

The Essence of God

Two young men were being ordained to the ministry. A well-respected pastor, took both of them aside before the service and gave them two words of exhortation. "First," he said, "don't take yourself too seriously." That's good advice for all of us. We should take God seriously, and the needs of others seriously, but taking yourself too seriously is a shortcut to self-centredness with all its problems.

"Second", and at this point his expression changed and he fastened his eyes on them, "preach God". Preach God. In other words, let your sermons always come back to the person of God. Preach the character of God Himself. This pastor was saying to those young men, "Don't make the mistake of preaching all kinds of Christian truth; all kinds of practical matters of Christian living, but fail to preach about God Himself."

And that is not only a possibility, I would say it is probably the norm. It is much easier to preach a practical list of do's and don'ts. No one will accuse you of preaching over people's heads. It is easier to preach stories about great Christians. No one will accuse you of being too ponderous or deep. It is easier to preach particular doctrines, especially if they are controversial or pet doctrines of the preacher. But to simply preach on the nature and character of God is something that many of us preachers shrink back from and in some ways, rightly so. I would be wary of any man who rushed into preaching a series on the attributes of God. I would expect him to either treat God like a lab specimen, which he would dissect in a clinical way every week, or I would expect him to be nothing more than an echo chamber for men who had gone deep into the things of God.

Nevertheless, I believe there is nothing more beneficial for Christians than to behold their God. For God-thirsty believers, this is concentrate without water added. For believers desirous to think elevated thoughts about God, nothing could be more to the point. So with a certain amount of fear in my own heart, I want us to plunge into a study on who our God is. I'm aware of both dangers I just mentioned; I don't want to preach about God like He is an organism that I'm taking apart for the benefit of biology students. I also don't want to be nothing more than an echo chamber, while at the same time, I'll be quick to admit, I'll have to be an echo chamber in some points – because some things have been said so well, there is no point in trying to be original, and secondly because when men have gone further than you have, you do well to read them and repeat them – with discernment.

Let me outline for you how we're going to approach this: We'll start with what is called the essence of God. The essence of God is that which makes God, God. When we are asking about the essence of any created thing, we are talking about it at its most fundamental level – its composition, its nature – what makes a leaf a leaf? What is a snowflake? So to study the essence of God is to ask, what is God?

After that, we will consider the nature of God. That is going beyond essence into asking, what kind of God is He?

Third, we will study, what are sometimes called, the attributes of God. This is what God is like in action. Closely connected with that we'll study the works of God when He deals with us.

To begin with, we must start with the most fundamental truth about God, and we find that in Deuteronomy 6

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!* ⁵ *"You shall love the LORD*

your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

That can also be translated the LORD is God, the LORD alone. Hear, Israel: Yahweh is God, Yahweh alone.

You might remember that I have said before that Deuteronomy 6:4 may be the most important statement in the entire Bible. This is the fundamental of all fundamentals. This is as core as you can get when trying to explain the essence of God: Yahweh is God, and no one else. He alone is God.

When it comes to the essence of God, this is most fundamental – what we call the Unity or the Simplicity of God. There is one single God, and there is no other. The identity of that God is Yahweh – Jehovah.

What does that mean, there is only one God? To answer that, we must ask and answer the question, “What is a God?” If Yahweh is the only God, then what is a God? How does one define God? I think the basic answer is this: a god is what you worship. Anything man worships is his god. The Bible says, Yahweh alone is God, but that doesn't mean man doesn't attempt to make gods out of other things or people. Anytime man worships something, it has become his god.

That leads us to another question: what does it mean to worship something? For example I might love the scene from a mountain. Does that mean I'm worshipping it? I might marvel at the skill of a piano player. Does that mean I am worshipping him? When is it worship and when is it not? I believe the biblical answer is this: you worship whatever you find ultimate satisfaction in. Let me illustrate. Let's say there is a man utterly consumed with cleaning his car. He loves to see his car sparkle. Does he gain ultimate satisfaction from a clean car? No. He loves a clean car because of what it does. What does it do? It draws attention to itself. Does he love the fact that attention is being given to the car as an end in itself? No he loves attention being drawn to the car because it is a means to something else. What is that? It is attention being drawn to himself. Even there, he is not satisfied with simple attention; he wants a particular kind of attention, the attention of admiration.

Now at that point, you can't go any further. The man loves car wax because he loves a shining car. He loves a shining car because it draws attention. He loves attention drawn to the car because it draws attention to him, which is ultimately what he wants. In other words, where is that man finding ultimate satisfaction? In the pride of life. In an image of himself. His real god is the praise of man. That's where he finds ultimate meaning, purpose, happiness, pleasure and satisfaction. All the other things are just means to that end.

In any human being's life, you watch what they do, and why they do it. If you keep going from one means to another, you will eventually reach the end of the chain, and there is that person's god, or at least, one of many: power, pleasing others, conquest, reputation as intelligent, perfectly controlled life, coming first in all he or she does, money, sexual pleasure, a healthy body, youth, a gratified body, success, control, discipline, power.

But the deepest and most basic truth about God is this: He was before all creation, and nothing in all creation can substitute for Him. You can make a god out of anything, but it will never, ever satisfy you. It will always disappoint you. It will always betray you. It will take, take, take and seldom give as much as it takes. If God alone is the only God, then to make a god out of anything else is to set yourself up for destruction.

Now why is this so fundamental? It is so fundamental because unless you believe that there are no gods outside of God, you will always worship someone besides God. The command to love God

with all your heart, soul and might comes out of the fact that He alone deserves that kind of love. But I want to suggest to you that very few human beings since Adam have believed this deepest fundamental – that there is only one God.

Let me list out the various ways man has tried to get around the most basic truth.

Animism is where man has believed that spirits inhabit all kinds of objects and animals, and these can be contacted to help us or harm us.

Idolatry is where a man-made object is used to contact the spirit-beings or gods.

Polytheism is the belief that there are many gods, and many of them should be worshiped simultaneously.

Henotheism is the belief that out of the many gods that exist, one should be singled out to be worshiped, and should become your favourite god – or the only god you will worship out of the others.

Dualism says that there are two gods or principles, one good and one evil, equal in power, who balance each other out.

But the most basic truth of the universe is monotheism- there is only one God. It is not that Yahweh is the best god out of all gods – that's henotheism. It's not that Yahweh should be served better than you serve all your other gods – that's polytheism. The truth of God's unity is that He alone is god. All other gods are merely pretenders – clouds without rain, fleeting shadows.

But I want to suggest to you that most Christians are probably a combination between dualists, polytheists and practising henotheists. Some Christians have the idea that Satan is the evil god, and he and God are battling it out to see who will win. But Satan is one of God's creatures. There is no contest. God has only permitted Satan's evil for His own purposes.

Most Christians are secretly polytheists. They have numerous gods which they continually serve. Most Christians have numerous ends in their lives from which they seek ultimate satisfaction. It might be a spouse or even a child. It might be achievement in work. It might be popularity. It might be a kind of perfectionism. It might be money. So as polytheists we believe that more than one God can bring us ultimate satisfaction.

As practising henotheists we seek ultimate satisfaction from a number of things in our lives, and then we turn around and say, but Jesus Christ is the best One out of them all. Jesus Christ is my God. And certainly we do mean that when we say it. But we do not go far enough. We do not embrace this most fundamental principle: that no one except God is to be pursued as ultimate satisfaction. This is true monotheism. It is consistent, radical, thorough monotheism. If God is the only god, then we should treat nothing and no one else as our deepest joy. No one and nothing else should be our satisfaction.

When I say satisfaction, I mean a few things:

I mean the thing that you seek your fulfillment from; the source of your contentment and sense of fulfillment.

I mean the thing which you believe gives you life and life in abundance. People in the world say things like 'That is life's meaning – that activity or thing is the best use of life.

I mean the thing in which you find identity – this is who I am, this is what I live for, this is what I am about. This is my purpose, meaning calling.

Now the question we have to keep coming back to is this: is God and God alone my deepest and in the final analysis only source of satisfaction? Is God truly the only one you seek satisfaction from,

so much so that all joy in your life points to and leads back to God? All loves in your life are streams that flow into the main river of loving God. And the moment you find a stream branching off and trying to become its own river, you either cut it off, or you channel it back into finding your all in God.

You see, the question is not, are you going to seek satisfaction in something? You are seeking satisfaction somewhere or another in your life. The question is not, are you going to try to experience fullness of life. You always do that, and how you do that reveals where you believe that fullness is. It is not are you going to seek meaning and identity – you are always doing that. The question is where.

This truth says God alone is the only one you can legitimately do that with.

Jeremiah 2:4-13 *Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵ Thus says the LORD: "What injustice have your fathers found in Me, That they have gone far from Me, Have followed idols, And have become idolaters? ⁶ Neither did they say, 'Where is the LORD, Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, Who led us through the wilderness, Through a land of deserts and pits, Through a land of drought and the shadow of death, Through a land that no one crossed And where no one dwelt?' ⁷ I brought you into a bountiful country, To eat its fruit and its goodness. But when you entered, you defiled My land And made My heritage an abomination. ⁸ The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' And those who handle the law did not know Me; The rulers also transgressed against Me; The prophets prophesied by Baal, And walked after things that do not profit. ⁹ " Therefore I will yet bring charges against you," says the LORD, "And against your children's children I will bring charges. ¹⁰ For pass beyond the coasts of Cyprus and see, Send to Kedar and consider diligently, And see if there has been such a thing. ¹¹ Has a nation changed its gods, Which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory For what does not profit. ¹² Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate," says the LORD. ¹³ "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns -- broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

God tells Israel that theirs is the greatest travesty. Pagan nations do not forsake their false gods. But here is Israel, who had the Shema, turning and embracing false gods that cannot satisfy.

Sometimes the hardest people to reach with this truth are those who have grown up in Christian homes or have been around the things of God for many years, or even are in the ministry. Often people like this do not realise that as close as they are to the things of God, they are not pursuing happiness in God Himself. They are not seeking ultimate satisfaction in God. They are seeking it in popularity with Christian friends, with approval from other Christians, with an eased conscience, with the pleasure of keeping all the laws of the group you are in, of appearing so committed to others, of being admired for being knowledgeable, for the joy of being admired for your natural talents or your spiritual gift. You can be so close to the things of God, and yet be like Rachel, hiding your idols with you in your tent.

This is where we need to do soul-searching. Are you thirsty for God Himself? Are you determined to prove that He alone is worthy of being treated as an end, as an ultimate in satisfaction. Then you can't be a polytheist. You cannot allow things or people to be sources of ultimate satisfaction to you.

If you agree with the fundamentality of God, then you cannot be a henotheist. You cannot believe that God is the best God of all the other gods in your life. Yahweh has never accepted being placed

alongside false gods.

Pursuing God is indeed a radical thing. Pursuing satisfaction is not something you do lukewarmly or half-heartedly. If you are convinced of the Shema, then you must put away all your other gods. You must burn the bridges to seeking ultimate joy in things or people. You must embrace God and God alone as your God. That's what it means to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. And that's why it's the greatest commandment.