

What is God like?

Introduction

Today we live in a society that emphasizes individualism: man is all-mighty, all-knowing and in control of his own fate. The statement is often heard: My God is like this. I think of God in this way. The Bible says of the last times that the end will not come before a falling away takes place and the man of sin is revealed. Man opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped. He wishes to sit in the temple of God as if he is God (2 Thes. 2:3-4). The New Age movement creates a god according to their own liking. Individuals can establish their own measuring stick of truth. They also say that truth is a subjective matter. The Bible, however, defines truth. Jesus said of himself: "I am the way, the truth, and life."

Hidden God

God cannot be comprehended by reason or knowledge. What do we know about God? The Scriptures declare that God is incomprehensible (see Job 11:7; 21:14; 36:26; Ps. 77:19; Rm. 11:33). Complete knowledge of God is not attainable by man upon earth. Whatever man knows of God, he knows through God's own revelation of Himself either in the realm of nature or in His holy word. Had God not revealed Himself, man never would have known him, since God is a spirit, who dwells "in the light which no man can approach unto" (1 Tim. 6:16). No man has ever seen God and lived (Ex. 33:20; Job. 1:18).

God reveals himself through nature, through phases of history, and in fates of life and sicknesses. These are known as general revelation. Atheism is a school of thought which denies the existence of God. The Bible says, however: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God' " (Ps. 14:1). During the end of the last century atheism became a common phenomenon in Europe, especially among the highly educated people.

A certain scholar went to Lapland to study nature. He unknowingly got a believing young Lapp boy as his guide. Together they slept by a fire in a Lappish teepee. The researcher noticed something different about this boy. Even though it was cold in winter Lapland, the boy never drank alcohol to warm his body. In spite of the many obstacles on the journey, the guide never cursed or swore. And every evening the boy prayed before going to bed at night. The researcher began to tease the boy: "Why do you pray to God," he asked. "Have you seen God or perhaps touched Him?" "No," the boy replied. The scientist laughed and said: "There is no such thing that cannot be seen or touched." Early the next morning the scientist woke up to go outside. It was still dark and the northern lights were dancing across the sky. He quickly returned to the tent and woke his guide. "A wolf circled our tent last night," the scientist said. "How do you know?" the guide replied. "Did you see it or touch it?" he added. "No," said the scientist, "but I surely know wolf tracks when I see them." "There couldn't have been anything if you didn't see it or touch it," the guide continued. Together they stepped outside and examined the tracks. Wolf tracks they were. "Do you know what these tracks tell us," the guide stated? "Of course," said the scientist, "a wolf circled the tent last night." The guide then added: "And we can be sure of that on the basis of these tracks." "Look at the beautiful northern lights dancing across the sky,"

said the guide. “And examine the silhouette of the fells against the dark sky. See how harmonious the Lappish winter nature is. These are all the fingerprints and handiwork of my God. I know my God by his fingerprints. And the longing in my heart testifies that my God has made all of this. God exists. God is near me. Even here in the middle of the Lappish fells I can approach my God and speak to Him in prayer,” said the guide to the scientist. The Psalmist writes in Ps. 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
The skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.

The Bible states in the Old Testament that God is as high as heaven is above the earth, and as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:11,12). So much higher are God's thoughts from ours. St. Augustine illustrated this idea when someone asked him what God is like. At that time he was standing on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Augustine stooped down and dug a small hole in the sand. “If you are able to put all of the water of the ocean into that hole,” Augustine explained, “I will be able to tell you what God is like.” Augustine scooped some water and put it into the small hole in the sand. Together they noticed that the level of the ocean didn't move. So small are the abilities of man (another application: To understand the triune God is as difficult as the little boy trying to drain the sea into the hole),

Triune God

God is a triune God. God the Father and Creator; God the Son and Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. This is difficult to comprehend, for in mathematics we learn that one plus one plus one is three. Yet, in this case, even though there are three godheads, there is only one God. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth (as there be gods many, and lords many.) But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him” (1 Cor. 8: 5-6).

God creates and maintains the world. The first article of the creed states: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Luther writes an explanation for this in the small catechism: “I believe that God has made me and all other creatures; that He has given and still preserves to me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses; and that He daily provides me with food and clothing, home and house . . . and all that I need for this body and life. . .” When God performed His creation work, he concluded each day by saying: It is good! God allows handicaps and disabilities, and they serve a purpose, which is many times unknown to us (cf. Job. 9:1-4). A group of people were on a field trip to an

institution for the handicapped. One individual said to a believer that she does not believe that God exists. “How can there be a God, called a God of love, when there is so much sickness and

suffering in the world? This entire world and its fates are in man's hands.” The group entered that part of the institution where the most severely handicapped were located. A believing nurse happened to work in this ward. There was one child without eyes. Other children were without hands. They only had wing-like structures which flapped in the place of arms. Some children were only a lump of flesh that were fed with tubes and cared for. The group of people listened as the nurse explained. All these children are God’s creation. They accomplish a unique task here on earth. Every one of these children understands a certain matter — that they are loved, and they respond to love in their own personal way. The atheist teacher who just earlier said there is no God, began to cry and say: “I retract all that I said. Look! I have two eyes. I have two ears. I can move and walk. But I am continually dissatisfied and bitter. Now I do believe that God exists.”

God hates sin, but loves the sinner. God gave his son to die for the sins of the world. God sent his son to redeem mankind. The second article of the creed states: “I believe in Jesus Christ His only Son, Our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.” Luther explains this in the explanation to the second article of the creed: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord; who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy and precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death.” Why? “In order that I might be his own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. . .”

The work of God continues as the work of the Holy Spirit in His congregation. The keys of the kingdom have been left in God’s congregation, with the believers. Whose sins are forgiven here on earth are forgiven also in heaven. Forgiveness is possible only through the power of the Holy Ghost The Holy Ghost sanctifies, gives new birth, and forgives sins, using the mouth of believers. The Holy Ghost gives everlasting life to the soul of man, who believes. The Holy Ghost joins all believers together through bonds of love.

Nature or Characteristics of God

Two names of God in the Hebrew Scriptures are Elohim and Jehovah. The latter means “He who is,” as we recall from the reply to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3). These terms together with other names emphasize certain attributes of the Godhead, such variations being rendered in our English version, “God Almighty,” “The Living God,” “The Most High,” “The Lord,” or “The God of Hosts.” The English word is identical with the Anglo-Saxon word for “good,” and therefore it is believed that the name God refers to the divine goodness. Luther writes: “It is God alone from whom we receive all good and by whom we are delivered from all evil. Ancient Germans utilized the name ‘God,’ derived from the word ‘good,’ because he is an eternal fountain which gushes forth nothing but the good, and from which flows all that is good and is so called.”

There are many metaphors for God in the Bible: shield, rock, fortress, protection, refuge and strength (see Ps. 46 and hymn 201). God is also known as king, shepherd and Father, especially our heavenly Father (see Mt. 6: 26-32). God is a spirit, who is eternal. He is the first and last. He is all-knowing, all-seeing, and everywhere. God is all-mighty, righteous, holy, and not to be ridiculed.

What happens when the fear of God is lost? "I am the Lord thy God, thou shall have no other gods before me," we recite in the catechism. Luther explains: "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things." In the Large Catechism Luther writes: "See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never seek another." We can see clearly what has happened in our society when the fear of God and sin is lost. In the 60's such things as divorce, abortion, cohabitation we considered very shameful and evil vices by the society in general. Today such acts are done openly and without shame. If a person loses the fear of God and the fear of sin, morals will degrade and erode. This is a danger for a believer as well. Joseph had the correct fear or reverence for God when tempted by the Potiphar's wife. He said: how could I do such an evil thing against my God." The Bible states: "The wages of sin is death" (Rm. 6:23). "If you live after the flesh, you shall die: but if you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live" (Rm. 8:13).

A God of Providence

God is not only the creator of the world and mankind, but he also maintains and cares for it. We can also see how God cared for the people of Israel during the wilderness journey and Joseph in Egypt (see also: Ps. 8:5; 23:1; Mt. 6:25). Is it only God's blessing when one is successful? One may think that as a believer everything should always go well. The Psalmist struggled with this question in Ps. 73.

For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. . . They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily . . . And they say. How doth God know? And is there knowledge in the most High? Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

The disciples perhaps thought they would be spared from difficult times because they were followers of Christ. But Jesus explained differently to them as he was sending them out on mission journeys (Mt 10:16-30). Even though God allows trials, such as the examples in Job's life, his children are yet not forgotten (Rm. 8: 28). God wishes to reveal the preciousness of faith through them (1 Peter 1: 6,7; 1 Peter 4: 12, 13). To Job God said of Satan: he will come so far and no further. And here shall your proud waves be halted (Job 38:11). The nation of Finland suffered greatly during World War II against great odds in the battle against the Soviet Union. Though they suffered many losses. God spared the country for the sake of the elect.

God is omniscient (all-knowing). Not one hair will fall from our head without his knowledge. He protects and keeps us on the palm of His hand, and will not allow us to be swept off. The Psalmist was comforted when he was asked to go into the temple, and heard:

“Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shall guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: but thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works" (Ps. 73: 23-28).

Conclusion

Our joy is to be near God. Our strength is in the gospel (Rm. 1: 16). God’s ways are not our ways (Rm. 11:33-34). God is great, but we are small. No one can comprehend His majesty. For now we partially understand and see as if through a foggy window. But soon we will be able to see Him in fullness (1 Cor. 13: 12).

Discussion Questions

1. What happens when the fear of God and sin disappears? [Jeff Salahab]
2. Trials in life — A person experiencing difficult trials may question — Why? Has God forgotten me? Am I even a believer? [Hanelle Kiviniemi]
3. What do handicap children teach us? What does God wish to communicate through them? [Kathleen Keplinger]
4. The dangers of reason and the struggles of reason with our faith life. What are the dangers and blessing of education? [Heidi Haapala]
5. 5. Psalms 73: Inequalities of life – ungodly proper / tribulations of the believers.

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