

A dramatic landscape featuring a vibrant rainbow arching over a dark, misty valley. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, and the sun's rays break through on the right side, creating a bright glow. The foreground shows a dark, rocky terrain with some green patches.

GOD

WHO IS HE?

WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE AND HOW THEY OUGHT TO LIVE

*Our most pressing question is not "Is there a God?"
The question of the heart is: "What kind of God is out there?"*

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Standing in my back yard, just a few miles south of the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, I watched the space shuttle Challenger leave its pad and roar heavenward out over the Atlantic Ocean. My friend Congressman Bill Nelson had been on the previous shuttle flight, aboard the space shuttle Columbia, and just three weeks before I had shared a quiet dinner with him and the Columbia crew. Their mission had been a wonderful success.

Now, with my heart tuned in a personal way to the space program, I stood with my wife, children and grandchildren, watching the magnificent Challenger with a new crew of seven hurtle through the clear blue sky, its fiery tail and huge white contrail in its wake.

Then, suddenly, disaster. The explosion filled the sky. Pieces of the \$3 billion space machine exploded in every direction. The crew—seven brave scientists including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe—were instantly vaporized.

My 4-year-old granddaughter, Kristin, grabbed my leg. She knew, by watching the sky and then hearing our expressions of horror, that something tragic had happened. "Pa Pa, where's God?" she cried. I picked her up and hugged her tight.

"He's right here," I comforted her. "We don't know what's happened, but God does. He loves the astronauts and He loves us. He's still in control."

She looked deep into my eyes to see if I was telling the truth. Then she smiled, nodded her head and hugged me tightly around the neck as we made our way back into the house to watch the rest of the saga on TV.

Mankind's most pressing question is not "Is there a God?" The question of the heart is: "What kind of God is out there?"

No thinking person can really be an atheist. There is too much intellectual evidence of a Creator, of One who judges, who treats us mercifully, who

fashions, forms and determines our future. The real questions are the kind Kristin asked. Where is God when a Mexican earthquake kills thousands? When a volcano in Colombia kills even more? When a spaceship blows up? Is God personal or impersonal? Is He good or cruel? In short, can God be trusted? Can He be trusted with my health, my money, my future, my life? Will God let me down if I put my faith in Him?

Those are the real questions.

Most of us simply do not understand who God is. We've grown up with childhood concepts which still color our picture of God. Someplace along my childhood journey, a Sunday school teacher told me that God was an "all-seeing eye." Like the eyeball on the \$1 bill, He would track me everywhere and punish me for my sins. That was not a comforting thought to a 9-year-old boy who was just learning how to smoke behind the garage. Instead of meeting the God of Jesus, I met a policeman who hid behind the clouds with a billy club 2,000 miles long, a God who loved to stomp on little kids, who was all eye and all boot and all fist. Therefore, many years later when I was introduced to a God who loved, who was merciful, who was full of grace and compassion, I had a hard time believing.

We have made God over in our own image. The statement "If I were God..." is indicative of this. If I were God I would not send people to hell. If I were God I'd walk through all the hospitals and heal every sick person. If I were God I'd give every poor person a million dollars. If I were God I'd let it rain on the just and withhold rain from the unjust until they came to me on their knees. If I were God I'd....

But we're not God. And unable to fathom His ways or His thoughts, we pretend. We make up theologies to fit our concepts, rather than doing what is necessary to know Him.

Concept

There are three major areas in which

man views God—and has problems. The first is the area of concept.

Many people, even Christians, have a low concept of God. We believe He can fail us even though He has committed Himself to us. We believe we can offend Him and He will toss us aside. None of these are biblical concepts. They are cultural.

We judge His love for us on the basis of a human's love for his or her children. We do not understand His patience, His love, His mercy, His grace, His provision, His protection, His healing power, His glory. We cannot comprehend how He welcomes, even invites us, into His presence, despite our sins. There is so much about Him we do not believe.

The words of the Scriptures are so strong about the relationship we actually have with God that even most Christians have backed off, afraid of becoming blasphemous. But John tells us that "...as many as received him (Jesus Christ), to them gave he power to become the sons of God..." (John 1:12). When we become as He is, then we are not only fashioned into His image, but we take on—in a real sense—the nature of Christ.

The highest New Testament truth is not that Jesus is Lord, but that God is our Father. True, we cannot legitimately say God is our Father unless we accept His Son, Jesus, as our Lord. But even Jesus said not to glorify the Son but to glorify the Father in heaven. Jesus is not the Father. He is, by His own admission, "the way" to the Father. In fact, He is the only way. Through Jesus we now have the privilege of entering the throne room of the Father, communing with Him, loving Him, worshipping Him and abiding with Him.

Control

To know Him means we must come under His control. That's a bit scary, for it means running the risk of becoming as He is. I knew, when I entered the presence of my earthly father and asked for

his advice or opinion on some matter, that I would have to do one of two things—accept it or reject it. If I rejected his word, it was the same as rejecting him as the authority. There was no in-between.

So it is with God. If we come into His presence and hear His Word, then we must accept or reject Him.

Most Christians do not believe God really controls things. They look at their churches and see they are controlled by men. They see the infighting, the division, the jockeying for position, the political machinery, the worldly shepherds—and they conclude God cannot be trusted with important matters.

However, as a man grows into the knowledge of God, as he is filled with the Holy Spirit, even his physical characteristics change. The life cells of his body take on the characteristics of the Creator. Even the genes and chromosomes—those unchangeable and unalterable factors in the human body—can be controlled by the Holy Spirit. Facial expressions change. Eyes twinkle. Mouths smile. Sexual drives are redirected. Vocabulary changes. The respiratory system, the cardiovascular system, the digestive process—all these things can take on godly characteristics. As the Holy Spirit takes complete control, we become like our Father.

Characteristic

The final problem area lies in seeing God as a characteristic rather than a person. God is holy, we say. But holiness is a characteristic—one open to much interpretation. So is love. And justice. God is holy and loving and just. But God is more. If we stop at any stage, pause at any doorway of life, and do not enter in and take the whole gospel, then we have limited God and created Him in our own image. God is more than any characteristic. He is a person. He is, as Jesus taught us, our heavenly Father. How desperately we need to know Him in that capacity. In fact, it is the right of every Christian who has received the Holy Spirit to call Him by the Hebrew term *abba*, our loving Father. Our heavenly Daddy, if you please.

The Other Side of God

But we must remember that to our enemies God has another side. When it comes to sin, disease, deception, demons, death—even Satan—He is an avenger who utterly destroys those who oppose Him.

The prophet Nahum gives us brilliant insight into this other side of God, helping us enlarge our vision and understand

there is so much about Him which is incomprehensible.

God sent a prophet, a man named Jonah, to the city of Nineveh. Through him, God called on the Assyrians to repent of their evil so He could bless them. When they repented, God honored it and blessed the nation for 150 years. But after five generations the Assyrians again slipped into idolatry and wickedness. They became the destroyer of the people of God, the archenemy of Judah. This

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time God sent Nahum—not to call the people to repentance but to tell them of the forthcoming vengeance of God.

“God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth; the Lord revengeth, and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked...” (Nah. 1:2-3).

The Assyrians were face to face with the almighty God, the Creator of the universe, and His wrath was mighty to behold. Yet that same night, back in the Father’s house, God had only words of peace and comfort for His children, Judah.

“Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off” (Nah. 1:15).

God has two faces—one which is presented to those who would harm and destroy His children, who would blaspheme His name, who would set themselves up as more powerful than God. The other face He shows to His children—that of a loving heavenly Daddy who protects and provides.



Faith

How do we learn of this God? Jesus said it is done by bowing our heads and taking on His yoke. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and

lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:29). The process of meeting and knowing and loving and trusting God is called faith.

Sometimes I wonder whether the abundance of books and articles and sermons about faith is not an unhealthy sign. True, the Bible has much to say about faith. But the faith spoken of in the Bible has no intrinsic value. It merely links us with God. Sometimes teachers of faith leave the impression that faith is more important than the object of our faith. As a result, many people worship the promise rather than the Promiser. But it is not the promise of God which heals; it is His presence. Neither the quantity nor the quality of our faith matters. What is of primary importance is the object of our faith. Faith is not to be explained or diagrammed—it is to be demonstrated.

Vance Havner once told the story of the mother bear who told her cub “Shut up and walk!” when he wanted to know which foot to put forward first. It’s the perfect illustration of faith. If we waited until we understood God, it wouldn’t be faith.

That tragic January morning when little Kristin grabbed my leg and shouted “Pa Pa, where’s God?,” she was searching—not for faith, but for the object of faith. Her faith was restored when someone she trusted picked her up, held her close and said, “Don’t be afraid. God is still in control. He loves us all.”

That’s what Jesus does for us. He opens the door to God. By holding us close, He gives us faith to believe.

Where was God when the spaceship blew up? He was right where He was when His Son died on a cross.

The question is not “Why?,” Kristin. The question is “Who? Who is in charge?” God is. And He’s working things out in His own way for His own glory—and for the benefit of all His children.

The American poet James Russell Lowell, writing during one of the darkest days in our nation’s history, summed up the nature of God in this way:

*Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and,
Behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own.*

He is worthy of our love—and of our absolute trust. ■

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