

Seeking God (Part One): Our Biggest Problem

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Forerunner, "Personal," February 2007

This article connects loosely to last month's article, which showed that drawing upon God's power is an option available to all of His children. In fact, we will not grow and overcome as He desires without drawing on that power. The natural man can make great progress regarding change, but unless God is involved, all his effort will not be aimed toward the same goals God desires when He motivates those changes. Without God's involvement, a person's labors are essentially vain.

The previous article ended in II Peter 2:5-9, where the apostle urges us to consider soberly what biblical history records happened to those angels and men who sinned grievously and failed to repent. He reminds us that God knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations, if they will submit to Him in faith.

II Peter 1:5-11 has a similar but more positive and encouraging flavor, explaining that, if we keep moving forward step by step, adding to former growth, we will never fall, and God will supply us entrance into His Kingdom. Peter's writings abound with heartening exhortations to keep going forward, indicating that standing still is not an option—at least for very long! For, if we are not moving forward, the world's influence will most certainly sweep us backward.

But where does a person go from this point to avoid sliding into the same spiritually weak condition as the negative examples shown in the book of Hebrews? Isaiah and Amos supply the answer, clearly declaring the responsibility of each one who has made the covenant with God. Isaiah 55:6-7 reads:

Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on Him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

"Seek Him" and "return" suggest a relationship that had badly deteriorated. Particularly addressed to those living in Joseph, Amos 5:1-6, 8-9, 14-15 adds greater breadth:

Hear this word which I take up against you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: "The virgin of Israel has fallen; she will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; there is no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord God: 'The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.'

"For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: 'Seek Me and live; but do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek the Lord and live, lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel. . . . He made the Pleiades and Orion; He turns the shadow of death into morning and makes the day dark as night; He calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth; the Lord is His name. He rains ruin upon the strong, so that fury comes upon the fortress.

. . .

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph."

When Does Seeking God Begin?

Note something of considerable importance to church members: Both Isaiah and Amos addressed their counsel to people who had already made a covenant with God. Why? Because these Israelites were in serious spiritual trouble within the relationship that the covenant created. These are stern exhortations for them to get on the ball.

A second but not readily apparent reason why these warnings are important to us is that seeking after God truly does not begin until after He reveals Himself to us and we make the covenant with Him. Many do not realize that seeking God is the main occupation for a Christian during the sanctification process. Amos is clear regarding this.

God warns how devastating the coming perilous times will be, then He counsels us to seek the help of One far greater—our Creator and Ruler. Finally, He urges us to turn our everyday conduct to seeking to do good, showing care for God and His people.

Amos is not charging the Israelites to seek God in order to find Him because, at the very least, they were acquainted with Him, having already made the covenant with Him. However, that He charges them with seeking Him reveals that despite making the covenant, what they knew about Him had not been translated into everyday living or being like Him. This indicates that they were just drifting along with the times.

Four times in Amos 5, he urges them to seek God, and two of those times, he adds, "that you may live." This thought ties directly into John 17:3, which indicates that, more than being just endless existence, eternal life is a quality of life. As we proceed, we will see that they were being exhorted to seek God because, despite having made the covenant, they had stopped seeking Him, and the effect of stopping was their poor spiritual condition and subsequently, their imminent destruction at the hand of the Assyrians.

Notice in the New Testament how the apostle Paul amplifies the charge to seek God:

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek. . . . (Romans 2:4-9)

This is a stern warning to the church that we must continue to seek God and His way *after* He has led us to repentance. We cannot rest on what we know of Him and practice when we are just baptized. What will happen if we maintain a shallow knowledge of Him, demonstrating that He is unimportant to us?

Consider the Purpose-Driven Church movement captivating the minds of many today. They think that God is highly interested, among other things, in membership increases and large church incomes. In addition, they believe they are to create a Kingdom of God on earth through doing good deeds, which are to work in tandem with the political forces of this world. They feel that God desires tolerance for the sake of unity regardless of truth, and hold that Christ's Word is no better than that of psychologists and philosophers. They seem to be headed in lock-step toward the man-devised New World Order, not the Kingdom established by God at Christ's return. Why do they do these things? Because of what they believe about God.

What about the Catholic Church's belief about God? Its adherents believe, among other things, in a God who promotes heaven as the reward of the saved. They hold that Christ did it all for us, and that Purgatory will take care of any leftover moral and spiritual deficiencies. They suppose that they are the Kingdom of God on earth, and that their leader stands in the place of Christ. Therefore, they, too, seek temporal power, being deeply involved in the politics and conflicts of this world. Their belief system is responsible for the Crusades and the Inquisition, which took millions of lives.

How much different is that from what Muslims are doing now? Muslims believe in a god who orders them to kill all non-Muslims who will not convert, and who wants parents to train their children to blow to pieces themselves and many others in order to attain Paradise and a reward of seventy virgin beauties.

These brief illustrations should help to clarify the principle. At the foundation of the practices of these three groups is the belief that their god requires these things of them. They respond as they do because they want to please their god. This principle is at work in us too.

Belief, the Foundation of Conduct

This principle is true for all cultures and individuals on earth. Conduct is motivated by a person's conceptions or misconceptions of his god. It is vital that one's conception of God be as close as possible to what is absolutely true of Him. This truth is as important to religion as the foundation is of a building. If the foundation is not as it should be, the whole building is in danger of collapse. A poor perception of what God is truly like can potentially be the source of serious misdirection in an individual's life.

In the early fall of 2006, *The Charlotte Observer* published the results of an extensive survey of the American public on what their perception of God is. Baylor University in Waco, Texas, organized the survey, the most comprehensive of this sort in American religious history. Gallup conducted the actual poll, asking 1,721 people a total of 77 questions with 400 answer choices.

The title of the newspaper article, "The Four Gods of America," ought to key us in to the findings. It begins, "The United States calls itself a nation under God, but Americans don't all have the same image of the Almighty in mind." The article reveals the mass confusion that exists in the U.S. on this subject.

Though 91.8% of Americans claim to believe in God, most of these are woefully ignorant of what the Bible says. This disparity occurs because they are not truly seeking God through the words of the Book He had written about Himself; they make things up as they go through life's experiences. The

survey discloses that some of their perceptions are indeed extracted from the Bible, but others are based on movies, TV, books (including fiction works), dreams, visions, and information from friends. The survey emphasizes that concepts gleaned from the paranormal are *immensely* popular.

In its analysis, the Baylor University group titled the four gods as "the Authoritarian God," "the Benevolent God," "the Critical God," and "the Distant God." In any given situation, the true God is all four of these and much more! These terms are quite broad, giving people great leeway in guessing what they think God will do in any given situation. In reality, the terms are extremely vague, indicating no other specific characteristics.

Compare these vague descriptors with the concept of God that Abraham had, a man who had a vibrant, dynamic relationship with God:

And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. (Romans 4:19-21)

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

There was nothing vague about God to Abraham. His relationship with God was of such intimacy that he thoroughly understood His character and purpose. He knew that he could trust God to act and react within clear parameters. Abraham added up what he knew about God and about His promise that Isaac was the promised seed, reached a conclusion, and acted. He knew God would have either to resurrect Isaac or to provide a substitute. He chose to trust the One he knew has the power and is faithful.

What if, like most Americans, Abraham had just guessed, based upon vague remembrances of a Sunday school class, movies, fiction works, and paranormal inspirations? We can assume that he would have worshipped the idols of his father Terah. A right concept of God is a Christian necessity because a wrong notion of Him is the very foundation, the starting point, for idolatry. In brief, the essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.

God makes this clear at Mount Sinai after making the covenant with Israel and giving them His law. In Exodus 32, Aaron, confronted by the sinful pressure of his peers, became carried away and made a stupid Golden Calf to rescue them from their perceived dilemma. Aaron and the Israelites revealed that their false concepts of God remained. God had the idol immediately destroyed. Israel sinned in attempting to determine the nature of God based on their own reasoning, and many died in a punishing demonstration of the true God's wrath at this egregious sin.

The Israelites of today are still at it, as this discouraging survey reveals; modern Israelites are fantasizing about God. The idolater simply imagines a conception of God and then acts as though his conceptions are true. He is deceived and certainly does not know the true God as Abraham did.

God seeks out those with whom He desires to make the covenant. At that time, all they understand about Him is in broad terms. They are then to seek Him out to know Him more precisely. Those who make the New Covenant with God are *required* to seek out intimate details regarding His nature, purpose, and character.

Seeking a Truer Conception of God

Besides being powerful, what is God like? What are His attributes? What is His character in any given situation? What does it take to please Him? How may we glorify Him? How can we become like Him? How can we show Him love and glorify Him? How does He live His life?

The last question is not unimportant. Ezekiel 33:10-11 charges us with an interesting responsibility:

Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: "Thus you say, 'If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?'" "Say to them, 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'"

The Old Testament was written without punctuation of any kind, and in fact, punctuation was not added until about 1,200 years after Ezekiel wrote this. As God's answer to the question of verse 10, verse 11 would read better if a period followed the words "Lord God." He replies that we should live as He would live if He were a man—sinlessly. When Jesus came as a man, He did exactly that.

Jesus declares in John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." A key to understanding Jesus' intent is to grasp His use of the word "eternal." We normally think of it as an endless length of time. However, William Barclay's commentary on this verse contains a simple and meaningful difference of opinion with that concept. Barclay contends that Jesus is speaking of something very good, one to be much desired. Living forever is not necessarily good unless the quality of life is also good. Therefore, "eternal" describes the *quality* of life God lives endlessly. Knowing God and being able to follow His example are vital to our living as He does. Jesus implies that, if one truly knows God, he will also live that way as an effect of his intimate relationship with God.

Yet, truly coming to know God creates one of the more difficult and continuous problems for church members. In fact, one commentator called it the church's biggest problem, and Romans 11:33 seems to confirm this. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgment and His ways past finding out!" Paul says plainly that the full depth of God's wisdom and knowledge are *unsearchable* and *past finding out*. We can indeed find out a great deal if we are devoted to seeking Him, an endeavor that requires thorough searching, evaluating, and adjusting of our conceptions. Certainly difficult, but not impossible!

Nevertheless, we must still seek Him, since this verse suggests that we can indeed learn much. It helps that God desires us to know Him, so He is willing to reveal Himself further. However, so many opinions, conceptions, and misconceptions about Him exist that a unity of true belief and understanding of Him is difficult to reach.

My concept of God is surely not perfect, but this I know: The foundation for my understanding of God began a few years before I was converted. My search was jump-started by reading a small book written by the main translator of the Phillips' translation of the New Testament, J.B. Phillips. This little book of less than a hundred pages, titled *Your God Is Too Small*, stirred my imagination as never before, laying a foundation for my conversion a few years later.

The book has long since disappeared from my library, but in it, Phillips complains that people visualize, in most cases, a one-dimensional God. There are those who see Him as the *Resident Policeman*. Many, he says, perceive God as a kindly, soft-touch *Big Grandfather in the Sky*, some, as the *Absentee Landlord*, and others, as the *Disinterested Professor*. Many of those remaining believe in His existence, but their concept is so vague as to amount to nothing more than the *Eternal Ethereal Nothingness*.

He mentions a few more misconceptions that I have forgotten, but his general theme lodged in my mind. Between reading that book and my conversion, I continued to seek out a firmer conception of God, but without doubt, most of the basic concepts about the true God came through the teachings of Herbert Armstrong a few years later.

Though I have been thinking about this subject longer than I have been in the church, this process is not unique to me. It happens to most of us. I have learned through nearly fifty years in the church that developing a more concrete and truer sense of what God Himself is like is a continuously evolving process.

God Reveals Himself

In Psalm 10:4, David delineates a significant difference between the godly and ungodly: "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts." The distinction lies in the way and how often each thinks about God. The fundamental differences are in how important God is to each and how accurate their thoughts about Him are.

Coming to a truer conception of God is not easy. It can be honestly said that God hides Himself, but this is true only to a small degree. In Romans 1:19-20, the Bible provides a clearer picture:

... because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and [divine nature], so that they are without excuse.

God Himself declares that at least some knowledge—a basic, foundational understanding—is available to virtually everyone. However, an interesting danger is revealed here. Note how this unfolds: "... because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (verse 21). These people knew God, just as the people addressed by Isaiah and Amos and in Hebrews had knowledge of God. Yet, they obviously did not honor God by conducting themselves according to what they knew of Him. They failed to put their knowledge into action, and instead, let their imaginations run wild and began worshipping things apart from what God had revealed of Himself. Their imaginings, Paul says, led them straight into idolatry. In other words, they did not hold fast to what God gave them. What did they worship?

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 1:22-25)

Does this not sound like a slice of Exodus 32? These passages teach us a principle: We cannot imagine God in terms of what He has materially created because what He has made is not God.

In the process that ends in idolatry, the first thing a person loses is his sense of awe, his reverential fear toward the majesty of God. This is what Paul means by "became futile in their thoughts." The result is that the person's former high standards concerning virtually everything begin to slip, and this corruption in turn gives birth to perversion. Romans 1:26-32 provides a partial list of these perversions.

For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

What an indictment! Additionally, the moral slippage resulting from misconceptions about God affects dress: immodesty becomes common; language: speech becomes filthy and coarse; the arts: entertainment becomes base; family life: the home becomes divided—and the entire culture degenerates.

Genesis 3:9-10 catches the essence of the process that stems from false concepts of God: "Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?' So he said, 'I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.'" This event illustrates why there are so many false conceptions of God. Once Satan and sin enter man's life, man hides himself from God, and God must seek him out before a relationship and revelation of true knowledge of God can even begin.

Because it suits His purpose, God has permitted Satan to continue what he began in the Garden with Adam and Eve. Despite the fact that Adam and Eve literally saw God, they sinned because they really did not know Him.

Contact With God Is Essential

Since eternal life lies in the relationship with God, it is extremely important how frequent and accurate our thoughts about Him are. Many influential people in this world are convinced that He

does not even exist. By definition, agnostics are not sure, so how does their uncertainty affect their worship of Him?

This is a major reason why Jesus says in John 6:44 that no one comes to Him unless the Father draws him. He adds in Matthew 11:27 that no one "knows the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Only true believers, those to whom God has specifically revealed Himself, have truth and thus eternal life.

Adam and Eve's summary dismissal from the Garden was among the most serious punishments ever inflicted on mankind because it severed contact with God. Without contact with God, a true conception of Him was impossible, and wholesale sin followed. We can conclude that what one knows about the true God Himself and how one uses that knowledge are the two most important issues in life. Seeking God is the most serious challenge of our lives! The quality of our present lives and the continuation of those lives everlastingly hinge on these two factors.

Baylor University's Christopher Bader, an analyst of the survey results, remarked, "You learn more about people's moral and political behavior if you know their image of God than almost any other measure. It turns out to be more powerful a predictor of social and political views than the usual markers of church attendance or belief in the Bible." Jeremiah 9:23-24 confirms this.

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glorifies glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord.

This thought, with John 17:3, gives us a precise idea of how important knowing God is from His point of view. His evaluation of the relative value of things ought to be of great importance to us. Carnal men look to their riches as their glory. "Riches" can be understood as anything achieved through natural means: money; political power; athletic, artistic, or academic success; etc. "Glory" indicates what brings honor and acclaim and thus a strong sense of well-being, self-esteem, and confidence. From God's perspective, then, the knowledge of Him and His purpose is by far man's most important glory. It has more value than any human, material riches an individual might labor and sacrifice to obtain.

II Corinthians 4:6-7 is among the most humbling declarations in the Bible:

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

The breathtaking element in this is that God makes this glory available to each of us, despite our being the weak of the earth. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American philosopher and essayist, wrote insightfully, "It behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

I used to agree with Herbert Armstrong that the most common of all sins is ingratitude. Ingratitude is indeed very common, but I no longer believe it is the most common sin. That place of dishonor belongs overwhelmingly to idolatry. As evidence, note that five of the Ten Commandments—the

first four and the last—apply directly to avoiding this most serious and frequent of all sins. One-half of the commandments concern this one transgression.

If a person does not really know God, could he be in danger of breaking, not only these five laws, but the others also? The answer is absolutely, yes! Most people are worshipping their current concept of God, and that concept is usually one they have devised. This is not all bad, however, because if we are growing, if we are seeking Him and maturing, our concept of God should be changing, being refined to a truer conception of what He is.

None Seeks the True God

Paul writes in Romans 3:11, "There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God." That is astounding! How can Paul, and David before him, make such all-encompassing statements? Despite all who have ever lived, not even one person has really sought after God. What he is saying is fact! No doubt, billions have sought after *a* god, but they have not sought after the *true* God because none of them had any idea what to look for.

This fact ties directly to Adam and Eve's sin and Satan's deception of all mankind. So thorough has his deception been that mankind has only bits and pieces of the truth, making human conceptions about God dreadfully vague. Only when God chooses to reveal Himself to individuals here and there do the pieces begin falling together into the correct pattern. Then, truly seeking Him becomes a likely prospect.

John 17:3 teaches that continuing to upgrade one's knowledge of God is linked to quality and length of life. The most important thoughts the mind can entertain are thoughts of God, as they will determine the quality and direction of an individual's life. Seeking God, then, is a continuous responsibility for the converted person. This is difficult to do, not because He is elusive, but because human minds are saturated with misconceptions. These mistaken beliefs are erased through the experiences of coming to know Him.

II Chronicles 15:2-4 was written to a people, like us, who had made a covenant with God:

The Lord is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. For a long time Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their trouble they turned to the Lord God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them.

The instruction is clear: When they sincerely sought Him, things went well, but when their seeking of Him relaxed and eventually stopped, the bottom fell out of their world: Sin increased, morality decreased, and contact with God ceased. This principle reveals to us that the power of a covenant people to keep their side of the agreement lies in their relationship with God.