

## Looking at God for the first time

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### An innocent approach to God

A man with no preconceived notions about the nature of God picks up his Bible for the first time. In his occupation as a physician, he has slowly developed a growing sense for the apparent design of the human body. For most of his life, he had dismissed the notion of a God. The seed was planted, however, during medical school when trying to comprehend the billions of complex pathways in the brain, all of which must work together in perfect harmony to perform the simplest task. It seemed inconceivable to him that such a complex system could have gradually evolved. And, as the years went on, his appreciation grew for many other beautiful and intricately organized systems not only in medicine, but in nature as he watched the symmetry and beauty in both the sky and flower. And as a parent, he marveled as his own children effortlessly grew from a speck on an ultrasound, to a fully developed person, and with their own independent and creative thoughts.

He finally concluded that God must exist. But from that conviction, almost immediately there arose a cascade of questions. What is God really like? He obviously has the ability to create in such a beautiful way, but why is there also so much pain and suffering? Is God interested in me personally, or does he just create and then move on? These and many other thoughts occupy his mind as he flips through the pages of the Bible. As luck would have it, he began reading the book of John, the words of the first chapter having struck a chord of interest. The claims which were made seemed too incredible. John strongly implies that this man Jesus, who he refers to as “the Word”, is the Creator and fully God, “... and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

In amazement, he reads on to discover the claim that Jesus is the revelation of God to the world. He is God in the flesh. “The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us...No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:14, 18). His mind begins to spin with new questions. Why would God have the need or desire to become a human? Why not come in his real form? And if it really was necessary to come as a human, why would the Creator of the universe condescend to enter the womb of one of his own creatures? And why not at the least choose a better family and a more suitable town to grow up in? He was raised in Nazareth from which it was said, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (John 1:45). What is God trying to accomplish in doing things this way?

As he reviews the first chapter again, it seems that God came with a specific purpose in mind. “Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God’s children” (John 1:12). He imagines what it would mean to become God’s child. The thought is appealing. Is it really possible to have an intimate Father-Child relationship with the Almighty God? But there is also this mysterious statement about Jesus by John the Baptist, which makes his coming to earth sound like a rescue mission as well. “There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). What does this mean?

The mind of our physician friend begins to see that even within this first chapter of John, all the

questions he has had are being addressed. What is God like? He walked the earth 2,000 years ago, and we have a record of what he did and said. Is God interested in me personally? He came to make me his child. Why is there so much pain and suffering? God apparently came to do away with this problem. With this basic understanding, he was filled great anticipation to read on and to answer these questions more satisfactorily.

### **What is the true character of God?**

Reading on in John the physician decided to entertain the assumption made that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh and to then search for the answer to his question, "What is God like?" He pondered these and other stories:

A member of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, sought to have a meeting with Jesus. He didn't come openly during the day, but at night, perhaps to avoid the public embarrassment of being seen with Jesus who was obviously despised by the Pharisees. Despite the request for a secret meeting, Jesus didn't say, "If you are too ashamed to be seen with the God of the universe in public, too bad!" Surprisingly, God in human form graciously and with no wounded pride met Nicodemus in quiet seclusion.

Sometime later Jesus was at a well where he happened to meet a Samaritan woman. His disciples saw no value in her, but the better part of an entire chapter is devoted to the tender conversation between Jesus and this woman who had been divorced five times. What would this say about God, that he would place such immense value on a woman who most others would only look down on with scorn?

Jesus revealed such compassion as he went about healing the sick. To the man who lay crippled on his mat for 38 years, Jesus didn't launch into a lengthy sermon, but simply had compassion for the man and asked, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6). Before healing the man born blind, he first shattered his disciples' ignorant belief that the misfortunate are somehow cursed by God. "Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?" Jesus seemed to turn their entire theology upside down by answering, "His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sin..." (John 9:2,3). Later he healed the man's spiritual eyes as well. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answered, 'Tell me who he is sir, so that I can believe in him!' Jesus said to him, 'You have already seen him, and he is the one who is talking with you now.' 'I believe, Lord!' the man said, and knelt down before Jesus" (John 9:35-38).

Jesus' words were remarkably gentle, yet at the same time sharp and to the heart of the matter. He did not cater to the religious leaders of the day, but openly and clearly spoke the truth. "I am not looking for human praise. But I know what kind of people you are, and I know that you have no love for God in your hearts" (John 5:41, 42). And what sane man in the history of the world has made the claim to be sinless? "Which one of you can prove that I am guilty of sin? If I tell the truth, then why do you not believe me?" (John 8:46). After reading the account of Jesus' words, it was entirely believable to read that when the guards came to arrest him, all they could do was listen with stunned silence and exclaim, "Nobody has ever talked the way this man does!" (John 7:46)

Jesus was never rude or arrogant towards those who hated him. When harshly rejected as a heretic by

the religious leaders, his sometimes sharp words of reply did not seem to arise from a desire to injure, but rather from a pure and worthy motive that they would see the error of their ways and come to him. He frequently expressed great sorrow that the ones he came to save did not love him. "If God really were your Father, you would love me, because I came from God and now I am here" (John 8:42).

Even more amazing than his kind treatment of the woman caught in adultery, to whom he merely said, "I do not condemn you either" (John 8:11), is the way he treated the self-righteous men who brought her. Surely he could have exposed the sins of those frauds and publicly humiliated them, but instead he knelt down and wrote a few words in the dirt for their eyes only. It would seem by their reaction in quickly departing the scene that Jesus was detailing to each of them their own darkest secrets as if to suggest, "Who are you to condemn others?" But why would Jesus rebuke them so gently and allow them to walk away with their reputations intact? Could it be that God even loves his enemies?

It was becoming clear to the physician that Jesus was either God, or he was crazy. His bold claims to the Pharisees cannot be misinterpreted. "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see the time of my coming; he saw it and was glad." They said to him, "You are not even fifty years old---and you have seen Abraham?" "I am telling you the truth," Jesus replied. "Before Abraham was born, *I Am*". So outraged were they at this claim to divinity, "they picked up stones to throw at him..." (John 8:56-59).

The idea that this is really God in the flesh is almost too big a concept to keep in mind as he intently reads on. The implications are staggering. Is God genuinely concerned about the daily sorrows of life? Jesus was certainly moved by the pain of others. When his friend Lazarus died, "Jesus saw her weeping, and he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved. 'Where have you buried him?' he asked them. 'Come and see, Lord,' they answered. Jesus wept" (John 11:33-35).

When Mary poured expensive perfume on his feet she must have been deeply hurt by the words of Judas. "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?" (John 12:5). Was Jesus sensitive to her humiliation? Once again, he turned down the opportunity to publicly expose the one who was at fault – this time Judas – who "said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would help himself from it" (John 12:6). Instead, Jesus defended Mary. "Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial. You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me" (John 12:7,8). Surely Mary left that night with a deeper love for Jesus than ever before because he welcomed and appreciated her expression of love. Judas, on the other hand, although gently rebuked by Jesus, still maintained his position as the one in charge of finances, though Jesus had full knowledge that he was a thief.

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room. Despite the importance of the meeting, the disciples were instead jockeying for their own position of power in the kingdom. How did Jesus choose to get their attention and to remind them that his kingdom is not of this world? "Then he poured some water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist" (John 13:5). After finishing, he told them, "Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice!" (John 13:17). What truth? Would it not be

the truth that the God of the Universe washes dirty feet? And more than that, it would appear that Jesus washed twelve pairs of dirty feet that evening, not eleven. Even his betrayer left the upper room with a clean pair of feet that evening as Jesus, despite having a full knowledge of his intentions, humbly stooped to wash his feet.

The physician had to re-read chapter 13, this time substituting the word “God” for “Jesus” just to experience more fully the concept that God is the type of Person who would wash the dirty feet of his betrayer....simply unbelievable!

But, oh glorious God, it gets even better than that! Jesus said to Judas, “Hurry and do what you must!” None of the others at the table understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas was in charge of the money bag, some of the disciples thought that Jesus had told him to go and buy what they needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor” (John 13:27-29). Judas left the upper room, reputation intact and with some of the disciples even under the assumption that he left for a worthy motive! Jesus once again turned down the opportunity to embarrass and humiliate those who were against him.

As the character of Jesus explodes out of the pages this far into the book of John, there is a strong impression made that Jesus watched Judas leave the upper room with great sadness, not anger. And then it dawned on the physician what was really happening. Jesus was forever losing one of his children and surely he loved Judas. Jesus must have washed his feet with special care. The man imagines that he would have done the same for one of his own children, even if he knew that they were leaving to stab him in the back.

Knowing that the time left was very short, Jesus seemed determined to leave his disciples with the most important teachings he possibly could. “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me. Now that you have known me, he said to them, ‘you will know my Father also, and from now on you do know him and you have seen him’” (John 14:6,7). Remembering earlier verses in the book such as John 3:16, “For God so loved the world he gave his Son...”, the physician concludes that God had great love for human beings even prior to Jesus’ coming in human form. The meaning then that no one goes to the Father except through Jesus could not be that the Father’s attitude is now more accepting towards mankind because of what Jesus did. Rather, if we have come to know Jesus, we also have come to know the Father, because they are the same in character, and it is in this sense that we now come to the Father – because we already know him as revealed in the man Jesus! Jesus came primarily to reveal what God is like – “from now on you do know him and you have seen him” (John 14:7). Philip, however, seemed to miss the point and “said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father; that is all we need.’ Jesus answered, ‘For a long time I have been with you all; yet you do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Why, then, do you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:8,9).

Jesus went on to describe the kind of relationship that one can experience with the Almighty God. “I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends...” (John 15:15). Can one really be friends with God? Jesus repeats this remarkable claim with different words. “And eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent” (John 17:3). Jesus reveals that God, more than anything else, desires a

personal, intimate, and “knowing” friendship with his children.

After so convincingly revealing what God is like, having such a relationship with a God who is just like Jesus is slowly becoming the greatest desire in the heart of the physician.

What more would Jesus possibly need to reveal about God? It seemed clear up to this point in the book of John that God is entirely trustworthy, gentle and humble in character, and also supremely caring towards all of his intelligent creatures. But yet, there was a mysterious conflict yet to unfold. “I cannot talk with you much longer, because the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me, but the world must know that I love the Father; that is why I do everything as he commands me. Come, let us go from this place” (John 14:30,31).

“The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them”, and Jesus could do nothing less than to reveal the greatest love of God (John 15:13). And so, he submissively lays down his life and allows his creatures, though he is the Creator, to torture him, nail him to a cross, and kill him. “No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will” (John 10:18). And, as his mangled body slowly dies on the cross, he thoughtfully looks out and remembers to care for his mother. “Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, ‘He is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘She is your mother.’ From that time the disciple took her to live in his home” (John 19:26,27). And then.....**God died.**

### **Time for church**

So compelling was the story of Jesus in the book of John, the physician now sees himself as God’s devoted friend. He desires to meet with other Christians, for he now considers himself to be one. In his mind, to believe that God is just like Jesus must make Christians the happiest people on the planet. And so, he attends his local Christian church, eager to listen and to share with those who have been God’s friend longer than he.

But, to his surprise, on this particular day of worship, he heard very little of what he had just read in the book of John. A hymn was sung about being “covered by the blood”. During the sermon, the pastor said, “Jesus could have pricked his finger and solved the problem, but he wanted to go all the way”. He did not come away from the book of John with the idea that a drop of blood had anything to do with solving the problem. There was also much time in the sermon devoted to the idea that Jesus would take care of financial worries by returning a double portion for those who would step out in faith by donating to the church. He didn’t doubt Jesus’ ability to do this, but his reading of John didn’t seem to suggest that God would place such emphasis on the material things of this world. He recalled that a crook was in charge of Jesus’ money.

Later, the pastor said, “God spent his anger at the cross, and now he’s not angry with me any more!” But after reading about Jesus and that he is the same as God in character, he could not imagine that God was ever angry with him, especially with the words, “For God so loved the world...” still fresh in mind. Then, there was some fearful talk about the hellfire that awaited those who did not give their lives to God. In utter amazement, the physician tried to imagine that Jesus, who loved even his

enemies, could possibly send them to a place of eternal torture. His mind was spinning with conflicting images of God. Could it be that the Father is different in character than the Son? But Jesus was so clear, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Finally, the pastor concluded with “good news” that, “Praise be to God, for Jesus pleads with the Father for us.”

On his way home, the man now hesitated to speak with the God he had come to love and trust, and to whom he had recently been silently communicating with. The book of John so fresh in his mind, he recalled the pastors’ final sentence, and quickly found the place where Jesus even labeled his words as plain, clear, and free of all symbols. “I have been speaking to you in parables - but the time is coming to give up parables and tell you plainly about the Father. When that time comes, you will make your requests to him in my own name, for I need make no promise to plead to the Father for you, for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. Yes, I did come from the Father and I came into the world. Now I leave the world behind and return to the Father.’ ‘Now you are speaking plainly,’ cried the disciples, ‘and are not using parables.’” (John 16:25-30, JB Phillips). How could the pastor contradict such plain words of Jesus? And why were so many heads in church nodding in agreement?

The man again felt like talking to Jesus, his new best Friend. But, were the warm and tender feelings he had experienced towards God merely a figment of his imagination? On his knees and filled with a sense of betrayal, he vowed that if God is not just like Jesus, then he would rather not enter into a relationship with him at all. As he prayed, he was filled with a burning desire to learn the truth for himself, rather than to trust his view of God to what anyone else told him.

### **God as revealed in the Bible**

As it so happened, the next 4 days had been planned with some friends at the beach. He called off the engagement and determined to read from Genesis through to Revelation until the issue was fully settled in his mind. He arose before dawn every day and read until late, with the sole purpose to develop a harmonious picture of God’s true character. Very late on the 4<sup>th</sup> day, he finished Revelation chapter 22. With the words of Genesis 1 still fresh in his mind, he reflected on the meaning. On the one hand, he could see how it would be possible, by selectively taking a story here and there, to view God as a deity who is strict, punishing, and one to be greatly feared. In his mind, he lumped together all the stories in which he could not easily harmonize the character of God with the life of Jesus.

Why did God put a beautiful tree right in the middle of the garden and then tell his children, in essence, “If you eat the fruit of that tree, I’ll have to kill you”? The man thought of his own children. Would it not be like putting a beautiful cookie jar on the table and then threatening the children with an unspeakable penalty for disobedience? God then threw them out of the garden on their first offense. Later he drowned the whole world but the eight who got on the boat. Then God rained fire down on a rebellious city and turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt for casting a glance back to the home where she had raised her children. Later he thundered on Mount Sinai and told his people not to come too close, or they would be killed. He then gave his children a long list of rules, such as ordering that gluttonous children and Sabbath breakers should be stoned to death. These rules extend into elaborate details about the tabernacle service and the sacrificial system, and several times it is mentioned that in the death of these animals “the aroma was pleasing to the LORD”. Then, God’s friend Moses, at the end of 40 years of selfless toil, broke down in frustration and struck the rock. For that one mistake, he

was punished by God and not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Upon entering Canaan, Achan and his whole family (even the children and their pets!) were ordered to be stoned to death for breaking a rule. Uzzah was struck down for reaching up to steady the ark. Elisha cursed some children, and God sent 2 bears to tear them apart.

His list of difficult stories continued into the New Testament as well. What did Jesus really mean in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus? Will those in heaven really have open communication with those in hell who beg for a drop of water on their tongue? And, after Jesus' resurrection, he read as Ananias and Sapphira were struck down for their unwillingness to pay enough of their offering. Would not the recently resurrected Jesus have been directly involved in their death? And finally in the book of Revelation, which is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1, RSV), there were so many complex and difficult symbols, including the description of the punishment dealt out to the wicked. "The smoke of the fire that torments them goes up forever and ever. There is no relief day or night..." (Revelation 14:11).

Yet, despite these challenging passages in scripture, there is so much he could counter on the other side, and he recalled just a few of the many stories in the Bible outside the life of Jesus in which the tender love and compassion of God was beyond description. Perhaps his view of God in the difficult stories was not slanted in the right way. He remembered the time that he was falsely accused of being a harsh and severe father. While gardening one summer he caught a glimpse of his 2-year-old son as he playfully began to climb out from his 2<sup>nd</sup> story bedroom window. With a voice of anger and authority he had never before used, he shouted and threatened until his son, with great shock and fear at his fathers' outburst, tearfully climbed back into his bedroom. The next door neighbors had witnessed his dramatic explosion but were oblivious to the fact that his son was about to plunge headfirst into the concrete. For several months they were under the assumption that, despite his outward pleasant and kind demeanor, because of this angry display he was a very severe and punishing father.

He wondered if God also was being unfairly judged in his actions. Is there another way of looking at those stories in which God is still seen to be just like Jesus in character? Does God also shout at times out of necessity and love for his children, because the consequences of their foolish actions can be so disastrous?

### **The war in heaven**

The other dimension which fascinated the physician was the description of a great battle which started in heaven. This war seemed to weave itself all the way, cover-to-cover, through the Bible – from the Garden of Eden where Satan tells Eve that God is a liar; to the cross where, just before Jesus died, he said "now the ruler of this world will be overthrown" (John 12:31); and through the book of Revelation which discussed this war in more detail than any other book. He wondered how his own personal salvation would relate to such large-scale events.

But, perhaps a better understanding of this conflict would help to explain the ongoing pain and suffering in the world. The Bible tells of an adversary who, for some reason, has been allowed to persist in his efforts against God. And he goes about his work with great and subtle deception. "Even Satan can disguise himself to look like an angel of light!" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Why would God

permit this? “From the very beginning he was a murderer and has never been on the side of truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he is only doing what is natural to him, because he is a liar and the father of all lies” (John 8:44). Why not blot such a wicked being and his followers out of existence?

The Bible describes numerous other unseen intelligent beings, both good and bad. This planet is described as a “spectacle for the whole world of angels...” (1 Corinthians 4:9) and the angels who are loyal to God are apparently learning from the experience of God’s true followers (the church) on earth: “God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, in order that at the present time, by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms” (Ephesians 3:9, 10). It seems that what has transpired on earth is not only for our benefit, but for angels as well. “These are things which even the angels would like to understand” (1 Peter 1:12).

The man is intrigued with the thought that the often painful experience of living in a world of war, death, and disease, is somehow tied to a much larger conflict. In fact, the earth appears to be the battleground in which the war is being fought. God came onto Satan’s turf, so to speak, to win the war. “And on that cross Christ freed himself from the power of the spiritual rulers and authorities; he made a public spectacle of them by leading them as captives in his victory procession” (Colossians 2:15).

In awe, the man reflects on the majesty and scope contained within the Bible. Much like an epic movie or novel, it is filled with great mystery and suspense. Yet, despite just having read the script from beginning to end, and was still unable to connect all the dots. How could the humiliating death of Jesus on the cross have succeeded in defeating Satan and winning the war, but yet at the same time secure his own personal salvation? How do these two positive outcomes relate to the death of God in a human body?

Exhausted from days of intense mental exertion, the physician collapses into a deep sleep. His entire frame of reference for what is important in life has been forever changed. Although he still has many unanswered questions, his conviction of a God who is personally engaged in his own life is stronger than ever. At times when he closes his eyes, he imagines himself face to face with Jesus. He recalls the many times Jesus had gently spoken to his thoughts through the years in his growing conviction that there is a God. But now, when he wants to actually hear God’s voice most clearly, he must only pick up the Bible and read. Slowly the pieces of the puzzle have come together and he trusts that with God’s help, the unknown will someday make more sense. He desires more than anything for the unseen world to become more real to him than the one he sees every day. He resolves to hinge every other belief on this one: that God is exactly like Jesus in character; or, perhaps better said – **Jesus is God**.

### **New glasses for looking at God**

It is perhaps naïve to suggest that there could be a person such as this physician. Very few enter into a discovery process about God having no preconceived ideas about his character. Most everyone carries a variety of deep-seated beliefs as to the nature of God from numerous and very obvious sources: ones parents and their religion, school, various forms of media, and social contacts, etc. Even an atheist cannot avoid such exposure, and in fact, it is often the presentation of a ridiculous and inconsistent picture of God that may eventually lead one to become an atheist – “if God is like that, forget it!”

I can think of no better scenario for a first look at God than to see God as revealed in the book of John, for in this book (in my opinion) we have the clearest picture of God's character. Our experience with God is entirely dependent on the kind of Person we believe him to be. For this reason, what an advantage it is to begin with a picture of a God who is just like Jesus, rather than to start with a story such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And, if we are shocked at the thought that Jesus could burn a city to the ground, we are not alone for even God's friend Abraham asked sharply, "Surely you won't kill the innocent with the guilty. That's impossible! You can't do that. If you did, the innocent would be punished along with the guilty. That is impossible. The judge of all the earth has to act justly" (Genesis 18:25).

A true understanding of God's character is the cornerstone of every other belief. For this reason, most of the New Testament tells and retells the story of a relatively short period of time – God's 3 and ½ year ministry on earth. If there are questions about what God is like, this is the clearest picture we have. But yet despite this evidence about God, many carry in their minds a seemingly incompatible picture of God's true character, and these conflicting views frequently have the effect to separate one from God. In the Old Testament, for example, we do not have the advantage or frame of reference to "watch" God in the flesh dealing with this or that crisis situation, and God can at times appear to be different in character than as Jesus revealed him to be. As we struggle in these difficult stories to maintain the belief that God is just like Jesus, I would propose that we must learn to view all of history through the "glasses" of God's life and death on the earth. Whenever God appears to be different in character than Jesus, all red flags should go up, and we should follow the example of Abraham and ask God.

Deep down, do we have a warm feeling in our hearts for Jesus, but fear and trepidation towards the Father? Fear is not meant to be part of a true understanding of God for, as John says, "There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear. So then, love has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid..." (1 John 4:18). Our questions about the character of God must be fully addressed. And, because it so directly relates to the character of God and whether he can be trusted, which is the basis of our salvation, our study of the Bible must include examining the evidence from every difficult story, especially the ones in which God is sometimes cast in a negative light. Does God really threaten with eternal torture if we reject his love? Is one member of the God-head appeased by the blood of another member of the God-head? What about all of the killing in the Old Testament – killing that appears to be sanctioned by God himself at times?

I believe that the struggle to answer these and many other questions is not a mere academic exercise, but an important part of our maturing relationship with God. In my own experience, additional light about God's true character has in every case led to an improved picture of God. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is a rule that a more accurate knowledge of God always leads one to see a God who is more like Jesus in character – a God of love, compassion, humility, soft-spoken gentleness, and supreme forgiveness. Never have the eventual results of inquiry and investigation about God led to disappointment that "God, you're just not as good as I thought you were". As we see more clearly there will be a greater desire to make Jesus our Lord and Best Friend, and a greater belief that Jesus' words about the Father are really true: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

## Can we really ask God?

Finally, we should establish that it is really safe to ask God these questions. Is God offended by our sincere questions? If Jesus were once again in physical form on the earth, how would he respond if someone humbly asked why he had to die? Would he say, “No questions, just believe”? Or, “It’s taken care of. You really don’t need to understand.” Is it even possible that he would love to entertain such questions and that he greatly desires a people who are earnestly searching for a clearer understanding?

All through the Bible, God is portrayed as inviting our discussion and understanding. “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18, RSV). Again and again, we see God having conversations with his friends, such as Abraham and Moses, with whom he even spoke “face to face, just as someone speaks with a friend” (Exodus 33:11). On one occasion, Moses was so perplexed at God’s inaction, he said, “Lord, why do you mistreat your people? Why did you send me here? Ever since I went to the king to speak for you, he has treated them cruelly. And you have done nothing to help them!” (Exodus 5:22,23). God did not respond with a stern reprimand, “How dare you speak with the Almighty God with such accusations!” By contrast, he frequently referred to Moses as his friend!

In many of the Psalms, David at times speaks almost reproachfully to God. “What hurts me most is this – that God is no longer powerful” (Psalms 77:10). Is this true? As David’s conversation with God continues, however, he is patiently led to the truth. “I will remember your great deeds, Lord; I will recall the wonders you did in the past” (Psalms 77:11). By the end of Psalms 77, David’s picture of God is restored and one is left with the impression that God was even pleased with the honest and open doubts that David expressed, because in the end it led to a greater confidence and trust in God. How much good can a Psychiatrist do for a patient who is not open and honest when he comes for appointments? How much more trustworthy and able to heal is our God when we come to him with all of our questions?

Jesus, in his brief ministry, was continually fielding questions and in dialog with the people, often in very informal settings such as over a meal or walking from one town to another. After the resurrection, while his followers were still in deep discouragement about his death, Jesus met with two of them on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-35). He walked with them in disguise and discussed the events of his life and death in the light of all the evidence in the Old Testament. As the men listened, their hearts were thrilled as they saw the light of truth. “Wasn’t it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). Why didn’t Jesus from the beginning reveal who he was, perhaps through display of bright light and visible glory? Surely they would have fallen down and worshiped him and spread the good news about his resurrection. Instead, Jesus first wanted them to understand based on the appeal to their reason and common sense. It appears from this story that God’s methods are to lead his followers to an intelligent understanding of things, based on evidence and inquiry. This has a lasting hold and strengthens trust in God, more than a show of power or a claim such as, “Believe me because I’m God – no questions!”

As another example of this principle, when John the Baptist was in prison, discouraged about his situation and perhaps wondering why Jesus wasn’t doing more to help him, he sent his disciples with the sad question, “are you the one John said was going to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). Jesus did not reply, “I am, and I expect you to believe it”. Rather, he quoted several well known passages from Isaiah which explained the mission of the Messiah and he showed the men

how he was fulfilling this prophesy. “Jesus answered, ‘Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. How happy are those who have no doubts about me!’” (Matthew 11:4-6). There is no question that when John received this message, he now knew, based on the convincing evidence Jesus gave, that he was the Messiah.

The methods of earnestly seeking for truth that is based on trust and evidence is demanded in every other experience of life. Why should these not be the methods used in religion? For example, a patient coming to the doctor with an ailment would bolt from the door if the doctor interrupted 5 seconds into the interview with the claim, “I know exactly what’s going on. Trust me, I’m the doctor! We need to operate!” No, the patient needs to dialogue with the physician. In the process, trust in the physician develops, and the patient is then accepting of the diagnosis and the plan of treatment. While it would be impossible for the patient to understand everything that took the doctor years of training to acquire, if the patient feels that the doctors’ explanation of the diagnosis and required treatment makes absolutely no common sense, then there is little chance of compliance.

In the same way, our Heavenly Physician desires that we sit down with him and experience an interactive exchange as we meet with him to prayerfully read the Bible and reflect on the truth. He wants us to ask our questions and that in turn we listen attentively to his response. Fortunately, he has given so much evidence that we, like the two men on the Emmaus road, can also believe based on the appeal to our intelligent understanding.