

The Character of God – introduction. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 11 May 2011.

This morning we start an entirely new series of talks. For the coming few months, in the will of God, we shall be considering some aspects of His (God's) character ... some of what are sometimes spoken of as 'the attributes of God'.

And the very first point I need to make – and make strongly – is that God is a person. It is very easy for us, when considering what we call 'the attributes of God', to fall into the trap of regarding God as a subject to be defined and analysed. But God is *not* a set of attributes; He is a person.¹

Let me say it again, 'God is *not* a set of attributes; He is a person!' And the wonder is that we can have *direct* dealings with Him and get to know Him on a one-to-one basis.

Sometime ago I read about a Scottish theologian by the name of John Baillie who taught at Edinburgh University. Professor Baillie made it a practice to open his course on the doctrine of God with the words: 'We must remember, in discussing God, that we cannot talk about Him without His hearing every word we say. We may be able to talk about others behind their backs, but God is everywhere, yes, even in this classroom. Therefore, in all our discussions we must be aware of His infinite presence, and talk about Him, as it were, before His face.' Well said, Professor Baillie.

Make no mistake, God – the God whose character and 'attributes' we will be considering over the coming weeks – is present with us here right now. And my prayer is that week by week we each capture some faint impression of His majesty, greatness and glory.

Our Bible reading for today comes from the prophecy of Jeremiah in the Old Testament: 'Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me"'.²

'Let him who glories glory in this', the Lord said, 'that he understands and knows me'. Not, of course, that God can be *fully* understood by any of His creatures. In chapter 26 of his book, Job, having celebrated many aspects of God's unlimited presence and power, was compelled to acknowledge, 'Lo, *these* are but *the outskirts* (the 'outer fringes', the 'edges') of His ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of Him!²

But, though God cannot be *fully understood*, in a very wonderful sense, thank God, He can be *known*. But this is *only* because He has chosen to reveal Himself.

One of the epistles in the New Testament opens with the majestic words, 'God, who at various times and in various ways *spoke* in time past to the fathers through the prophets, *has* in these last days *spoken* to us through His Son'.³ Throughout Old Testament days, God made Himself known through the prophets of Israel⁴ – but that revelation was, at best, gradual and incomplete. But, in contrast, as the writer says, God has *now* given one comprehensive and full-orbed revelation of Himself ... 'through His Son', the Lord Jesus.⁵

And yet you and I today have no access *physically* to either the prophets or to the Lord Jesus. Our only knowledge of them and of Him – and the truth about God which He and they made known – is through God's written word, the Bible. And so, in practice, we find God revealed to us through the scriptures.⁶

But there *is another* 'voice' which speaks to us about God. I refer to the 'voice' of the creation around and above us.⁷

King David once wrote, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, and night after night they declare knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard'.⁸ A thousand years after David, when demonstrating that man has no excuse for his ignorance of God, the apostle Paul wrote, 'since the creation of the world the things of Him which *cannot be seen*, namely, His eternal power and divinity, have been *clearly seen* through the things that have been made'.⁹

I wouldn't expect you to know, but next Monday marks the anniversary of the death – in 1990 – of Jim Henson, the American puppeteer.¹⁰ Yesterday, (courtesy of my computer) I was watching a television advertisement made back in 1977.¹¹ The commercial began with a close-up of a man most viewers would not have recognised. 'Do you know me?', the bearded man asked ... immediately adding, '*I* created the Muppets'. Then the background suddenly came alive with fuzzy little creatures, all shouting out together, 'Big deal!' 'Everyone knows them', the man continued, 'but not me. So when I travel I carry the American Express card'. And, at that point, 'Jim Henson' was visually typed on an American Express credit card on the screen.

'Everyone knows *them*, but *not me*', the creator of the Muppets said. Far more importantly, *God* created man, the world, and everything else ... and yet, alas, many of us know His creation far better than we do its Creator!

But what precisely has God revealed Himself to be? Over the coming weeks, God willing, we will learn that He is infinite in terms of His knowledge and wisdom, infinite in terms of His power and authority, and infinite in terms of His presence. We shall learn also something of His holiness, His righteousness, His goodness, love and grace, His changelessness and His faithfulness.

But I want to make it clear that, when we have finished our series of talks, we will hardly have begun to discover how immense God *is*. We will not even be mentioning, for example, that God is Self-existent and Self-sufficient,¹² that He is spirit,¹³ that He is the Living God¹⁴, that He is the God of glory¹⁵, the God of peace¹⁶, the God of hope¹⁷, the God of comfort¹⁸, the God of patience¹⁹, and so on.

And even if we *did* attempt to cover *everyone* of these, at the close of all our talks we should still have to confess with Job, 'Lo, these are but the outskirts of His ways'.

What we do know is that God (who is present with us here today) will ever remain infinitely bigger and more glorious than we can possibly imagine.²⁰

The writer of one of the psalms once threw out the challenge, 'Who is like the Lord our God, who dwells on high, who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth?'²¹ The psalmist was pointing out that, on account of the infinite distance which exists between God and the most exalted of His creatures, it is an act of enormous condescension for Him even to notice and take any interest in His creatures.

And I have often wondered what the psalmist would have made of the apostle Paul's words in the New Testament, that there was One on equality with God – our Lord Jesus – who not only stooped to 'behold' us, but who actually stooped to take our nature – to become a man – and then, in that nature, to further 'humble' Himself – to the point of dying on a cross for us.²²

Footnotes

¹ The expression 'the attributes of God' is simply a convenient way by which we refer to what our God has revealed of Himself.

² Job 26. 14. 'Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?', was the question of Zophar in the book of Job, Job 11. 7. And 'No, of course we cannot'. But that must not deter us from searching and inquiring after Him. We should endeavour to get to know Him as well as we *are* able, that we may serve and worship Him, and may honour and glorify Him, in a worthy manner.

³ Heb. 1. 1-2.

⁴ 2 Pet. 1. 21; compare Amos 3. 7; 2 Tim. 3. 16.

⁵ For only He was properly qualified to fully reveal who and what God is. And our Lord made it clear that no one knows 'the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him', Matt. 11. 27. We read in John 1. 18 that 'no man has seen God at any time' but that God's only begotten Son 'who is in the bosom of the Father' has declared Him. 'The bosom' was the place of nearness and intimacy – no prophet had ever been there – not even Moses, who the Lord had known face to face, Deut. 34. 10!⁵ And when He was here in the world, the Lord Jesus told Philip plainly, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father', John 14. 9. The context of John 1. 18 suggests that, when John wrote 'no man has seen God at any time', He had in mind, 'not even Moses'. In the previous verse, he had written that 'the law was given by Moses' – the man who God knew face to face, Deut. 34. 10, and to whom God spoke to face to face as a man to his friend, Exod. 33. 11 – but to whom God had still had to say, 'no man shall see me and live', Exod. 33. 20.

⁶ The revelation of God has come gradually and progressively. We could think, for example, of God's names and titles. See especially:

(i) 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty (*El Shaddai*; the all-sufficient/bountiful God), but by my name the Lord (*Yahweh* or *Jehovah*) I did not make myself known to them', Exod. 6. 3 God had proved Himself repeatedly to be 'the All-sufficient One' to the patriarchs, but the significance and meaning of His name 'Jehovah' was not known - as the One who proved true to His purpose and covenant.

(ii) 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', Matt. 28. 19. Note 'the name' (singular), not 'names'. The Lord Jesus is to be understood as enlarging the name 'Jehovah' into that of 'the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. He identified the Lord God of Israel with the three persons – Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

⁷ The Bible does not attempt to prove the existence of God. It simply assumes it – declaring in its opening words, 'In the beginning God ...'.

⁸ Psa. 19. 2-4. That is, the lecture given by the heavens about God's greatness is not delivered in secret; it is given in speech which is everywhere audible, and in words which are understood by all. Later in Psalm 19, David directs us to God's written word as another channel through which God's voice is heard, when he (David) speaks of the Lord's 'law', 'testimony', 'precepts' and 'commandment', Psa. 19. 7-11. It has been said that Psalm 19 points us to the witness of the sky, vv. 1-6; the scriptures, vv. 11, and the soul, vv. 12-14.

⁹ Rom. 1. 19-20. For, though the creation has been marred by sin, Rom. 8. 19-22, it still bears God's signature.

¹⁰ Jim Henson died at the age of 53 on 16 May 1990. See ... http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Henson.

¹¹ See ... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skor2mwvAAw>. For more details, see ...

http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/American_Express

¹² This means that God is not dependent in any way on anyone or anything for His existence. Every other living being is dependent – on people or things – and ultimately on God. But God has no needs, and depends on no one. Listen to Paul, 'Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He *needed anything*, since He *gives* to all life, breath, and *all things*', Acts 17. 25. 'The greatest and best man in the world must say, "By the grace of God *I am what I am*"; but God says absolutely — and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say — "*I am that I am*", Matthew Henry – referring to 1 Cor. 15. 10 and Exod. 3. 14 respectively.

¹³ John 4. 24.

¹⁴ See, for example, 1 Sam. 17, 26; 1 Kings 17. 1.

¹⁵ See Acts 7. 2.

¹⁶ See Rom. 16. 20; Heb. 13. 20.

¹⁷ See Rom. 15. 13.

¹⁸ See 2 Cor. 1. 3.

¹⁹ See Rom. 15. 5.

²⁰ I closed a meeting at which I was speaking this Monday afternoon with the words of David, 'Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; His greatness cannot be searched out'. Psa. 145. 3.

²¹ Psa. 113. 5-6.

²² Phil. 2. 6-8.