

What is God Like?

By David Feddes

There is a God, but nobody knows what he's like or what he's thinking. He doesn't care about us or get involved in our lives. At least that's what one prominent journalist says. Roger Rosenblatt, a longtime writer for *Time* magazine, declares, "I would like to offer the opinion that God is not thinking about us. Or if he is, one has no way of knowing that." Rosenblatt mentions fanatical terrorists and famous pastors in the same breath, as the type of characters who believe that God thinks about people. "On the other hand," Rosenblatt declares, "there are folks like me who are fanatically uncertain about what God is thinking. I believe in him, all right," he says, but he thinks God is unknowable and uninvolved.

"The essential act of faith, it seems to me, is wonder—a sort of involuntary fascination in awe," writes this influential journalist. "I don't believe in seeking, and I don't believe in finding." He also doesn't believe in praying about specific needs because, he says, "if one prays for gifts and protections, one must naturally assume that God micromanages the universe for the advantage of particular believers." Rosenblatt prefers to think of prayer as "an act of unconscious adoration," with no specific requests and no particular beliefs about God.

In this approach, he says, "Religion becomes more generous and modest." He says "good hearted arrogance" is what "makes people decide that God created humans in his own image" and cares about them. He proclaims, "The God worth worshiping is the one who pays us the compliment of self-regulation, and we might return it by minding our own business. So indefinite is my idea of God that I do not even connect it to morality. It is pleasant to believe that God wants us to behave well, and that if we do, we may be making those choices that he hoped for when he let us alone. Then again, we may not."

Apparently, the only thing you can be sure of about God is that you can't be sure of anything. This talented writer isn't the only one who thinks this way; he just says it more plainly than most. Maybe you have similar thoughts yourself.

Dangerous Religion

One reason this approach is attractive is that religion can be dangerous. Some people have done terrible things in full confidence that they know God and his ways. There have been so many religious fanatics and so much violence in God's name that I can see the appeal of saying that God can't be known, that no book or leader or organized religion has any clue what God is really like, and that we should make decisions without bringing God into the picture. Isn't it better to leave God a mystery than to use him as an excuse for cruelty?

Roger Rosenblatt thinks so, and Salman Rushdie does too. For years Rushdie lived in hiding because Muslim leaders offered a huge reward to kill him after he wrote about Islam in a negative way. When a person has been targeted for death in the name of religion, and when he has seen religiously motivated violence and murder, it's understandable that he wouldn't be a big fan of those who claim to know God and to be acting on God's behalf. Rushdie is wary not only of Islam but of all religion and reference to God. After an eruption of Hindu-Muslim violence in his native India, Rushdie wrote,

In India, as elsewhere in our darkening world, religion is the poison in the blood... Yet we go on skating around this issue, speaking of religion in the fashionable language of "respect." What is there to respect in any of this, or in any of the crimes now being committed almost daily around the world in religion's dreaded name? ... India's problem

turns out to be the world's problem. What happened in India has happened in God's name. The problem's name is God.

I share the sorrow over cruelties committed for religious reasons. But the problem's name is not God. The problem's name is sin. People sinfully follow false ideas about God and sinfully do terrible things to each other, but does that mean it's best to throw out all ideas about God? Communism tried that—and killed more people than any religion has killed. If people come up with false and sinful ideas about God, the answer is not to ignore God. The answer is to face the reality of sin, sift out the false ideas, and meet the true God.

Stark Contrast

A lot of people have been wrong about God, but does that mean we should give up on knowing God and connecting with him? Is God really so mysterious and unknowable that it's useless to ask what he's like? Is God so uninvolved and uninterested in our affairs that prayer is pointless and morality meaningless? Not if Jesus is right. To say that God is unknowable and uncaring is to contradict Christ completely. Jesus came to make God known and to show God cares.

Granted, God is mysterious and can't be known by human effort and reasoning. To that extent Roger Rosenblatt is right. But the fact that our reasoning can't soar to God's level doesn't mean God can't make himself known at our level. That's what God has done in Jesus. As the Bible puts it in John 1:18, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [Jesus Christ], who is at the Father's side, has made him known."

God's ways are higher than our ways, and we shouldn't think that God has nothing better to do than to run errands for us. Again, to that extent Rosenblatt is right. But the fact that God's agenda is greater than ours and includes far more than our individual concerns doesn't mean that God doesn't love us or pay attention to specific prayers. Jesus is proof of God's love and special concern for people. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The contrast is stark. Rosenblatt doesn't believe in asking God for anything in particular. Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). Rosenblatt says, "I don't believe in seeking, and I don't believe in finding." Jesus says, "Seek and you will find" (Matthew 7:7). Rosenblatt rejects the idea "that God micromanages the universe." Jesus says that God clothes each flower, feeds each bird, and numbers every hair on our heads (Matthew 6:25-30; 10:30). Rosenblatt says of humans, "We're all animals," and calls it good-natured arrogance to think God created humanity in his image. But Jesus affirmed the truth of Genesis, which says, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Rosenblatt believes that God leaves us on our own. Jesus tells his followers, "I will not leave you" (John 14:18). "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

Can God be known? Does God care? If Roger Rosenblatt is right, the answer to both questions is no. If Jesus is right, the answer to both questions is yes. So whom should we believe? Who is better qualified, someone who says he doesn't know God at all, or someone who knows God and is one with God?

When Roger Rosenblatt speaks about God, he literally doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm not being nasty when I say that; I'm just taking Rosenblatt at his word. He says he doesn't know anything about God's thoughts or God's involvement in the world. He openly admits his own ignorance. Unfortunately, he doesn't stop there. He wants to make ignorance the standard for everybody. He takes an illogical leap from "I don't know God" to "God can't be

known by anybody.” He leaps from “I don’t see God’s involvement in my life” to “God has left us all on our own and doesn’t much care what happens to us.” He leaps from “I haven’t found God” to “nobody should seek God.” It would be more logical (and more modest) to say, “I don’t know God, and I’m not eager to get acquainted. So if you want to know what God is like, I’m not the one to help you. Ask someone else.”

Jesus knows God and is one with God. To those who choose not to recognize God in Christ, Jesus says, “I am not here on my own, but the one who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me” (John 7:28-29). Now, if Jesus really is from God the Father and has come to earth to make the divine being known to us, then God can be known, and God is love. In John 17:26 Jesus speaks to the Father about his people and says, “I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known, in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Roger Rosenblatt claims that with an unknowable, uninterested God, “Religion becomes more generous and modest.” But is that true? If God made us in his image, cares about every detail of our lives, hears our prayers, and has given his own Son to bring us eternal life and love, is it generous to snatch God’s gifts away? Nothing could be less generous. And is it modest for a man who frankly admits he doesn’t know God to flatly contradict the Son of God? Nothing could be more arrogant. True modesty is not making our own ignorance the standard of religion but rather admitting our limits and depending on God’s revelation of himself in Christ.

When we ask, “What is God like?” we may be tempted to say there’s no way of knowing what God is like. That way nobody will try to impose their views on anyone else, and we can all pursue our own agenda without thinking too much about God. But what if God wants to be known? What if God really does speak in the Bible and befriend us in the person of Jesus Christ? What if he loves us and wants us to enjoy a relationship with him? Then it would be a terrible loss to ignore him, and it would be the greatest possible joy to experience his friendship.

The Living God

God is anything but silent and uninvolved. The Bible is bursting with God’s words and God’s actions. In fact, the Bible often speaks of God as “the living God.” He’s not just a silent, impersonal force; he’s the living God. He’s not just a dry doctrinal formula; he’s the living God. He’s not just a distant mystery; he’s the living God.

It wasn’t a random process that made the world and all living things; it was the living God. It wasn’t a distant dream that parted the water of the Red Sea and made a dry path for the Israelites to escape slavery; it was the living God. It wasn’t a vague emotion that thundered the Ten Commandments and wrote them on stone; it was the living God. Moses marveled, “What mortal man has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived?” (Deuteronomy 5:26)

Why was the huge warrior Goliath defeated by young David? Not because David was tougher or smarter but because the giant “defied the armies of the living God” (1 Samuel 17:36) and David trusted the living God. Why did 185,000 soldiers from Assyria die before they could conquer Jerusalem? Not because of natural causes or wounds received in battle but because their king chose to “insult the living God” (2 Kings 19:16), and God wiped out his forces in a single night. Why did a bunch of vicious lions not touch Daniel when he was thrown into their den? Not because the lions weren’t hungry but because Daniel trusted the Lord, who proved that “he is the living God and he endures forever” (Daniel 6:26). The God of the Bible is living and

active, and his Word is also “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12), bringing salvation to those who trust him and serving as a weapon to defeat God’s enemies.

Let’s not ignore the living God just because there are many dead gods out there. For thousands of years there have been man-made idols and false religions. “But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King” (Jeremiah 10:10). You can’t have a real relationship with a phony God. But if you get to know the living God, you will want more than anything else to know him better and better and experience his action in your life. Your heart’s cry will echo the biblical writers who said, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:2). “My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Psalm 84:2).

In Old Testament times, the living God made himself known through words and actions. In Jesus Christ, the living God speaks even greater words and does even greater miracles. In his words, he speaks with amazing insight and declares God’s way with total authority. In his actions, he makes paralyzed people walk, gives sight to the blind, raises the dead, and makes wild storms become silent simply by giving an order. In Jesus Christ the living God speaks his greatest words and does his greatest miracles, and he does something even more astonishing. In Jesus Christ the living God actually becomes one of us. If you wonder what God is like, focus on Jesus. As Jesus puts it, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father...I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me” (John 14:8-10). Jesus’ friend Peter said to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The eternal Son is just like his Father, the exact representation of God’s being (Hebrews 1:3). So if you want to know what God is like, get to know Jesus.

Jesus is a real person with definite character traits, and it’s possible to know him. If we tell ourselves that it’s impossible to know God, we’re lying to ourselves. It may sound intelligent and tolerant to say that it’s impossible to know what God is like, but in fact God has shown us exactly what he is like, if only we pay attention. Everything Jesus says, God says. Everything Jesus does, God does. Everything Jesus is, God is. For Jesus is God.

It may come as something of a shock that God is this definite and knowable. It seems easier to leave God in a mysterious fog and say either that all religions offer a path to God or that no religions really know God. But when the fog clears, what we see is Jesus. Any religion that ignores Jesus or rejects him as God and Savior is a religion that rejects the living God. Any person who has no relationship with Jesus has no relationship with the living God. The Bible warns, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God... It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 3:12; 10:31).

Have you turned away from the living God? If so, you are in dreadful danger. If you ignore God and offend him, he says, “You are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hosea 1:9) But that can change. God’s love is so eager to forgive and his power so able to transform, that God declares, “In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God’” (Hosea 1:10).

Jesus is the one who makes that happen. Jesus gave his blood “so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14) Believers in Christ can say, “We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). We can even say, “We are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). The Spirit of Christ lives in us, and other people can get to know Christ through us. The Bible tells those who trust Jesus, “You are a letter from Christ ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God”

(2 Corinthians 3:3). What a change—from not knowing God at all to becoming God’s letter to others—and the key to it all is faith in Jesus Christ as the living God.

The Loving God

Jesus reveals God as the living God and as the loving God. The miracles and teachings of Jesus show not only God’s active power and amazing wisdom but also his love. When Jesus calmed a terrible storm that was about to sink his disciples’ boat, he wasn’t just showing his command over nature; he was rescuing those he loved. When Jesus healed sick people and restored disabled people to full health, he wasn’t just showing his power; he was acting out of compassion and love. When Jesus raised dead people back to life, he showed himself superior to the powers of death, but he also showed his love for bereaved people who longed to have their loved ones back. When Jesus allowed himself to be arrested and nailed to a cross, he showed that he would rather die for his people than live without them.

Jesus was and is love in action. When you get to know Jesus, you find that the truth about God comes down to three simple words: “God is love” (1 John 4:16). It is dreadfully sad and harmful to regard God as a distant mystery rather than a loving Father and Friend. The Bible says that God is love and that the most important thing in life is to “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18-19). The evidence that we know God as a loving God is that we become loving people through faith in Christ.

The living, loving God does not keep his distance; he comes near. The Bible says in Acts 17:27 that God wants us to “seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” Our very life and breath come from God. He is all around us, and he wants to live in us.

The Holy Spirit—the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus—lives in the heart of every person who trusts in Jesus. If the Holy Spirit lives in you, he helps you to know God the Father and Jesus Christ better and better. The Holy Spirit makes your character more like Christ. The Holy Spirit is your joy in good times and your comforter in hard times. The Holy Spirit brings supernatural power and direction into your life.

This is what God is like. As the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is love. When you know him by faith, the Father adopts you as his child, the Son is your elder brother and friend, and the Holy Spirit is the presence of the living God right inside your own heart. This living God is so concerned for you that he counts your every hair, and he is as close as your next prayer.