

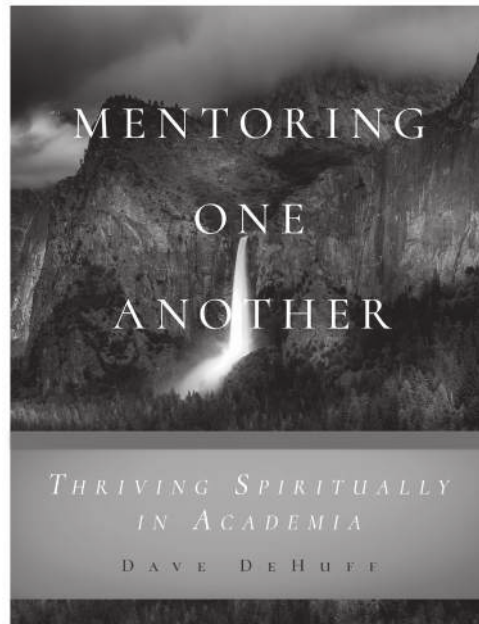
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Excerpt from *Mentoring One Another*

❧ Chapter 1 ❧

Knowing God: His Attributes and Character



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One of three digital chapters (#1, 2, 5)

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1 Knowing God

His Attributes and Character

The 2015 Academy Award for Best Actor went to Eddie Redmayne for his portrayal of the young Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*. That film personified the present quest by physicists for a “Grand Unified Theory.” Such a “theory of everything” (TOE) is an elegant formula that would include all the fundamental forces in the universe. If such a theory was ever devised and proven, it would inadvertently fall short of the grandest and loftiest thoughts the mind can fathom: the thoughts of God.

Canadian author A. W. Tozer wrote, “The mightiest thought the mind can entertain is the thought of God.”¹

Tozer is not alone. Professor J. I. Packer observed, in his classic work *Knowing God*, that most people today “have been conformed to the modern spirit . . . that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God.” This perspective has “allowed God to become remote.” Packer described such people as ones “*who look at God, so to speak, through the wrong end of a telescope, so reducing Him to pigmy proportions.*”² A pigmy god does not inflame the minds of clear-sighted people or of great men and women.



Our worship of God is only as pure as our thoughts of God are true. “*God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth,*” Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:24).

In stark contrast, Packer notes, “The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place . . . for those who do not know about God. Not to know God is to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.”³

Yet if the most majestic and elevated truths known to mankind are those concerning God, then studying *God’s self-revealed attributes* can become the most invigorating but humbling quest on which we’ll ever embark. Even though this journey will take a lifetime and an eternity, there’s no good reason to delay our first steps:

1) God Is Unchangeable

God is immutable—never changing in His nature or attributes.

“For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Malachi 3:6, ESV).

Read: Psalm 118:1–4
 Psalm 46:1–5
 Numbers 23:19
 James 1:17

Clarification: God cannot change for the better or for the worse. He does not evolve or need to grow. This attribute of God is related to His faithfulness. Because He never changes, God is faithful and reliable. He is not capricious. Since His character and purposes do not waver, the promises in His Word can be counted on.

Application: Since God is unchangeable, what thoughts, attitudes, and actions could this awareness produce in me?

(e.g., *“When everything changes, it’s encouraging to know that God has not changed or morphed.”*)

2) God Is Good

The goodness of God is “that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and full of good will toward men.”⁴

“How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You” (Psalm 31:19, NASV).

Read: Psalm 107:1
 Psalm 103:1–5
 Romans 8:28
 Ezekiel 34:11–15

Clarification: God takes “holy pleasure” in the *blessedness* and *shalom* of His people—their happiness and welfare. Our whole outlook would improve if we believed “that we dwell under a friendly sky and that the same God who is exalted in power and majesty is also eager to be friends with us.”⁵

Reflection: The antithesis of believing in God’s goodness is cynicism. Does the fact that *God seeks our highest welfare* seem counterintuitive to you? Does it sound too good to be true? If so, try to identify some specific reasons this may seem hard to fathom.

A real-life example concerning cynicism: C. S. Lewis, the Oxford scholar and author of *Mere Christianity*, became an atheist by the time he was 16. He had lost his mother to cancer six years earlier. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis later reflected on his prayers for her recovery: “The thing hadn’t worked.” He continued, “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life.⁶ It is not strange that I should feel the universe to be a menacing and unfriendly place.”⁷

3) God Is All-Wise

The wisdom of God, according to Packer, is “the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.”⁸

“*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*” (Romans 11:33, NIV).

Read: Job 12:13
Daniel 2:20–23
Psalm 104:24
Proverbs 3:19
James 1:5

Clarification: Tozer wrote, “All God’s acts are done in perfect wisdom. . . . Not only could his acts not be better done: a better way to do them could not be imagined. An infinitely wise God must work in a manner not to be improved upon by finite creatures.”⁹ “*For the foolishness of God is wiser than men*” (1 Corinthians 1:25). God is also *all-knowing*. Yet human knowledge does not guarantee that one is wise (i.e., able to use knowledge to resolve crises, to help, or to restore). Our universities are overflowing with *knowledge* but not so with *wisdom*.

Application: Since *God is all-wise*—not just all-knowing—what attitudes and actions might this produce in me?

4) God Is Omnipotent

God is all-powerful, having more than enough strength to do the sum total of all things.

“*For nothing will be impossible with God*” (Luke 1:37).

Read: Psalm 147:5
Ephesians 3:20
Hebrews 1:2–3
Jeremiah 32:17, 27
Philippians 3:20–21

Clarification: Paul explains that nature gives clear evidence of the eternal power of God (Romans 1:20). On this truth, Tozer commented, “The self-existent Creator is the source of all the power there is, and since a source must be at least equal to anything that emanates from it, God is of necessity equal to all the power there is.”¹⁰

Reflection: Pause and reflect on these words of A. W. Tozer: “With the *goodness* of God to desire our highest welfare, the *wisdom* of God to plan it, and the *power* of God to achieve it, what do we lack? Surely we are the most favored of all creatures.”¹¹

Try to identify a present difficulty or the biggest challenge in your life right now. Then attempt to reframe that issue with the above quote in mind—picturing God’s *goodness*, *wisdom*, and *omnipotence*. How does this encourage you and change your perspective on that matter?

5) God Is Omnipresent

God is infinite and present everywhere, through all time and space.

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Psalm 139:7–12, NASV).

Read: Deuteronomy 31:6
 Proverbs 15:3
 Acts 17:27–28
 Jeremiah 23:23–24

Clarification: Scripture reveals two attributes in paradox: God’s *immanence* (He is infinite and found everywhere) and God’s *transcendence* (He is spirit and cannot be spatially localized). Unlike pantheism or deism, the Old Testament declares that *both* qualities are true (in Exodus 33:12–23) and so does the New Testament (in Acts 17:24–28). We’ll touch on transcendence again when we cover God’s holiness.

Application: If I was more conscious of God’s *inescapable presence*, how would that better my daily life?

6) God Is Sovereign

The word *sovereign* means “chief,” “highest,” or “supreme.” Because He is sovereign, God was able to create and is able to sustain and govern the universe and all it contains.

“The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19, NASV).

Read: 1 Chronicles 29:10–12
 Psalm 47:7–8
 Daniel 4:24–37 (esp. 26, 32, 34)
 Proverbs 21:1
 1 Timothy 6:13–16

Clarification: Since God is also good, He is the blessed controller of all things. Observing a wise and good earthly monarchy, imperfect as it may be, helps us begin to understand divine *sovereignty*. However, unlike human kings, nothing can frustrate God’s purposes or thwart His will. Nothing is outside His control. Even in our affliction, He “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28).

Application: If I was daily aware that *God is sovereign*, what attitudes and behaviors would that encourage in me?

7) God Is Love

God's love (*agape*) is unconditional and sacrificial, and it seeks the highest good of the one loved.

“We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love” (1 John 4:16, NASV).

Read: Zephaniah 3:17
1 John 4:10
1 John 4:18–19
Romans 5:5–8

Clarification: Packer explains, “God’s love is an exercise of His goodness toward individual sinners whereby, having identified Himself with their welfare, He has given His Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy Him in covenant relationship.”¹² For those who already have a personal relationship with God, we can know that God loves us just as we are. Yet like a good father, *He also loves us too much to let us remain as we are.*

Application: If I was confident of *God’s love for me*—unconditional, unending love—how would that change my life?

Because we are made in God’s image, we have the desire to be loved and a capacity to love. God is a personal being, possessing all the aspects of personality. He is not a “force.” Since the Bible claims we are His image-bearers (Genesis 1:26–27; Acts 17:28–29), it also presumes that God is a person. He has the recognizable traits of personhood, including *intellect, emotion, and will.*

8) God Is Holy

“Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. *Because He is holy, all His attributes are holy*; that is, whatever we think of as belonging to God must be thought of as holy [*holy love, holy wisdom, holy power, etc.*].”¹³ Some theologians refer to God’s holiness as His “central and supreme perfection.”¹⁴

Holy is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning “to cut” or “to separate.” This implies that what is holy is *set apart*.

There are two distinct concepts included in God’s holiness: *majesty* holiness and *moral* holiness. *Isaiah 6:1–4* declares the first, and *Isaiah 6:5–8* implies the second. (The second is what people unconsciously associate with “God is holy.”)

God’s **majesty holiness** refers to His infinite glory and unique grandeur, which set Him *wholly* apart from His creation—*wholly different* in kind, not just in degree. It is partly what is meant by God’s *transcendence* (see section 5). His “majesty” holiness invites us to worship in reverential awe and to adore “the beauty of the Lord.”

Read: Isaiah 6:1–4
Exodus 15:11
Psalm 145:3–5
Psalm 27:4

God’s moral holiness is His absolute, untainted moral purity and His uncorrupted goodness. This sets Him apart *morally* from fallen and corruptible humanity. When God exhorts us, “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16), it is in this sense of moral holiness that He urges us to “share His holiness,” though differing in degree (Hebrews 12:10).

Read: Isaiah 6:5–8
 Habakkuk 1:12–13
 1 Peter 1:14–16
 Hebrews 12:2–4

Reflection: For many Christians, God’s holiness is the most humbling of His attributes to contemplate. Why do you think that is the case?

What was your most helpful realization as you pondered the *majesty* and *moral holiness* of God?

C.S. Lewis’ own conclusions about God include the following:

A man can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word, “darkness” on the walls of his cell.¹⁵

As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you.¹⁶

*“Thus says the Lord, ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom,
 let not the mighty man boast in his might,
 let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this,
 that he understands and knows Me . . .’ declares the Lord.”—Jeremiah 9:23–24*

Appendix

1. Since God is a personal being, He has revealed Himself as having recognizable traits of personhood, including: intellect (Isaiah 55:8–9; Romans 11:33–36); emotion (Genesis 6:6; Psalm 103:8–11); and will (Psalm 40:8; Matthew 6:10, 7:21).

These three aspects of God’s personhood are reflected in each of us, as His image bearers. These same traits of personhood also provide a foundation for our next chapter, about “knowing Christ,” through whom we actually come to know God personally.

2. The following are other attributes of God, for further study, if desired:

A. God is *omniscient*. God possesses all the knowledge there is to have. Nothing ever takes Him by surprise, nor does He need to learn anything.

Psalm 33:13–15

Psalm 139:1–4

Hebrews 4:12–13

B. God is *eternal*. There has never been a time when God did not exist. He has no beginning and He has no end.

Psalm 90:1–2

1 Timothy 1:16–17

Revelation 1:8

C. God is *just*. It is impossible for God to do anything that is unfair, either in Himself or to man.

Isaiah 42:1–4

Psalm 146:5–7

Hebrews 6:10

D. A biblically informed view of God would also need to include His following attributes:

- righteous
- gracious
- merciful
- faithful
- patient
- light
- infinite

Endnotes

1. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper & Row, 1961), 10.
2. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity, 1973), 6 (emphasis mine).
3. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 14–15.
4. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 88.
5. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 89.
6. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Harcourt, 1966), 20–21.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 65.
8. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 80.
9. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 66–67.
10. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 72.
11. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 70 (emphasis mine).
12. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 111.
13. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 112–13 (emphasis mine).
14. Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1941), 73.
15. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Touchstone, 1996), 47.
16. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Touchstone, 1996), 111.

Recommended Reading

- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity, 1973). Packer's study of God's attributes is a classic work.
- A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper & Row, 1961). Tozer covers more attributes, devoting shorter chapters to each.

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