

The Most Important Decision of Your Life

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, shares how to know God and go to heaven when you die.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

I have come to share a message that changed my life. I was not a bad boy—but not a good boy either. I went to church with my parents and was baptized when I was 12.

If you had asked me if I were a Christian, I would have said yes. But for twenty-one years God was just a formal idea to me rather than a personal friend. I professed Christianity, but I lived my life as a practical atheist.

At the University, I studied music. I loved to sing, especially the tenor arias from the great operas. As I neared my final year, I was having success with my career goals, but my heart was empty. I felt that something was missing from my life. I did not know at the time that, as the empty stomach calls for food, I was suffering from spiritual hunger.

Pascal, the great French physicist eloquently expressed this hunger when he said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”

Augustine, the great theologian and bishop speaks of the same hunger: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

I thought I had many unsolvable problems then, but I soon discovered that solving my spiritual hunger helped many of my other problems to vanish.

I met a fellow student, an athlete, who had the radiance of a Christian on his face. A simple conversation with him changed the entire direction of my life that day in September, 1959.

He told me that just as there are physical laws in the universe, so are there spiritual laws which govern our relationship with God. They are called “laws” because they are universally true. For example, we do not break the law of gravity. . . it breaks us. Jump off a high building and we discover the truth about the law of gravity.

So what are these spiritual laws? I will share with you the four my friend related to me that day. And like the law of gravity, they are true, whether we believe them or not.

I. God loves us and has a purpose for our lives.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10, “I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.” That is one of the reasons He came to make our lives rich and full of purpose.

Everything in this room has a purpose—the microphone, the piano, the stage, the chairs, the sound system, the lectern. What is man’s purpose? What is your purpose? This is an important question.

Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised? The second law tells us:

II. Man is sinful and separated from God; thus, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.

The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” God has given us standards to live by in such things as the Ten Commandments. And James

tells us that “if a man keeps the whole law (the Ten Commandments) but offends in **one** place, he is guilty of all.”

I am not saying that every person is as bad as he/she could be; I am saying that every person has fallen short of the mark, has failed to meet what God has required. And what God requires of us in our personal standard of behavior and righteousness is as unattainable as throwing a rock and trying to hit the North Pole.

Humans have tried to address this problem of personal, moral failure in various ways. Some, in the face of some 4000 years of documented history which records horrific, bloody, and unending incidents of man’s inhumanity to man, some have actually persisted in the belief that man is basically **good**.

Others, more realistic and honest about man’s tendency toward selfishness and evil, have attempted to explain the reason man displays such destructive behavior. Here are three explanations widely held across the world:

(1) Some suggest that man’s moral failure is **biological**; that it is simply the vestigial remains of aggression from our primitive, animal, evolutionary past.

(2) Others argue that man’s moral flaw is basically **sociological**, that man lacks the proper environment necessary for upright behavior.

(3) Still others insist that the human problem is essentially **intellectual**, and if people knew more, they would understand what was right, and they would do it. Curiously, in the United States, over 35,000 laws and statutes exist simply to try and enforce the Ten Commandments! We *do* know what is right, but we choose often not to do it!

These three theories have one thing in common: each one approaches the human moral condition from the standpoint of what man lacks.

The **biologist** tells us that more time is needed for man to work out and eliminate the remnants of his primitive aggression. Tennyson optimistically hopes for this in his poem, *In Memoriam*: "Moving ever upward, outward, let the ape and tiger die."

The **sociologist** tells us that what humans basically need is a proper or better environment, and if they had it, human behavior would improve. Modern America is a vivid and tragic example that abundance will not make people good.

Others suggest that man's lack is **information**, and therefore education is the answer. We lack sufficient time; we lack a proper environment; we lack the necessary information.

But our real dilemma is not what is *lacking*, but what is *present*! And every academic discipline has to allow for and explain what it is:

Biology calls it primitive instinct;
Philosophy calls it irrational thinking;
Psychology calls it emotional weakness;
Sociology calls it cultural lag;
History calls it class struggle;
Humanities calls it the human flaw, or *hubris*;
The Bible calls it sin.

Jesus speaks of this presence in Mark 7:15-23 as something which comes from within man, something which issues forth from his inner life:

*"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. . . .Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? . . .That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from **within**, out of the*

heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

Albert Einstein echoes this when he said, "It is not the explosive power of the atom which I fear: but rather the explosive power for evil in the heart of man which I greatly fear."

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."
(Romans 3:23).

And if this sinful condition were not bad enough, we learn from the Bible that there are consequences for our sin: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

What is the meaning of death? Death always means separation. *Physical death* is a separation of the soul/spirit from the body. People who are present when someone dies can actually observe the moment when this takes place.

Spiritual death is also a separation, from God Himself. Man's sin keeps him separated from the one he seeks to know. Mahatma Gandhi, the great Hindu teacher, speaks of this separation when he says in his autobiography, "O wretched man that I am! It is a constant source of torture to me that I am separated from the One I know to be my very life and being, and I know it is my sin that hides Him from me!"

T.S. Eliot expresses this same despair when he says:

"We are the hollow men,
We are the stuffed men,
Head piece filled with straw.
No head—No heart.

Life does not end with a bang,
But with a whimper."

Feelings of this separation, this alienation, have prompted men through the ages to try and find a way to bridge this gap, this estrangement, from God. And historically, all of these attempts originate with man, and reflect his own efforts to reach God by trying to be good, trying to keep the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule, or by observing some religious practice.

The problem with these approaches is that one never knows when he or she has been good enough or done enough! Karl Marx said that "Religion is the opiate of the people," meaning that it appeared to be something necessary and helpful for humans, whether true or not. And many people console themselves by attending church, trying to be basically good and decent, and drugging themselves into believing God will accept them for making such efforts. Marx believed these naïve human inclinations should be eliminated.

Actually, the teachings of Jesus agree with Marx on this point. Jesus taught that religion is the enemy of Christianity, because religion represents man's best attempts to reach up and find God. And it is interesting to note that in Jesus' day He was most critical of the self-righteous, religious people He encountered: the "good" ones.

He said, "Those who are well do not need a physician." (Matthew 9:12) When does someone go to the doctor? When well, or sick? What Jesus was implying is that the notion that one's good deeds or relatively good life were already sufficient to bridge the gap between himself and his God, then what Christ came to accomplish through His sacrificial death on the cross is totally negated and unnecessary. In other words, He was saying, If you have drugged yourself into believing that your own good works have secured your salvation, then He, the Great Physician, can do nothing for you.

This is what Paul was getting at in Ephesians 2, 8-9 when he said: "For by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

The Ten Commandments were never given by God with the expectation that man would keep them flawlessly. They were given as a guide, a teaching tool. Or, in medical terminology, the commandments parallel the purpose of an X-ray machine, which can only *reveal* the condition of the broken bone within a human body. It identifies the problem but can provide no solution for knitting the bone back together.

This is what Jesus was trying to say to the Pharisees, to recognize the true spiritual condition of their lives, in that as good and righteous as they tried to be, they were still hopelessly short of the mark which God required. A gospel preacher once pointed out that it was not difficult to get people saved, but it was extremely difficult to get them *lost*! We must first honestly face our true spiritual condition.

Once we have come to grips with this fact of our own personal sin and failure before God and accept it as true of ourselves, we are ready to consider the third spiritual law:

III. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin; through Him we can know and experience God's love and purpose for our lives.

The second spiritual law reveals to us the bad news about man's condition. This third law now gives us the *euaggelion*, the gospel, the good news from God:

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

We have established that "religion" is defined as man's best

efforts to reach up and find God. Christianity is unique and exactly the opposite and is defined as God's only effort to reach down and find man. Religion is spelled "**Do.**" Christianity is spelled "**Done!**"

Jesus stated the purpose of His divine mission in John 6:38-40:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. . . And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. . . For this is the will of My Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life: and I myself will raise him up on the last day."

John the disciple, an eyewitness, recounts to us the last words Christ uttered on the cross: "When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (9:30). "Mission accomplished!" "Done!"

It is for this reason that Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6) He claimed to be the One who, by His Incarnation and death, had come from heaven to build a bridge made of Himself, which could alone completely span the spiritual chasm between sinful human beings and a holy God.

The exclusiveness of this statement by Christ offends many. It is too narrow, they say. But honestly, some things in life *are* narrow. I have always appreciated a narrow-minded pilot, for example, who insists in landing his plane on the runway!

One of most beautiful cities in America is San Francisco, California. You may know that at the opening into the vast San Francisco Bay there stands a gigantic, rust-red suspension bridge called the Golden Gate Bridge. It allows people and cars to get back and forth from the city on the South to the

picturesque little seaside village, Sausalito, and the Napa Valley on the North. People have a choice if they want to get to Sausalito: they can take the bridge, or they can swim in the cold Pacific with its treacherous currents flowing in and out of the Bay. Everyone decides to trust the Bridge.

This bridge is also narrow. And since it was built in the 1930s, no one has ever petitioned the city of San Francisco to put up another bridge alongside the Golden Gate so people can get to Sausalito. It is not necessary, not needed. Now the real question is whether Jesus' claim to be the bridge, the only bridge, which gives access to God, is true.

There is a story recounted about a certain man who operated a drawbridge over a large river which he raised and lowered, allowing the boats to pass through. One day he brought his small son with him to the drawbridge. Late in the morning a large boat approached filled with people. As he was raising the drawbridge to let the big ship pass, his little son fell directly on to the great gear wheel. Horror-stricken, the man was faced with the decision of imperiling the many lives of those on the swift, oncoming craft, or saving his son. Moments later, the crushing of the little son's body in the machinery was accompanied by the tears and the crushed heart of a father who sacrificed his beloved child for the lives of the strangers on the boat.

That is the significance of the Cross. Jesus' life for ours. He is our substitute, our bridge, and access to God. He died so we might live. He was separated from God the Father ("My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?") so we might not have to be. . . for an eternity.

"All we like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on
Him.
He was oppressed and He was afflicted,

Yet He did not open his mouth.
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. . . .
He was cut off out of the land of the living,
For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was
due. . .
Although He had done no violence
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
But it pleased the Lord
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If His soul would render Himself as a guilt offering. . .
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.”
—Isaiah 53

What this means to you and to me is that if we were the only two people who ever lived on planet earth, Christ would still have come and do what He did just for the two of us. That is how much He loves us. He had you and me specifically in mind as He carried that cross up the *Via Dolorosa* on that day in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. And on that Cross He took your place and mine and bore our Hell so that we might have the chance at Heaven.

Now it is most important to make something crystal clear. I want to pose a question. If the above things are really true, how many people did Jesus die for? We find the answer in John 3:16: “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

We learn from this that Christ died for the world. His death is sufficient for every human being who ever lived on the planet.

But we must ask a second question: Does that fact that Christ

died for *all* mean that everyone is a Christian? Obviously not. His death is *sufficient* for everyone, but it is only *efficient* for certain ones. Which ones? The fourth and final spiritual law tells us:

IV. We must personally receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into our lives in order to become a Christian.

John 1:12 and 13 tell us that “As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe on His name. . . who were born not of blood (through inheritance), nor of the will of the flesh (human will power), nor of the will of man (priestly pronouncement), but of God (the new birth).”

The Bible speaks of receiving Christ as similar to receiving a gift. We have seen this mentioned in Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8,9 above. This “gift” concept marks out an approach to God that is diametrically opposed to any and all religious systems based on human effort we have already discussed.

The “spirit” of gift-giving is one of **grace**. How does one accept a gift? The appropriate response is “Thank you.” If you were to try to give money in exchange for a gift given you, the other person would be highly insulted and offended. The graciousness of the gift-giver would be spoiled by such a response. Grace is God’s unmerited, undeserved favor.

We cannot earn this gift.

We do not deserve this gift.

We can only say “Thank you.”

What God has so graciously provided for our salvation is so unlike the way humans think about such things, that no human would ever have thought up such a solution to the fallen,

human condition.

And so we humans have a choice with respect to our personal salvation. We can continue our own religious efforts with the uncertain hope of being acceptable to God when we die, or we can accept the free gift of God, His Son's death on our behalf. And when you come to think about it, if God intended for man to achieve his own salvation through self-effort, then He made a terrible mistake: He let His own Son die on the Cross, which was evidently (along this line of reasoning) not really necessary! Salvation through self-effort negates the very significance of the Cross and Christ's death on our behalf.

Now how do we receive this gift? We do it by exercising faith through the exercise of our will. It is a personal faith decision one makes on the basis of the facts stated above.

The experience goes by many names: conversion, being saved, being born again. Let's look at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter three. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the group Jesus was so often critical of because of their self-righteousness. But Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus and comes to see Him. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these miracles that you do unless God is with Him." Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus took Him literally: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can He?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of . . . the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Here Jesus contrasts physical birth with spiritual birth. Physical birth is an event. It happens at a moment in time

and, we each celebrate the occasion once a year on our birthdays. Likewise, spiritual birth is an event, one that can occur at any time and any place when a person understands what Christ did and reaches out to personally receive the Gift He offers: "But as many as received Him, to those He gave the authority to become the children of God, to those who believe *on* His name (John 1:12)." Observe the verbs in this verse. It is our part to believe that what Christ did for us is true, then to receive Him into our lives as our Savior, and become a child of God. This is done by an exercise of our will, which actively decides to abandon all self effort to reach and attain a righteousness acceptable to God, but rather to reach out to Him in faith and receive the Gift which He offers us. And notices the verse states that we are to believe *ON*, not *IN*. Believing in something does not necessarily call for trust. Believing on something does. This is the true nature of faith. To "believe *on*" means to "*count on*."

The story is told of a great trapeze artist at the circus. Up on the high wire, he would ride back and forth across on a bicycle with a long pole. Then he would do it again with his attendant sitting on his shoulders. After that He asked the audience if they believed he could carry one of them across. The entire audience loudly exclaimed they believed he could. He looked at a particular man on the front row and asked if he believed, and he said "yes." Then the trapeze artist said, "Climb up the ladder, get on my shoulders, and Ill take you across." If the man responds and *entrusts himself* to the man on the bicycle, he is demonstrating the equivalent of the biblical faith called for by one who desires to become a Christian and to be born into the family of God.

It is important to understand the nature of faith in our lives. Faith is something that we employ all the time. Faith that a chair will hold us up; faith the on-coming driver will stay in his lane; faith the plane will land safely. Everyone has faith—atheist, agnostic, Christian. The real issue is not

having faith, in large or small quantities, but rather to have a *worthy object* for our faith. If you walked out on a frozen pond, which would you prefer, a little faith in a sheet of ice two-feet thick, or a lot of faith in an inch of ice? Faith is important, but the *object* of our faith is all-important.

To believe on Christ is to trust Him and Him alone to make us presentable and acceptable to God. We decide that He is the most reliable object of our faith and we are saying that when we stand before God, we are not trusting in our own merits to attain eternal life, but rather in the merits of our Substitute, the spotless Lamb of God who stands there with us, our Savior and our Redeemer.

Revelation 3:20 gives us a picture of how this spiritual birth occurs: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine (fellowship) with him, and he with Me."

Picture Jesus standing at the door of your life, your will, seeking entrance. He is a gentleman. He will never force His way into our lives. But we learn here that if we open the door of our life to Him and receive Him as our Savior, He will respond.

If I were to come to your home and knock on the door, you would have essentially three responses: (1) you could tell me to go away, (2) you could ignore me and play like you were not at home, (3) or you could invite me in.

The same is true of Jesus. He waits to be invited. He treats each person with integrity and will not come where He is not invited or wanted. It is our choice. But if we *do* open the door (that's our part), He *will* come in (that's His part). And Jesus doesn't lie. If we open, He will come.

We do this through prayer. The specific words we use are not important, but rather the attitude of the heart. Here is a short prayer which contains the major elements of receiving

Christ:

"Lord Jesus, I reach out to you at this time in my life to claim the gift you have offered me. I confess I have sinned and fallen short of what you require of me. I thank you for dying on the Cross for my sins, and I thank you for your forgiveness. I open the door of my heart and life and invite you to come into me, and make me the kind of person you want me to be. I trust you now as my personal Savior and from this day forward I *trust in you alone* to make me presentable and acceptable before God when I must give account of myself and my life. Thank you for coming into my life, and I know you are there now, because you promised that if I opened the door, you would come in. Amen."

If you prayed this prayer right now, and it expressed the desire of your heart, then where is Christ? He is now inside you. Before, He was on the outside looking in. Now, He is on the inside looking out. The word "Christian" means "Christ *in* one." That is why the body is called the temple of God. A temple is a place where God dwells.

How do you know he is there? We are back to the question of faith. Above, we spoke of exercising faith and trust that Christ's death on the Cross for us is true and that we are called upon to respond by believing *on* it. To answer this question, we must exercise faith again.

Let's say I came to your home and knocked. You opened the door, invited me in, and we went into the living room and sat down to chat. And let's say after a time, you got up, went to the door, opened it and said to me, "Come on in, Jim!" You did this several times, while I remained on the sofa in the living room! This would not only be silly; it would be clear evidence that you did not *really* believe I was already in your home!

So it is with Christ. Faith is when you stop saying "please" to God and you start saying "thank you." Unless you trust in

faith that, regardless of how you *feel*, Christ was true to His Word and actually entered when you invited Him, you can never get on with your new life in Christ, because you keep “going to the door” in uncertainty, not truly believing He did what He said He would do. And so once you have invited Him into your life, *believe that He is there*, and begin to trust that by saying, “Lord, thank you for coming into my life and making me a child of God and a member of your family.”

Perhaps this train illustration will help to understand the difference between fact, faith, and feeling. The *engine* of the train represents the facts . . .the truths about Christ’s death and its implications to us. The *coal car* represents faith. . .the energy needed to make these facts a reality to us. The *caboose* represents our feelings . . .which may vary every day and every moment depending on our circumstances, emotions, and state of mind.

The train will run with or without the caboose, and one would never think of trying to pull a train with the caboose! So it is with our life in Christ. This decision we have made concerning our salvation has nothing to do with how we *feel* at any particular time.

If someone were to ask me if I were married, I wouldn’t respond by saying, “Well, I feel married today,” or “I’m working at being married,” or “I think I’m married,” or “I hope I am.” And yet these are the very kinds of statements we often hear when we ask someone if they are Christians. In fact, these responses are a strong indication that the person does not really understand what Christ did for them, and He is probably still “standing outside” knocking at their door. This may be the case for many just simply because they lack the proper information and no one has ever clearly explained how they can become Christians.

Let’s ask another question: Is it presumptuous to assume that when I die I will go to heaven?

“And the witness is that that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know (not “hope”) that you have (present tense; not “will have”) eternal life.” (I John 5:11-13).

What we learn here is that a Christian receives eternal life not at death, but at the Second Birth. To receive Christ and “have the Son” is also to have eternal life as a **present possession**. No Christ, no eternal life. Possess Christ and also possess eternal life. We can see why this would be so. At our physical birth, our parents gave us the only kind of life they possessed—human life. When we place our faith in Christ and are born spiritually into the family of God, He gives us the only kind of life *He* possesses—eternal life.

That is why the apostle Paul could say with confidence, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). And that is why Jesus could say to the believing thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, *today* you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

As a non-Christian, it always made me angry if someone said with confidence, that they knew they would go to heaven when they died. That is because I had assumed that what they implied is that they had done enough “good things” already to merit heaven. But that wasn’t their reasoning at all. They were simply giving testimony to the fact that they had received the gift of eternal life promised them when they recognized the futility of their own religious efforts and turned to Christ and received Him into their lives as the Bible instructed them to do.

To not have this certainty in the Christian life is to live out one’s days motivated by fear. God does not intend this for His children, and plainly states it over and over again, that

our lives are to be lived out with a motivation of love and gratitude for what God has done for us. We want to live for Christ. Our good works become, not a means of gaining our salvation, but the results of having been forgiven and a desire to please our Heavenly Father out of grateful hearts which have received mercy.

Where does one go and what does one do after he/she is born again?

Newborn babies need a lot of care. Birth is followed by a process of growth and development and time. When this natural development in a little baby fails to proceed as intended, we consider it sad, a tragedy. In the spiritual realm, the new birth goes through a similar process. New Christians need a proper environment so they can begin to grow spiritually and mature in their Christian faith. Here are several suggestions to speed your growth along:

- **Begin to read the Bible.** Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is saying here that if we want to obtain a word from God, we must go where He has revealed Himself. He has done so in the Scriptures, not Shakespeare or the morning paper. Peter says, "Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, so that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

The Bible is a big book. In fact it's 66 books! Many people get bogged down by starting in Genesis. They quickly get bogged down in the "begats" and abandon Bible reading in despair. What kind of nourishment do little babies begin with? Milk. Then pabulum. Then baby food. Then finally meat.

Start with the Gospel of John. It is the baby food section. Get a Bible that you feel free to mark up so you can underline things which are meaningful to you. Read the Bible like you eat fish. When you come upon a bone, something indigestible,

don't choke on it. If you don't understand it, say "Father, I don't understand this, but I trust that as I grow, I will come to understand it. It's probably meat I can't digest yet." Mark Twain observed, "It's not the things about the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the things about the Bible that I *do* understand that bother me." There is plenty that we do understand even as young Christians to feed our souls. It is through the Bible that you let God talk to you.

- **Make prayer a habit.** This is how we talk to God. Prayer can happen at any time and any place, not just on Sunday. It can be long or short, eloquent or plain, important or trivial, and with or without "thee" and "thou." It can be done with eyes open or shut, standing, kneeling, or lying down. It is talking to a Person, your Heavenly Father. He promises never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), and therefore is accessible to you 24 hours a day everyday. Prayer can involve:

- (1) *confession of sin*, as it occurs, with assurance that "If we confess (agree with God concerning) our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

- (2) *praise and thanksgiving*,

- (3) *intercession* (asking for others), and

- (4) *petitions* of any kind which may burden one's heart. Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6,7).

- **Fellowship with other Christians.** Seek out the encouragement that comes from being and sharing with other Christians. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." A hot coal removed from the fire and placed apart from the others quickly dies out, but left in proximity

to other coals it burns brighter and longer. Christianity was never intended to be a solo affair. It is best served by a community of believers who mutually strengthen, support and challenge one another to “run a good race” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

- **Baptism.** Our Lord left us only two ordinances to faithfully observe: baptism and communion. Therefore, in obedience to the Lord’s command, every new believer should soon arrange to express his/her faith commitment to Christ—in His death, burial, and resurrection—by a personal, visual rite of public baptism. (“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” [Matthew 28:19].)

- **Share Christ with others.** Jesus told the first disciples, “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). If you know of a good bargain somewhere, you tend to want to tell your friends. One sign of being a Christian, is that you have a strong desire that others might know what you have discovered yourself. . .that God loves them and wants them to know Him. But notice this is a *process*. No one is a “natural” born fisherman. It takes time and skill to catch fish. Learning how to share effectively with others is a learned experience as well. Study the life of our Lord and see how He dealt with people. Read the book of Acts and observe how Paul and others were effective in helping others clarified their own spiritual experience and joined the family of God.

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Learning About God

The God Who Would Be Known

Recently my wife and I took a few hours off to visit a local nature preserve. You know how quiet and peaceful that can be. Imagine you're out there in nature enjoying your walk, and talking with . . . God. That's what Adam and Eve did, wasn't it?

We don't walk and talk with God the same way Adam and Eve did, but the God of the universe Who holds our very existence in His hand wants to show Himself to us as well; He wants us to know Him. He not only wants us to *know* Him, though; He wants us to know *about* Him.

Sometimes Christians will say they don't need a lot of doctrine; they just want to know God personally, to just *experience* Him, without complicating things by adding all that theological gobbledy-gook. With a little bit of reflection, however, one can see how important knowing *about* God is to *knowing* God.

If my wife were to try to talk to me about her interests or desires or anything about herself, and I were to say, "You know, dear, I hate to get confused with all that information. I just want to *experience* your presence; I just want to *relate* to you personally," you might understand if she experienced some confusion! What does it mean to "know" someone in our experience without knowing things *about* the person? The most it could mean is that I just want the feelings that come with being near someone I love.

My own joy in her presence, however, rests on certain knowledge about her. How much joy would any of us experience in the presence of, say, a known axe-murderer?! It's amazing what a little knowledge can do for one's "experience!"

Resisting any knowledge about my wife would also indicate that I don't really have much interest in her; I'm only concerned

with *myself* and *my* experience. What greater way is there to let someone know you really care and are interested than to want to learn about him or her?

Have I convinced you of the need to know *about* God in order to truly *know* God? If so, I hope you'll invest some time in studying theology. You needn't read a massive work on systematic theology. A writer whose work I'm benefiting from is Alister McGrath. He's a well-respected theologian who makes theology accessible for the layperson. R.C. Sproul and J. I. Packer are two others from whose writings you would benefit. In fact, Packer's popular book, *Knowing God*, would be a great place to start.

You might still be hesitant because you know that it's possible to substitute the "knowing about" for the "knowing personally." How can we let what we know about God feed our personal knowledge of Him? Listen to this suggestion from J. I. Packer: "The rule for doing this is demanding but simple. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God." [\(1\)](#)

In this essay we'll just touch on a few subjects of importance in knowing about God: revelation; the Trinity; God's sovereignty; and idolatry. I hope this will be helpful to you as you continue the wonderful journey of knowing God.

The God Who Can Be Known

In a debate on the existence of God between Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland and atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen, Nielsen argued that, for the educated person, "it is irrational to believe in God." [\(2\)](#) Why? Because there is nothing in our experience to refer to when we say "God" that gives meaning to the word. If we want to argue, for example, that a certain table exists, we can point to the table or we can describe it in terms we understand. Since we can't point

to God and we can't understand what God is in Himself, we can't talk about Him meaningfully, Nielsen says.

So, where does this leave Christians? Does it leave us with an irrational faith? *Can* we know about God? If so, *how* so?

We are able to know God because of revelation. *Revelation* means "disclosure." As New Testament scholar Leon Morris says, "Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover."[\(3\)](#) The last book of the Bible is called *Revelation* because it reveals the plans of God which were otherwise unknowable.

Revelation is necessary because of the nature of God. He can't be seen by us (Jn. 1:18; I Tim. 6:16; I Jn. 4:12); we can't know his depths or His limits, Zophar told Job (Job 11:7; cf. Rom. 11:33); and no one knows His thoughts except the Spirit (I Cor. 2:11). Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Mt. 11:27). Thus, if God and His ways are to be known, they must be revealed by Him to us. As Deut. 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever. . ."

How has God revealed Himself to us? Rom. 1:20 says that we know God exists through what He has made (i.e., nature). We see the hand of God in the historical events recorded in the Old Testament, such as the Exodus and the establishment of Israel and the regathering of God's people under Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ps. 9:16; 77:14; Eze. 20:9). Our own conscience bears witness through a knowledge of moral law (Rom. 2:15). God has made Himself known specially through Jesus and through the written Word of God (Jn. 15:15; Mt. 11:27). Recall Heb. 1:1,2: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last

days he has spoken to us by His Son.”

Through revelation we know of God’s glory (Is. 40:5), His righteousness (Is. 56:1), and His righteous judgment (Rom. 2:5). We know his plans (cf. Dan. 2:28,29; Eph. 3:3-6) and what He desires of us (cf. Micah 6:8). Even the message of the Gospel is referred to as a mystery now made known (Mt. 13:35; Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:3-6).

If atheists like Prof. Nielsen refuse to acknowledge the reality of God, that doesn’t negate what we know to be true. *Our* belief in God doesn’t depend upon the confirmation of others. Besides, God has made Himself known in a tangible way in Jesus as well as in nature, history, conscience and Scripture. At the day of judgment, those who rely upon the excuse “Not enough evidence!” will be in for an awful surprise. God has revealed Himself, and we can know Him.

The Trinity

There’s probably no more baffling doctrine taught in Scripture than that of the Trinity. Christians say that God is three in one. How can that be? How can there be one God, and yet we name three persons— Father, Son, and Spirit—as God?

Attempts have been made to find some comparison in our own experience that can make this truth understandable, but they all fail at some point. Some say the Trinity might be like steam, water and ice—three forms which H₂O takes. But this analogy fails because the same quantity of H₂O doesn’t assume all three forms at one time. The analogy of an egg also fails because the three components—yolk, white and shell—are completely different. God isn’t three separate parts in one unit. The Bible teaches that there is only one God, and that He is unified in His being. It also teaches that there is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, distinct from one another, all existing at the same time. One being, three persons. A mystery, for sure, but not a contradiction.

Theologian Alister McGrath offers a helpful illustration. If a scientist takes a sample of air for some kind of testing, he has real *air* in his sample but not *all* of the air. He just has a sample, but he expects that what can be found in the rest of the air can be found in the sample; they are identical in nature. As McGrath says, “Jesus allows us to sample God.” [\(4\)](#) When people saw Jesus, they saw God. This is a better illustration, but it still isn’t perfect.

Is this doctrine important? As McGrath notes, it is the foundational reality underlying our belief that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (II Cor. 5:19). God could reach out to us effectively because He reached out Himself. It was God in Christ who acted on our behalf; it wasn’t some mere human emissary who brought us a good word from God. And it is the Holy Spirit—God again—who continues to minister in us while we wait for the glory which is to come.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn’t only a difficulty for Christians: it’s also a favorite target of critics who seek to undermine our faith by finding flaws in it. Apart from the logical question of how one God can be three persons, critics also point to the fact that it was centuries after Christ that the doctrine was formulated. They say it was an invention of the church.

It shouldn’t seem surprising that there was a delay in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. As noted earlier, it’s the theological explanation of the teaching that was present from the beginning, that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” As the church came under attack and as Christians thought through scriptural teaching, they gradually developed fuller and more sophisticated doctrines. They weren’t making up new beliefs; they were more fully explaining what they already believed.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a necessary component of Christian belief. Any description of God which doesn’t include

all that this doctrine includes is inadequate. Far from being theologically burdensome, the doctrine of the Trinity is an essential part of Christianity.

The Sovereignty of God

Along with the doctrine of the Trinity, an issue that is equally baffling is that of God's sovereignty and man's free will. The Bible indicates that God is fully in control of this universe, yet it also makes clear that we have real freedom. Our decisions are significant. Our prayers, for example, do make a difference. How can we be free and our actions be meaningful while God determines the course of history?

In recent years a view of God called the "open view" has gained a hearing among evangelicals. According to this view, "God does not control everything that happens."[\(5\)](#) God often changes His plans to meet the changing situation brought about by our decisions and actions. As one writer says, "God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; . . . history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do."[\(6\)](#) Among other things, this means that God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future; He is learning as we are.[\(7\)](#)

What do we learn from Scripture about this subject? First, we learn that God is unchanging in His being and perfections or attributes. In Malachi 3:6 God says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." James tells us that in God "there is no variation or shifting shadow." (Jam. 1:17)

Second, we learn that God is unchanging in His purposes. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation," says Ps. 33:11. In Is. 46:9-11 God says clearly that what He has planned from long ago He will bring about.

Third, we learn that God knows the future already. Is. 46:10 says He “[declares] the end from the beginning.”

While acknowledging God’s control of history leading to His own ends, we must also acknowledge that He does respond to our actions and petitions. In Gen. 6 we read that God was “grieved in His heart” that He had made man, so He acted to wipe out everyone except Noah and his family. In Numbers 14 we read of a time when God said He would wipe out the Israelites, but He relented after Moses interceded for the people.

What are we to make of this? As writer Mark Hanna has noted, we tend to make adjustments in our theology to compensate for this tension between God’s sovereignty and our free will. To do this, however, only creates problems elsewhere in our theology. What we must do is leave the tension where the Bible does. [\(8\)](#)

Why is the reality of God’s sovereign control important? It’s because God is unchanging in His being that we can trust Him to be “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). It’s because God has knowledge of the future which is settled that predictive prophecy is possible. It’s because God knows in advance what people will do that he isn’t blind-sided by evil. Thus we can trust Him to know what is ahead of us; our future is ultimately in His hands, not the hands of people.

Although some people have theological problems with this, for others the problem might be personal. In other words, maybe we just don’t like the idea that anyone else—even God—has ultimate control over us. For those who are truly and joyfully submitted to God, however, the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and complete foreknowledge is a source of comfort, not of annoyance.

A Jealous God

In Isaiah 44 we read about a man who makes an idol from a

tree. Part of the tree he worships; he calls on it to deliver him. The other part he burns for cooking and for warming himself. Isaiah 44:19 shows the ridiculousness of what he is doing with these words:

No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat it. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!"

Idolatry is setting something up in place of God. Paul sums it up in one simple phrase: "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1:25). Those things to which we devote ourselves and which end up ruling our lives, thus taking precedence over God, become our idols.

Writer Richard Keyes speaks of nearby idols which give us a sense of control over our lives, things as ordinary as a clean house or even a stamp collection. Keyes also speaks about faraway idols, those things that give a sense of meaning to our lives such as financial security or progress in science. Nearby idols give us an immediate sense of security; they're substitutes for the immanent activity of God in our lives. Faraway idols give us a sense of purpose and meaning; in them we put our hope. They are substitutes for the transcendent rule of God over our world. [\(9\)](#)

In response to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, God often revealed Himself to be a jealous God. "They have made Me jealous with what is not God," He said. "They have provoked Me to anger with their idols" (Deut. 32:21). Why would God respond this way? Because first, God deserves all glory, for all good things come from Him (Jam. 1:17). And second, because created things can't do what God can and wants to do for us. In Is. 42 we read: "Thus says God the Lord, Who created the

heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it. . . . 'I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.'" (42:5-8). He is the creator and life-giver. There is no one and nothing like Him.

In contrast to this, idols are created, they aren't eternal, and they are incapable of providing what we really need. Theologian Carl Henry brings to mind Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al when he refers to idols as "the false gods who never show." [\(10\)](#) Ba'al couldn't respond to his prophets no matter how much they shouted and danced and prayed (I Ki. 18:17-40). As the psalm writer said, "They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see" (115:5). The problem is that idols by nature are not gods at all (Jer. 2:11; 5:7; Acts 19:26; Gal. 4:8). Thus it is that when such things as money or power or athletic prowess become our idols, we find that they cannot deliver us from everything that would destroy us.

We began this essay talking about the God Who would be known. To set up an idol in His place is to reject what He has told us about Himself and His desires. Today there are many other gods which call for our allegiance. We must continually recommit ourselves to the One Who won't share His glory with others.

Notes

1. James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 18.
2. J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 48.
3. Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 10.
4. Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 205.

5. Pinnock, Clark, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.
6. Ibid., 15.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Mark Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 59-60.
9. Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory," in *No God But God: Breaking With the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 37-48.
10. Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1966), 5.

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