

Understanding God¹

By Daryl Wingerd

How does the Bible describe God?

God is Perfect

We might describe our mother as "a good person." We might say that an honest judge is "a just man." But only God is *perfectly* good and *perfectly* just. All human beings, even those we admire and trust, are, by nature, *imperfect*, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But "As for God," David writes in Psalm 18:30, "His way is perfect."

God is Awesome

The word "awe" is an old word. In relation to God, it means 1) "dread, terror" or 2) "profound and humbly fearful reverence inspired by deity. . . ." (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1973). For the Christian, the fear of God is like the second definition—a *reverent awe coupled with trembling* (see Philippians 2:12). We love Him, knowing that He first loved us. But we must never forget that He is sovereign, incomprehensibly vast, holy, omnipotent, commanding as well as deserving our pure worship and our complete and unquestioning obedience, and able to discipline us if we disobey. For the unbeliever the proper understanding should be like the first definition: pure terror and dread. When, by the grace of God, an unbeliever begins to understand God, he should rightly become terrified. If he truly does understand when he hears the gospel, he will be compelled to seek safety in Christ.

God is Love

Have you ever heard the phrase, "God loves the sinner, but hates the sin"? Many people believe that statement fully depicts God's emotional stance toward every member of fallen humanity. But consider those words, *not* found in the Bible, in light of some words that *are*: Psalm 5:5, for just one of many examples, where David says to God, "You hate all workers of iniquity." God's just and holy hatred of *the sinner* cannot be legitimately denied. Nevertheless, His *hatred* must not be understood apart from the following aspects of His love:

1. God's Benevolence Toward All (Matthew 5:43-48; Psalm 145:9)

God extends goodness even to the most wicked of His enemies by providing them with such good things as sunshine for warmth and rain for their crops. It is not only the believing farmer who prospers at God's hand, but also the wicked one. Because *God* does good to all, even His enemies, *we* as Christians are taught to follow His example and love our enemies.

2. God's Love for Mankind in General (John 3:16—"For God so loved the world . . .")

Precisely *who* is God said to love in this verse? A common mistake is made when we *assume* that "the world" refers to all people *individually*, each of whom (it is also assumed) God loves *equally*. These assumptions are rooted in the notion that God is obliged to be "fair." But the Bible is clear: God is not bound by any human understanding of fairness. He sets His highest love *on whom He pleases* (e.g. Deuteronomy 7:7; Romans 9:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). We find it perfectly natural for a human father to love his own children in a much deeper way than he does those who are not his. God is no different in this respect, and the Bible clearly teaches that not everyone in "the world" belongs to God in the same way children belong to their father. (John 6:37-39; 8:42,44; 10:26; 15:19; 1 John 3:10). There is, in fact, a special, *fatherly* sense in which God *only* loves His children (study Hebrews 12:5-11 to see this clearly). Our conclusion, then, is that "the world" in John 3:16 refers to a "what" more than a "who." It is a reference, not to all people as *individuals*, but rather to *unlovely humanity in general* as a singular object of God's love.

3. God's Fatherly Love for His Children (Ephesians 2:4-7)

The New Testament is filled with references to God's elective, seeking, redeeming, fatherly love *toward His chosen people* (e.g. Romans 5:8; 8:35-39; Ephesians 2:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 12:5-11; 1 John 3:1; etc.). While it is often argued that these references are meant to refer to all people universally, the people in view (God's elect) are shown to be the recipients of God's love in ways that cannot logically be applied to every person. From among the mass of fallen humanity, which God loved in the "John 3:16" sense, He has chosen *some* upon which to set this higher love.

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