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you,
And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you
For the LORD is a God of justice;
How blessed are all those who long for Him.*

Isaiah 30:18 (NASB)

⁸*The LORD is gracious and merciful;
Slow to anger and great in loving kindness.*

⁹*The LORD is good to all,
And His mercies are over all His works.*

Psalm 145:8-9 (NASB)

So, we have seen that God is loving, good, gracious, merciful, patient, compassionate and kind. However, I have no option but to talk as well about God's perfect holiness and, therefore, the severity of His judgment on sin. Those things are also real. But, there is a danger that if the reader has to focus for several chapters on such things he may lose heart and stop reading. If so, he may be left with a false impression about God's character. He might see Him only as a judge and not see any of the other aspects of what and who God is, such as a compassionate Father and a friend. Please try to look at God in a rounded and balanced way. Take note of all of His many characteristics, not only His holiness and severity, but His love and kindness as well.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

Romans 11:22 (NIV)

Despite the statement by apostle John about God's love, which I have quoted earlier, the way the Bible *introduces* us to God is never to emphasise His love. Instead the Bible focuses, first of all, on His holiness and the fact that He will judge us. That is how Jesus and the apostles spoke to unbelievers. They spoke in that way even to the Jewish people, who believed in God, but had not yet realised that Jesus was their Messiah. We have to meet God first at the level of His holiness, and to realise how we have wronged Him. Only then can we go on to know Him as a Father and a friend.

So, I have tried to take that approach in this book and to look at things in that order. Remember that when apostle John was writing those words about God's love, he was writing to Christians who had already repented, believed, been baptised, received the Holy Spirit, and come to know God for themselves. He was not writing to unbelievers or even to Jews who had not yet accepted Jesus as Messiah.

So, with such a mature, believing, Christian audience John felt able to say a good deal about God's love. He knew that his audience already understood about God's holiness. I cannot make that assumption in writing this book. Neither could Jesus when He spoke to the crowds during His earthly ministry. Those crowds contained at least some people who did not understand the truth or realise the

seriousness of their situation. That is why Jesus always began by speaking of sin, judgment and Hell first. That has to be the starting point.

We must approach God first with respect, not familiarity

God loves you and wants an intimate and personal relationship with you. But before you can have that you must first respect Him for what He really is and honour Him as the Lord, King and Judge of the universe. In the Western world today, the holiness and severity of God are not emphasised. They are not even mentioned at all in many churches. But they need to be, because if we want to get to know God we must begin by respecting and fearing Him. It won't work properly any other way.

It is like meeting a very important man for the first time. Imagine you went to work for Winston Churchill, the war-time Prime Minister, and were about to meet him on your first day at work. You would not approach him with familiarity or address him on first name terms at that stage. There would be a formality to the relationship to begin with. Your main feelings would be respect, and also some fear.

You would, in the beginning, have to relate to him in his capacity as Prime Minister and as your boss, not as a friend. There is no other way for it to happen. However, as time passes, you would begin to form a personal relationship and get to really know him in a more rounded sense, as he truly is. You would see other aspects of his personality and find out about other areas of his life, besides being Prime Minister. The people who worked for Churchill always began by fearing him, but ended up devoted to him.

Maintain a balanced view of God

The example of Winston Churchill is also appropriate to illustrate the fact that God is multi-faceted and has many different aspects to His character. Although Churchill was a hugely powerful man, feared by many, making decisions that affected the whole world, he was also a merciful, kind, literary, artistic, generous, amusing and playful person. He loved to make jokes and play tricks on those he knew and worked with. He was loved and admired as well as feared and respected. If you saw Churchill as one-dimensional you would be badly misunderstanding Him. That is even more true of God. If you wanted to, you could write books about Churchill, each one of which could focus on just one aspect of his life, his interests and his achievements. He lived to be 90 and in that time he was all of the following things, and much more besides:

He was a son, schoolboy, soldier, journalist, prisoner of war, politician, husband, father, Trade Secretary, Home Secretary, First Lord of the Admiralty, a soldier again, unemployed, Colonial Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, a back bench MP, a voice crying in the wilderness, then at the Admiralty again, then Prime Minister in war time, then Leader of the Opposition, then Prime Minister in peace time, then a back bench MP again. During all of that time he was also a writer, a historian, a pilot, a wit, a traveller, a painter, a bricklayer, and a keeper of cats, fish and pigs!

So, if you focused, on just one or other of those roles or aspects of his life, then whatever you wrote would be true up to a point but it wouldn't be the whole truth. For example, if you were to say "*Churchill was an artist*" it would be a true statement. However, it would be very far from being the whole truth. Therefore, to say it as if it was the whole truth would be seriously misleading.

People have actually written books solely on what he achieved as an artist, examining the many watercolours he painted. There's nothing wrong with that. Yet it would obviously be very wrong to

think of him *only* as an artist. It would be equally invalid to think of him only as a politician or only as a writer or only as a soldier or only as a husband/father/grandfather etc.

Don't make the mistake of focusing on just one aspect of God's nature

Many of us make the same mistake with God. We tend to think of him solely in terms of one favourite aspect. Usually people like to dwell upon God's love, or His mercy, or his forgiveness. Of course all of that is true. But it is even more misleading than in Churchill's case if we focus only on one aspect of God. We need to see Him in the round, in every possible aspect and appreciate every feature. Then we will have a much truer picture of Him. Like God, Churchill related to different people in different ways. When he was dealing with cabinet ministers and generals he could be stern and rigorous. Yet, if he was dealing with ordinary humble people then he would reveal a much softer and gentler side of his nature. For example, Churchill was very easily moved to tears.

On one occasion he was out inspecting bomb damage during the 'blitz'. He saw some houses, newly destroyed, and their occupants standing in the road, homeless. As he stood looking at the scene he began to weep. The public standing nearby were surprised, having heard his defiant and resolute speeches on the radio. His display of emotion and tenderness did not fit their image of him. Yet, there was no contradiction in any of that, because he was all of those things. During World War One Churchill fought for a time at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. One night he caught a man who had fallen asleep on sentry duty. He could have had him shot for that, but he had mercy on him and spared the soldier's life, because he felt pity for him. Yet, this is the same man who later ordered the daily bombing of German cities.

On another occasion Churchill was having a meeting at 10 Downing Street involving various ministers including the Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden. His grandson aged 5 was visiting at the time and Churchill allowed him into the room. It was a small group meeting in a sitting room. His grandson hid behind an armchair and rolled up some pieces of paper and threw them at Churchill's head. He knew what was happening, but pretended that he thought it was the Foreign Secretary doing it. He began to rebuke Sir Anthony Eden saying "*Foreign Secretary, will you stop throwing those pieces of paper!*" This delighted his grandson who then threw more pieces of paper, resulting in more protests to the Foreign Secretary, to the amusement of all those present. Yet, this was the same man who spoke in the gravest and most serious tone about life and death issues for national defence.

Therefore we see that even whilst operating as Prime Minister, there were intimate aspects of Churchill's character that he displayed to those who knew him. But you could not approach him on your first meeting with him in the same way his grandson did, or as his staff did, who knew him well. You could not be familiar or jocular with Churchill on your first day at work and hope to get away with it. You first had to approach him in his capacity as Prime Minister and start to get to know him. Then you could gradually discover all of the many other aspects of his character.

It is rather like that with God. He is holy and righteous. He hates sin. He will be our judge one day. Most people will be condemned by Him and sent to the Lake of Fire, because that is how seriously He views sin. Therefore when we approach God for the first time it must be with reverence and respect. There must also be sorrow and repentance for our many sins against Him and other people. We can't approach Him in a casual or presumptuous manner. Neither can we be familiar with God, or take liberties. Yet, for those who do know Him and have repented, they can start, from that point onwards, to get to know Him in a much wider way. They can learn about the many other aspects of God's character and personality, in addition to His holiness and awesome power.

God is a Trinity - three Persons who, together, form One God

Although the Bible speaks of God as being One, it also makes clear that there are three distinct and separate Persons. Together they make up what we call the "Trinity". They are God the Father, The Son of God and the Holy Spirit. The word "Trinity" is not used in the Bible, but it is a good word to summarise what the Bible does say about God. He is three Persons, but One God. The word Trinity means "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness".

The New Testament gives us a much clearer understanding of the Trinity than the Old Testament. But even in the Old Testament there are many passages which clearly suggest that God exists as more than one person. Let's look at a few examples where God is referred to in plural terms. Note in each case the use of the words "Us" or "Our":

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; ..."
Genesis 1:26(a) (NASB)

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil;..."
Genesis 3:22(a) (NASB)

"Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech."
Genesis 11:7 (NASB)

In each of these verses God is speaking in terms which make clear that He is more than one person. It is not simply the so called "Royal we" that the Queen uses. That is something our own British royalty have used, but it is not found anywhere in the Old Testament in relation to the Kings of Israel or Judah. So it can't be explained away in those terms. God is clearly speaking to, and of, Himself in plural terms. Also, there are many passages where God is speaking but He is clearly speaking to another Person who is also God. Let's look at some examples, though there are many more:

***⁶Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;
A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom.
⁷You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You
With the oil of joy above Your fellows.
Psalm 45:6-7 (NASB)***

In the passage above it initially refers to the Son of God (Jesus). We are told that God (i.e. the Father) has anointed Him. This passage cannot make sense any other way. Two Persons, both of whom are God, are being spoken of. However, they are distinct from each other. Let's look at two more passages from the Old Testament where the Holy Spirit is also referred to as God. But He is, likewise, differentiated from the other Person being referred to as God:

***Yet they rebelled
and grieved his Holy Spirit.
So he turned and became their enemy
and he himself fought against them.
Isaiah 63:10 (NIV)***

In the verse above the Holy Spirit is referred to but a distinction is made between Him and God. See also this next verse, where a distinction is drawn between "The Spirit of the Lord God" (which is the Holy Spirit), "the LORD" (which is the Father) and the person speaking, which is Jesus Himself. So,

all three Persons of the Trinity are involved in this verse. Jesus is speaking and He is referring to the Holy Spirit and the Father:

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners;
Isaiah 61:1 (NASB)*

Then, when we get to the New Testament, more is revealed. The fact that God is three Persons is made very clear:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.
2 Corinthians 13:14 (NASB)*

In this verse all three Persons of the Trinity are named separately and all three are clearly presented as being divine. It cannot be read any other way. The same is true in this next passage from Ephesians:

*⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:4-6 (NASB)*

There are many more such passages. Please refer to chapter 15 for more examples of verses which prove and help to explain the Trinity.

Summarising what we mean by the Trinity

In short, what we mean is that:

- a) God is three Persons
- b) Each Person is fully God
- c) Nevertheless, there is only One God.

To understand the Trinity we must accept all three of the above points. Each one is essential. So, it would not be correct to say that the members of the Trinity form one Person, because there are three Persons. But it is true to say that those three Persons together are one God. Therefore, it is appropriate to refer to God as "He".

Why does it matter that God is three Persons but still One God?

The doctrine of the Trinity is vitally important for many reasons. Thus, when cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses reject these facts, they are rejecting something which is essential to the genuine Christian faith. Let's look at a few reasons why this matters so much:

- a) If Jesus was merely a created being like we are, and not fully God, then how could He save us? How could He ever have lived a sinless life and how could His death on the cross have paid the price for our sins if He was only a man? (See chapters 10 and 11 for more details).

- b) If Jesus was not fully God in His own right, then how could we ever pray to Him or worship Him? We would be praying to, or worshipping, a mere man, which we must never do.
- c) If there is no Trinity then it would mean that before He created the angels and mankind, God would have had nobody else with whom to relate. Yet we know that God did have personal relationships before He created any of us. He did so within the Trinity. Each of the three Persons related perfectly to each other. And, they always have done, for all eternity past.

What are the distinctions or differences between each of the three Persons of the Trinity or ‘Godhead’?

In terms of their nature, character, attributes and power, each of the three Persons of the Trinity are equal. They are each divine and are all knowing and all powerful. That is why Jesus, said: "*If you have seen me you have seen the Father.*" So, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit do not differ in their essence. But they do differ in the roles they play and the functions they have as they relate to the world and to us as believers.

We see in the Bible that God the Father spoke the words which brought the universe into existence. However, God the Son was also active in the process of creation. He brought the Father's words to completion. We also see that the Holy Spirit played a different role in the creation of the world. He was "moving" or "hovering" over the face of the waters and taking part in what was occurring.

Then, when it comes to the salvation of mankind, all three Persons of the Trinity played different roles. The Father planned the redemption and sent the Son into the world. Jesus, the Son of God, carried out that plan. He became a man and died on the cross while the Father and the Holy Spirit watched. Imagine how firmly they must have held back their natural desire to intervene and stop the crucifixion. Even in their restraint they played their part. The current role of the Holy Spirit is mainly to bring to completion the salvation of individuals and the development of the Church. He is fulfilling what was planned by the Father and carried out by the Son.

Until we die and meet God face to face, we will never be able to properly understand this mystery of God being three Persons in One. It is beyond our minds to grasp it. Even so, the Bible tells us that it is true. God is formed from the perfect union and co-operation of three distinct Persons. Each of them is fully divine and eternal. They relate so closely together and are so perfectly united, that it is right to say that they are One. We cannot really understand that. We must just accept it because the Bible says it is true. Perhaps we could see marriage as a partial analogy here. The Bible presents marriage as a bond or union which is so solemn and profound that although the husband and wife are two people they are, in a certain sense, viewed as being one.

Therefore as we seek to form a correct and biblical understanding of who and what God is and how He operates, let us always remember that He is three Persons. Sometimes when we see different aspects of God's character being emphasised it may be because one of the Persons of the Trinity is being focused upon at that moment.

God's character

God is not just a disembodied "force" or electrical power, as some people imagine Him to be. He has personality, and emotions. He feels love and anger. He can also be hurt and grieved and made to feel sad, just like you, even though He is the God who created the whole universe. He also displays every virtue to an infinite degree. He is more kind than you could ever imagine. Likewise He is utterly

generous, good, gentle, patient, loving, and faithful. If you imagine the best person you have ever met, they are only a pale reflection of what God is like.

God's kindness is infinitely greater than any kindness that you have ever come across from a human being. His love is infinitely greater than any love that you have ever known. Therefore, as well as being our King and our Judge, God is also our Father. Jesus sometimes even addressed God as "Abba". That means "Daddy", as a child would say. We can do the same.

This amazing God, who created everything, is also our Father

To be allowed to be so intimate as to call God "Father" is a great privilege. Consider how much it means. The very God who created the whole universe is inviting you and me to relate to Him as a child relates to their father. He wants to have a one to one relationship with you which is close, tender and personal. There are even ways and times when God plays and jokes with us and deals with us softly. Yet, at the same time, He still remains the awesome, all-powerful King of the universe. God is far from being one-dimensional. He is the most brilliant person in the world. He created everything that we know. If you have ever studied science, you will realise how complex it is. Yet God did not simply learn about science. He created all the rules of science. Can you imagine how indescribably intelligent He must be?

Not only did He create the universe in scientific terms, but He also designed it in artistic terms. Look at how beautiful everything is. It is obvious that God is an artist. There is nothing that He has made that is not beautiful. That is true of the stars and planets, the sun, moon and sky and of all the plants, mountains, lakes, animals, birds, fish and insects on this earth. Every one of these is a work of art in itself. Taken together, they are an astonishing masterpiece of design.

God is a complex mixture of every virtue and quality. He is a genius of a kind that we cannot begin to imagine. He is in charge of the entire universe and yet is able at the same time to relate individually to everybody on the earth. He knows about everything that is happening throughout the whole of creation. At this moment He knows exactly what is happening on every planet and where each one is on its orbit around the sun.

At the same time, He also knows what a particular insect is doing that is sitting on a leaf somewhere in the Amazon rain forest. He is watching it, and He is watching every other creature too. He knows what every atom is doing and what every electron is doing as it orbits around each proton. He is observing it all happening simultaneously, because He is fascinated by His entire creation and enjoys its beauty. What does that tell you about the capacity of His mind? It is beyond calculation.

The kindness of God and the interest He takes in our lives

At the same time He knows you personally. He knows everything that you have ever done, and every thought you have ever had. He knows your needs and what is best for you. There have been times where I have been astonished at how much God cares for me as an individual. He finds time, amongst everything else He has to think about, to consider all the little things that I need.

For example, when I was a student I was working one summer as a gardener. I had no car at the time and used to walk a few miles each day to my customers. One day I was intending to go knocking on doors to ask if people wanted any gardening work doing. I set off in the morning and realised, after walking about two miles, that I had forgotten to bring a pen. That bothered me, because I needed one to write down phone numbers etc. As I was thinking over this little problem, I prayed and asked God to help me to sort it out. Then, to my amazement, I walked on just 10 yards or so and I found, lying

on the pavement, a biro pen that someone had dropped! It was just a cheap one, but it solved my problem.

You may say that was just a coincidence. But I knew immediately that God had been concerned for my little problem and wanted to help me. He treated me as a parent might treat a small child. He saw my need and He met it and looked after me. Isn't that how we are with our own children? What's more, I felt God was chuckling about it. The incident amused Him and I felt He was laughing to Himself with anticipation as he watched me find the pen, saying "*Was that answer quick enough for you?*" That is exactly how God can be at times, when you get to know Him, but not before.

That, therefore, is the amazing God that we are privileged to serve and worship. He is Almighty and is a King and a Judge, but He is also a Father and a friend. He cares about us and looks after even the most trivial details of our lives. If you choose to believe in Him and to follow Him, then He will not disappoint you. He has never, ever, let me down, in my whole life. He has never been faithless or unreliable. Can you say that of any friend, or even of your own parents?

Therefore, I will try to present God to you in this book in an accurate way, telling you honestly about His judgment and His severity. However, I do not want you to misunderstand Him by failing to remember as well all the other aspects of His nature, such as His love, grace and mercy. We need to hold them all in balance at the same time.

Perhaps above all we need to realise that God takes no pleasure from judging or punishing any of us. His holy nature means that He has to do it or He would not be true to Himself. However, He actually wants all of us to avoid His judgment by turning to Him in faith and repentance:

"For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."
Ezekiel 18:32 (NASB)

¹⁰"Now as for you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'Thus you have spoken, saying, 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we are rotting away in them; how then can we survive?'" ¹¹"Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?'"
Ezekiel 33:10-11 (NASB)

We are now going to embark upon several serious and worrying chapters. As I do that, please continue to bear in mind the fuller picture of God's character that I have begun to describe in this Chapter. We shall expand upon all of that once we get past chapter nine.