

INTRODUCTION



This book is about God. Quite unashamedly. The reflections are short, and hopefully the illustrations make it relatively easy to understand, but the subject matter is the most difficult, exciting, meaty, and wonderful topic there is: the living God.

If that sounds like a dangerous challenge, it probably is. But I believe that there is nothing anywhere that is more worth reading about and responding to than the character of God. In fact, I am convinced that if your knowledge of God doesn't grow, then neither will you. Let me give you a few reasons why I think theology, the study of God, matters.

Theology matters because of Panida. Panida was fourteen when she was taken from her home in Thailand to Malaysia by a sex trafficker. She arrived in a city she had never seen before, and was told that she had been sold. She was told she had to have sex with between five and ten clients each night, every night, if she was to pay off the debt.

If she refused, she would be beaten, and would not be allowed to eat. She was allowed to sleep between five a.m. and three p.m., in a locked and barred room with seven other slave girls, and was forbidden from even putting her head out of the window. Helpless and terrified, she sat on her bed, waiting.

Thousands of miles away, a group of lawyers and investigators had seen something of the character of God. They had read Amos, and the Psalms, and Isaiah, and encountered the God who championed the cause of orphans and widows and victims. Taking seriously God's anger at injustice and the biblical commandments to set free the oppressed, they set up an organization that (among other things) prosecuted child traffickers and freed sex slaves, funded entirely by the charitable donations of others who had also gained revelation about the God of justice. International Justice Mission (IJM) was born.

Panida never saw her first client. The night she was going to start, a raid was conducted with local police, based on an undercover investigation done by IJM. She was set free without ever having to pay or prostitute herself, and ninety-four other girls were released in the same series of raids—ninety-four rape victims made in the image of God, who were set free because some lawyers they had never met read their Bibles and discovered something about the character of the living God.¹ Theology matters.

Theology matters because of Dave. A tall, sociable salesman in a small town in England, Dave had no background in Christianity and no interest in getting one. Like millions around him, he was destined for an eternity without God. That is, until his first child was born. Looking down at the miracle of life in his hands, Dave couldn't believe

it was an accident, and marveled at the wisdom that God, if he existed, must have in order to create his daughter. It was a life-changing moment. He and his wife Julie repented of their sins, got baptized, and committed themselves to their local church. Twenty years later, having brought up two Christian children, given generously to further the gospel, and run a marriage course numerous times, Dave and Julie are moving three thousand miles away to help build the church in Canada. Revelation of the wisdom of the creator God changed a man, a family, and a church.

There are millions of Daves around the world. Sadly, there remain some Panidas, and there is still work to be done. But it is theology, the revelation of who God is, that saves Daves and frees slaves. Being convinced of God's sovereignty is the only thing that can strengthen a martyr or inspire someone to plant a church in the Muslim world. Seeing his holiness is the only thing that can produce the kinds of revival we read about in church history. Understanding his Fatherhood is the only thing that can mend people broken by abuse and fear. Grasping his grace is the only way to get free of legalism, false expectations, perfectionism, and who knows how many other modern sicknesses. Seeing how scary God is serves as the ultimate weapon against sin. You and I were transformed by revelation of who God is—what Paul calls “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). But that was not the end of our need for theology. It was the start.

Theology also matters for the church as a whole. It can often seem like the world is taunting us, whether through liberal theologians, newspaper columnists, scriptwriters, or whoever, like the Rabshakeh in Isaiah 36:4,

“On what do you rest this trust of yours?” The answer, of course, is the same as it was for Hezekiah: on Yahweh of hosts. Knowing the God in whom we place our trust is the only secure foundation we have.

The character of God is the only basis we have for establishing churches in the first place. Knowing the God of Israel is our foundation for community on earth, and the ultimate answer to those who would prefer to opt out of local church altogether. The multicolored wisdom of God is our foundation for building multiracial, multigenerational, and socially diverse congregations in a world where people like spending time among their own. It is also the reason to establish indigenous churches in countries where very few locals have been converted. If the church is not based on the character of God, it is just a club that people can feel free to join on their own terms. But if it is, community is not optional, because we are expressing who God is to the world.

Theology matters because of mission. In Scripture, the missionary task is always rooted in the character of God. Psalmists cry out for the nations to praise him, and apostles give up their lives to reach new people groups, because of his excellent attributes: “Let the nations be glad, for you judge the peoples with equity!” “That the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.” “To the praise of the glory of his grace.” And so on. When people stop caring about who God is, the imperative for mission fizzles out.

So does the basis for mission’s success. This swings both ways: People can believe God is so independent of us that he doesn’t need us (like the infamous leader who told William Carey that God could save the heathens “without your help”), or they cannot believe he is truly

sovereign, so there is no point in praying. For the apostles, though, God's sovereign freedom was the basis of their missionary success: "And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). His all-surpassing goodness and glorious grace meant that any sacrifice, any persecution or torture, even death itself, was worth it. Good theology will always result in a sacrificial, zealous, joyful mission.

Good theology will also stop the church from becoming irrelevant on social issues. Every year, secular Western liberals write volumes to argue that Jesus was a misunderstood teacher of tolerance, cryptic wisdom, and love for fellow men, who would have had no problem with anything like sexual immorality or abortion or divorce—which all makes him sound suspiciously like a secular Western liberal. On the other hand, rich conservatives can produce an equally distorted mirror image, in which God has lots to say about the family, liberty, and individual responsibility, but nothing at all to say about greed, social justice, or care for the poor—which all makes him sound suspiciously like a rich conservative. Knowing the God of the Bible will protect us from such mistakes. The more we know the God of justice and the God of holiness, the more the global church may end up fighting child slavery in Asia, domestic violence in Africa, materialism in North America, and sexual immorality in Europe with the same vigor.

All of these things—freeing sex slaves, saving individual men and women, transforming people's thinking, establishing churches, going to unreached people groups with the gospel, engaging with social issues around the world—are important. To my mind, they are all but one of the most important things we ever do. But the most important

thing we do, and the biggest reason that theology is important, is worship: glorifying God himself.

Theology fuels worship. We cannot worship what we do not know; we cannot delight in what we have not seen. When I compliment my wife, Rachel, I ground what I say in facts about her. If I didn't know her very well, my relationship with her, and the honor I could give her, would be very limited. It is the same with God. We praise him because we know him. The world's best worshippers are theologians—not necessarily professional scholars, or academics, but theologians, people who know the character of God because they have read about him, gotten to know him, and experienced him in their lives. Missionaries like William Carey, James Hudson Taylor, and Jim Elliot. Songwriters like Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady, and Isaac Watts, and for that matter Stuart Townend, Darlene Zschech, and Matt Redman. Preachers like George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and Jonathan Edwards. These people are worshippers because they are theologians. They have said and done great things because they know God.

Knowing the character of God is like putting heavy logs in the fireplace: When the fire of worship is lit, it burns hotter, brighter, and longer than the guy's down the road who used paper. But that metaphor has a flip side—there is no use in theology that does not turn into worship. Logs that just sit there on the hearth would have been better off staying in the forest. When we learn about objects, it enhances our brains and equips us to use them; when we learn about people, it enhances our relationships and equips us to serve them; when we learn about God, it enhances our lives and equips us to

worship him. So if our theology does not regularly and joyfully lead us to worship, then something is wrong.

For this reason, all of the reflections in this book are written with worship in mind. Some reflections are followed by a brief *Selah*, designed to give some practical application from what we have been studying; others are left deliberately open-ended. Some reflections are quite complex; others are extremely simple. But my prayer is that all of them, no matter what their content, help you delight in the King of Kings. I would like to think that people could use these reflections in any setting—in their devotional times, to prepare preaching, to read on the train, or even in the downstairs bathroom. Theology and worship are for all times and all places. But however you use them, I hope they will provoke you to praise the I AM that they are trying to describe.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Endnote

1. For more information, see International Justice Mission’s Web site, www.ijm.org.

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EXPLORATION I
The Being of God

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GOD EXISTS



The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

—Psalm 14:1

The Bible never tries to prove the existence of God. It would be like a math textbook proving that $1 + 1 = 2$, or a historian trying to show that there was such a thing as the past—there would be no point. To the Bible writers, God’s existence is foundational, essential, and startlingly obvious. So anyone who does not believe in God, the psalmist says, is quite simply a fool. Lots of clever people since then have come up with ways of proving God’s existence, and some of these can be useful. But it is interesting that—in a book spanning two thousand years of history and with stories about all sorts of people who don’t believe in him—the Bible never presents an argument for God’s existence. It is so obvious, it doesn’t need to be argued for.

Many people today think the opposite. Lots of people believe

that nonbelief in God is the default view, and science has removed the need to add God into the picture. People take it for granted that God doesn't exist, and if you say he does, they will want you to prove it scientifically. If you ask them to prove scientifically what they believe, of course, they are very unlikely to be able to—but mostly, they will not see this as a problem, because it seems that the majority agree with them.

There are two problems with this. One, the majority is often dangerously wrong. The majority of German officers in the 1930s agreed with persecuting Jews; the majority of nineteenth-century Europeans thought black people were second-class citizens; the majority of medieval scientists thought the world was flat. But also, lots of beliefs we hold—often, the most important ones!—are just not provable scientifically.

Take the statement: “For something to be true, it must be provable scientifically.” Can that statement be proved scientifically? Can you do an experiment in a lab to demonstrate that it is true? Or how about, “My daughter loves me”? How can that very important statement ever be proven? The fact is, we believe things because they make sense of the world as we see it, not because some outside authority (like scientific proof) says they are true. So the real question is: How does belief or nonbelief in God make sense of the world around us?

You see, every view of the world has to provide an explanation for every fact there is. People who do not believe in God still have to account for beauty, the fact that the world came into being in the first place, the occurrence of miracles, the awareness in people that there is such a thing as evil, the existence of things like conscience and

emotions, and the sense of God that seems to be present in every civilization we have ever discovered. Often the explanations provided for these facts are so ridiculous that they call into question the worldview itself (like the ways atheists try to explain Jesus' empty tomb). Denying the existence of God creates many more problems than it solves.

The biblical perspective, on the other hand, accounts for the unbelief of other people in terms of sin. Look at Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

People don't believe in God because they suppress the truth. They want to be independent of God, without accountability for their actions, and so they don't want there to be a God. As Thomas Nagel, professor of philosophy and law at New York University, wrote recently, "It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope that there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."¹

It is simply foolishness and sin that lead people to deny that God exists. The Bible never argues for God's existence, but titles it as the

foundation stone of all thinking and living, because God's character is so clearly evident in creation. From morality to mercy, from miracles to mountains, God's existence is displayed in all things. Only the fool denies it.

Endnote

1. *Thomas Nagel, The Last Word (New York: OUP, 1997), 130.*

GOD THE BEGINNING



In the beginning, God ...

—Genesis 1:1

In the beginning, God. What a way to start! No lengthy explanations or arguments, just a simple few words that show God was always there. Questions like “Who made God?” or “What was there before him?” are shown here to be as irrelevant as they are silly. God is, was, and always will be the beginning of all things.

As with God’s existence, there are many people today who argue that God was not the beginning, because we can’t prove he was. We have already seen how poor this argument is. On the other hand, it is important that we understand that our belief in God’s pre-existence—the idea that he was there before anything else came to be—is not logically ridiculous, but actually the most likely explanation of why things are as they are.

John Piper gives a helpful way of thinking about this.¹ Go back in time in your mind to the beginning of time, before the Big Bang, before anything we can scientifically understand had happened. We don't know what started it all—it could have been a gas, or it could have been a person. It's a 50/50 shot. We will never be able to turn up a fossil and find out which it was. The only way of coming to a conclusion about it is to look at the world around us, and see whether the person explanation or the gas explanation looks more likely. Does the universe carry the characteristics of a person who created it? Or is it all a random collection of atoms, which in some cases have formed living things?

To some scientists, the universe is exactly that: a random series of matter and events that show no sign of a personal God. Richard Dawkins, the famous scientist and atheist, said this: "In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find a rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference ... DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."²

To most people (including many scientists!), this is ridiculous.³ Quite apart from the social and moral dangers of believing that all people, from Mother Teresa to Hitler, are simply dancing to the music of their DNA, there are a number of properties in the universe that suggest design, purpose, evil, and good. The fact that we are aware of "good" or "evil" at all is an obvious example. If everything in the

world is “blind pitiless indifference,” why do we have a sense of good or bad? Why aren’t we all striving to have as many offspring as possible, as you would expect if there were no personal qualities in the universe? Conscience is another example. In evolutionary terms it is difficult to explain, whereas if we are created by a person, it makes perfect sense. Or take our attitude to things like time and death—two of the most certain and normal things there are. Why do we fear death, and mourn for people, sometimes people we don’t even know? Why do all cultures known to us observe burial rituals of some kind? Why are we surprised by death, and surprised even by the passing of time? C. S. Lewis, in fact, sees this as strong evidence for man’s eternal destiny, arguing that it is “as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed; unless of course the fish were destined, one day, to become a land animal.”⁴

I am inclined to agree. That God was there in the beginning, not a gas or an atom or an explosion, is indicated by the host of our universe’s design features that point to a person.

The Bible does not go into this, of course. As with the existence of God, his pre-existence is just assumed. Yet it is also present throughout Scripture, from the first verse of Genesis to the first verse of John’s gospel to the final chapter of the whole Bible (see Rev. 22:13). In the beginning, God. It’s as simple as that.

Endnotes

1. *John Piper*, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003)*, 322f.
2. *Richard Dawkins*, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life (New York: Basic*

Books, 1995), 133. For a fuller response to Dawkins, see Andrew Wilson, Deluded by Dawkins? (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 2007).

3. *For a convincing argument for this position, see the various works of Alister McGrath, including Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), and The Dawkins Delusion (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007; London: SPCK, 2007).*

4. *C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 138.*