

Three

Introduction

If you are reading this material, presumably you have some interest in God. Congratulations! You are in good company.

We live in an age of spiritual 'hunger', but people seem unsure where to find spiritual 'sustenance'. The first time one lady visited our church (her first ever visit to any church) she indicated to me afterwards that she was very interested in spiritual things, but never expected to find any 'spiritual reality' in a church! She expected to find ritual, tradition, ceremony, but it caught her completely unawares when she sensed (in her words) a divine presence.

The brilliant French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, once suggested that in every human being there is a 'God-shaped void'. As long as it exists we are restless and incomplete. We try to fill it: money, power, position, career, even family are squeezed into the space. But none of these satisfy – the hole is *God-shaped*!

I meet a growing number of people who recognise within themselves a hunger, a longing to discover 'something more'. Prince Charles once spoke for his belief that, "For all the advances of science, there remains deep in the soul a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing, some ingredient that makes life worth living." There must be something more! As a convinced atheist, Ernest Hemmingway lived without reference to God. He concluded: "Life is just a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness." In contrast, the 4th century theologian, Augustine, penned: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

'*Three*' is a simple series of reflections and questions attempting to explain the Christian faith in a clear and accessible manner. It works on the assumption that there is 'something more', which billions of people have discovered as they have encountered 'God' as described by the Christian faith. *Three* investigates a trio of key dimensions in Christian experience: relating to God as a Father, making sense of Jesus Christ and discovering the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit.

So, without any further ado, let us begin.

Points to Ponder

- What do you think of Pascal's claim that we have a God shaped void within us?
- Have you ever felt that there must be 'something more' to life? If so, where did these thoughts lead you?

God

What is God like? How would you describe him (of course, you might not use the pronoun 'him', preferring to use 'her' or 'it' or something else altogether)?

I remember once speaking with a young woman who was an atheist. When she found out I was a Christian she immediately assumed we had nothing to talk about. The conversation went something like this:

“You won’t want to talk to me. I’m an atheist!” she said.

I asked, “Does that mean you don’t believe in God?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“Then tell me, what sort of a God don’t you believe in?”

“What do you mean?”

I said, “For you not to believe in God you must have some idea of what other people think God is like in order to reject that notion.”

She worked out what I meant and proceeded to describe what she thought other people thought God was like. When she finished I said to her, “If that’s God, then I’m an atheist too!” The God she described certainly wasn’t anything like the one I believe in, nor that the Bible describes.

J.B. Phillips once wrote a brilliant little book called *Your God is Too Small*. It deals with some of the ideas people carry about God. The chapter headings reflect people’s views (which Phillips labels as distortions): the resident policeman, the grand old man.

Phillips works through a dozen or so misconceptions and clearly implies that one of the biggest hindrances to people finding life and reality in the Christian faith is not unbelief, but that people just don’t bother to find out what God is like, especially sources that claim to be God’s self-revelation.

No one has an understanding of God that is faultless. John Stott once said, “If you think you have God in a box in your mind, it’s not God in the box.” But God has gone to considerable lengths of self-disclosure and, in the Bible, we have a remarkable account of God’s nature and character.

According to this account, we would suggest there are three essential things to understand if you wish to grasp God’s self-disclosure:

1. *God is Life*
2. *God is Light*
3. *God is Love*

We shall briefly consider each of these in turn.

God is Life

Have you ever stood atop a mountain, and been stopped by a breath-taking view. Why does this happen? What draws us to gaze at a star-filled sky? What makes it inspiring? Oxford professor, Alister McGrath, suggests the reason we find our hearts drawn beyond ourselves in these situations, is that creation has been designed for this very purpose. “Maybe the spectacle of the night sky is meant to trigger off such patterns of reflection within us.” McGrath further points out that we seem to have been created to ask questions – to try to make sense of what we see around us and how we fit into the greater scheme of things. What if the sense of longing and yearning that is evoked by the night sky is meant to lead us on a voyage of discovery? What if nature is studded with clues to our true meaning and destiny, fingerprinted with the presence of God? Has God planned the heavens to lift our hearts

and minds beyond ourselves? Are the mountains there to reflect his majesty, the oceans to model his grandeur?

It comes as a surprise to many that the Bible answers these questions quite plainly, “. . . what may be known about God is plain to them, for God has made it plain. For ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature can be clearly seen. They are perceived in the things God has made.” (Romans 1:19,20) The appropriate place to begin relating to God is as our Creator.

God Made All Things

The Bible opens with a vivid portrayal of God as our Creator, the author and source of life. In fact, he is the Creator of everything. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) Not only did God originally create all things, but he holds every cell in the universe together by his power (Colossians 1:17) whilst also affording the creation a degree of autonomy and self-direction (Genesis 1:11), indicating that the creation is not a part of God (as pantheists believe), nor that God dwells within every part of creation (as animists or panentheists believe), nor dwelling at a great distance in a far away place (as deists believe) but rather that the created order is distinct from the Divine. Put simply, God doesn’t dwell anywhere in the universe, nor the universe in God, but “. . . heaven and earth are overlapping, interlocking, superimposed in a variety of ways. This can initially seem confusing after the clean either/or of pantheism and deism, but embraces the complexity we ought to expect to make sense of the intricacy and many-sidedness of human life. The sense of overlap between heaven and earth, and of God thereby being present on earth without having to leave heaven, lies at the heart of Jewish and Christian thinking.” (Tom Wright)

The Creation Story

- If you have never read the Creation story in the Bible, this would be a good time to do so. It is found in the first chapter of the book of Genesis in the bible. What are your impressions of the narrative?

John Dickson reflects on the idea of creation: “While some religious believers attempt to prove that God exists, many Christian philosophers are content simply to affirm that God’s existence explains the universe we live in better than God’s non-existence. How so? A universe that ‘banged’ into existence with sophisticated and elegant laws of physics already in place (as cosmologists remind us) is more likely to be the result of a great ‘Mind’ than a big accident.” Cosmologist Stephen Hawking: “The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like a Big Bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications.”

Why would Hawking make a statement like this? However, there are logical difficulties in assuming that something with a random beginning could become inherently ordered. Random causes produce random results. As Edwin Conklin, Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University said, “The probability of life being created by accident can be likened to the chance that a set of encyclopaedias would spontaneously form as the result of an explosion in a printing factory.”

Dickson continues, “Add to this the fact that this universe eventually produced beings like us, with minds that can grasp these laws and the accident theory seems even less satisfying. In short we have just the sort of universe you’d expect if there is a creator behind it and the kind of universe you could never expect if there isn’t. This does not prove God’s existence, but it goes some way towards explaining why, without proof, most people throughout history have believed in some sort of God.”

For centuries, people have been arguing over technical issues relating to the Biblical story of creation. But by worrying about matters such as the length of a day (24 hours or thousands of years¹), where dinosaurs fit into the narrative of creation or whether Adam had a navel (think about that one!), they miss the grand point: *God made all things and the crown of his creation is humanity*. That means we are not here by *chance*, but by *choice*. That's why we live in a cosmos and not a chaos! There is intention and purpose behind our existence, but you are unlikely to ever discover that purpose without reference to the Creator. Even the famous atheist, Bertrand Russell, said, "Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless."

Near the end of his life, Jean-Paul Sartre told Pierre Victor: "I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God."

Purpose & Science

- Do you believe life has a meaning or purpose? Why or why not?
- If you surveyed the general population asking what they believed the meaning of life to be, what might some of their responses be?
- A lot of people feel that the idea of a Creator has been denied by recent scientific discoveries, especially the development of the theory of Evolution. To what degree are science and faith compatible? What are your views?

The Creation Holds Clues to the Creator

If we assumed for a moment that there is a Creator, it should follow that we can discern certain things about God by exploring his creation. What can you tell about God when looking at what has been made? Here are a few thoughts:

God is *powerful*. We assume great power by splitting an atom and releasing massive quantities of energy. Do we ever stop to ask, who initially packed it in there? Einstein's formula $E=mc^2$ tells us that the energy present in matter is equal to its mass multiplied by the squared speed of light. This renders even the tiniest part of the creation a vessel of enormous force. One might assert, the very nature of matter is power. If there is a Creator, then beyond doubt is his claim to power and might.

God is *intelligent*. The human eye contains over 107,000,000 light receptive cells. My brain receives millions of simultaneous reports from my eye cells. In a single moment my brain carries the capacity to receive this massive volume of information, interpret the signals, and process them in a manner that further signals can be sent to other parts of my body, allowing it to almost instantaneously respond to the information received. If this system of information retrieval and processing, more complex than the inner workings of the computer on which I write and only one tiny part of an almost infinite creation, was the result of a Creator's action, to me it betrays some fairly careful and intelligent planning and development.

God is *benevolent*. One reaches this conclusion by observing the provision God has made for the creatures he created. He hasn't left us without supplies, but created abundant food, air, water, building

¹ "A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by." Psalm 90:4

material and other resources for our provision. The problem of world poverty is not an issue of provision, but rather of supply. The United Nations recently indicated that the amount of money required to feed the planet's population for one year is what governments of the world spend on military weapons every fortnight. Those of us fortunate enough to live amongst the wealthy minorities experience God's provision at its very best. The variety of foods available at a local delicatessen transform eating from an act of survival to one of potentially exquisite pleasure. How thoughtful of a Creator to make food consumption delicious as well as necessary.

God is *creative*. Look around. Tell me which two people are the same? Even identical twins aren't identical. No two trees, blades of grass, snowflakes, or people are matching. Phillip Yancey observes: "It seems safe to assume that God enjoys variety, and not just at the cellular level. He didn't stop with a thousand insect species, he conjured up several hundred thousand species of beetles and weevils alone . . . he lavished colour, design and texture on the world, giving us pygmies and Watusis, blond Scandinavians and swarthy Italians, big boned Russians and petite Japanese." If nothing else, we could at least attribute vast artistic purpose to a Creator-God.

God is *one*. Or, at least, there is only one God. We live in a *universe* and not a *multi-verse*. Einstein's Jewish upbringing provided the assumption there is one God. If that God created everything, there must be one set of rules and laws governing and controlling the universe. He noted that much of the deep structure of the cosmos can be represented mathematically and, correspondingly, the human mind amazingly understands that mathematical complexity. Rather than the universe operating under conflicting or competing laws, as one might expect if there were a cohort of gods responsible for creation, or functioning in random and unexpected ways if there were no controlling mind behind it, Einstein and many others have worked from the assumption that there is an order within creation to be discovered.

Finally I believe that you can tell that God is *personal*. He is not just a cold, distant, impersonal force, but a personal being. I conclude that simply because God has made us as personal beings with the ability to relate, communicate, think and feel. Surely the Creator cannot be anything less than what is created. God may be more than a personal being, as we know it, but must be at least as personal as we are.

Observing Creation

- What else might be discerned about God by observing the creation?
- What limits are there in this method of trying to discover God's character?

The Creator Holds Clues to His Creation

So, *God is Life*, the Source of life, the Author of life. There are some serious implications in this.

First, if God created all things, that includes you (yes, person reading this text, I am personally addressing YOU!). Your life was not just the result of accidental collision of sperm and egg. Working through and above these natural processes, God was fulfilling a *divine* purpose. God said to the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart . . ." The Psalmist expresses it: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." (Psalm 139:13,14) *You are fearfully and wonderfully made!* So is everyone else.

Human Beings hold a special place in God's creation. We uniquely have the capacity to question our origins. We have been gifted with *imagination*: allowing us to conceive that which exists beyond the limits of our immediate reality; *conscience*: an innate sense permitting us to make moral distinctions and decisions; *reason*: allowing us to harness the remainder of creation towards various purposes, with seemingly endless possibilities.

The biblical explanation for these capacities is that in the creation of humanity, God invested more of the divine nature in the creative act so that we uniquely bear God's image. The bible makes two important statements in relation to that image. First there is a sense in which that image can never be removed. Like the image of a sovereign on a coin, wear and tear cannot remove the image. But second like the image of a person in a mirror, only a small twist in the mirror will result in the image being lost. For human beings, it appears we have simultaneously retained the image of God but also lost it. Therefore, people are capable of the finest dignity and the darkest depravity.

One of the ways in which God's image is lost, is when we step out of alignment with our Creator. One of the fundamental human tendencies is to give a place of importance to ourselves, instead of reserving that place for the Creator. We reverse the role of Creator and creature. Instead of worshipping God, we worship ourselves. Instead of seeking God's purpose for our lives we insist on our own way. Instead of realising we are designed to serve the Creator, we assume the Creator is there to serve us. Interestingly, when we step out of alignment with our creator, we also end up out of kilter with the creation.

The idea of a Creator God is so important because it establishes the relationship between God and everything else. It stops us worshipping the creation, as many did in ancient times and not a few still do today (observe the sun, sand and surf at the beach most weekends!) It helps us avoid placing the creation on a pedestal. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that instead of referring to 'mother earth', seeing the planet as the ultimate provider of our needs, we should instead think of the earth as our 'little sister', created along-side us in the purpose of God, needing our respect and protection, there to be enjoyed and loved, but not deserving of our worship. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams recently wrote: "Our present ecological crisis, the biggest single practical threat to our human existence in the middle to long term, has, religious people would say, a great deal to do with our failure to think of the world as existing in relation to the mystery of God, not just as a huge warehouse of stuff to be used for our convenience."

If the universe is, in fact, the result of a creator's divine action, then we must face the question: to whom does it belong? In our day and age, intellectual property is a rapidly growing field within the legal arena. The default position is that ownership is attributed to the originator of something unless contractual evidence stipulates otherwise. If God is our Creator, then there must be some sense in which the Creator has ownership rights.

If you are part of God's creation and God owns that creation, what does that mean for us? Most of us spend all our time and energy seeking independence from everyone and everything. We hate relying on others let alone being obligated to them. And so the first big question we are confronted with is: What do we owe God?

Jesus was once asked what the most important things in life are. In light of an understanding of the world where God created all things, he answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself." This means each of us has an obligation to honour God. After all, if God had done nothing else than create all things, this alone would make God worthy of honour, glory and power; and to honour other people (who share the same image of God that we do).

John Andrew Homes once said, "It is well to remember that the entire universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others." John Dickson comments: "If God exists, what could be more basic to authentic human life than wholehearted devotion to our Creator and selfless care for our fellow creatures."

But if we fail to acknowledge God in this role what are we missing out on? It is unlikely we will be getting the best from life. Every time I purchase a new mobile phone, I quickly master the basic functions. But, some time later, I open the manufacturer's instructions and discover I am only enjoying perhaps a quarter of the phone's capabilities. Many people seem to be living below par lives. Just scraping through rather than really living. Richard Evans once said, "The great tragedy of life is not that it ends so soon, but that we wait so long to begin it." Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness." Are you living, really living? Or, are you just existing?

Let me try to summarise. Perhaps the most important question we could ask is, "If there is a Creator who made everything, including us, what should our response to that Creator be?" Some people respond with **apprehension**. It seems a little scary to think of a sovereign Creator so they spend most of their lives doing everything in their power to ignore and distract themselves from the possibility of such a Being. Others respond with **aggression**, feeling that the existence of a Creator God will reduce rather than enlarge their lives and they vigorously work to deny God's existence.

But some take a step back, pause, look into the seemingly infinite heavens, stretch their arms out and simply say, "Thank you!" They respond with **appreciation**. Like a child before a mound of presents in front of the Christmas tree, they consider the marvel and miracle of the 'gift of creation' and their lips mouth the word "Wow!" Centuries ago, Gregory of Nyssa astutely observed, "Concepts create idols, only wonder grasps anything." Wonder is the appropriate response to creation. Open-eyed, jaw-dropping wonder that subsequently generates a sense of appreciation, privilege and stewardship to responsibly care for this wonderful gift God has given us.

I once read of the highest ranked and paid commercial airline pilot in the UK. He had everything a man could want: a loving wife, a beautiful family, a well-paid highly respected job, opportunity to travel. He had a large beautiful house, an expensive sports car, a holiday home. And one day as he was crossing the pacific on a routine flight he suddenly realised something was missing in his life. He said, "I came to the realisation how empty my life really was, because I had everything a man could need or want, *but I had no one to thank.*" When he landed at the next airport he went straight to a motel room, opened the draw beside the bed pulled out the Gideon's bible and started reading. He wanted to get to know the One he could thank for his life. Of course, not everyone has a wonderful life, but ironically often those who have less 'stuff' to distract them, are often the most appreciative.

A response?

- What is your response to the idea of Creation?

God is Light

Light is necessary for life. Without light we couldn't survive. One of light's main purposes is to reveal things. If you walk into a dark room and feel your way around, you can identify certain things: a sofa, a desk, a chair. But as soon as you switch on the light, you see things as they actually are. CS Lewis once said, "I believe in God as I believe in the sun. Not because I see it but, because by its light, I see everything else."

A second statement the Bible makes about the Creator is that God is light! "God is light and in him dwells no darkness." (1 John 1:5) This is a statement about God's character. It means that in God there are no shadows, there is nothing hidden, there are no skeletons in closets, nothing to catch you by surprise. What you see is what you get.

We hear this sceptically! In a day and age where scandals are expected of high profile people, such a claim seems too good to be true. But the assertion that God is transparent, that God is light-filled, permeates the pages of the Bible from beginning to end.

For Discussion:

What difference does light make to our lives? What parallels might there be to God's influence in the world?

God is Holy

Another way of saying 'God is Light', is to assert that God is 'holy'.

The word 'holy' is used of God over 500 times in the Bible, often in a three-fold formula that adds important emphasis. When people encounter the living God, they cry out, "Holy, holy, holy!" The word 'holy' has two meanings: holiness refers to being both *special* and *spotless*. If something is holy it is unique and set apart from ordinary use (special), but also without stain or blemish (spotless). God's holiness is often equated with his perfection. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," said Jesus to summarise his most famous and influential discourse, the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5:48)

To be honest, this limits God's appeal. Have you ever tried relating to a perfect person? Many years ago, when I was learning the guitar, our home was visited by a professional musician who played in a successful band. He saw my guitar and picked it up and started to play. His fingers raced up and down the strings. The sound was so full and rich. Next to my feeble and erratic strumming and plucking, his rhythms and melodies seemed to approach perfection. Then he handed me the guitar and said, "Why don't you have a go?"

How keen do you think I was to play? There is a part of us that longs for holiness. C.S Lewis once remarked, "How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing it is irresistible." Why do you think crowds were drawn magnetically to Jesus? There is something in us that is attracted to the holiness of God – something in us that longs to be more than we actually are, for, written into every human heart is a deep dissatisfaction with life as it is.

But there is another part of us that subconsciously wants to avoid God. We shy away! If we start to get close we often find ourselves retreating (as I did when I was handed the guitar) and are trapped between simultaneous attraction and repulsion to/from God's holiness. The same was true when

people encountered God in Bible times. We wonder today why God doesn't make obvious physical appearances to prove his existence. But in Bible times, manifestations of God's physical presence often left people begging God to leave. They were overwhelmed by God's glory. When they encountered perfect, pure holiness, their own lack of genuine goodness, their inadequacies, were shown up.

This is a genuine dilemma. But I'm afraid things get worse.

For Discussion:

What associations do you make with the word 'holy'? Have you ever met someone who struck you as being holy? What was it about them that created that association?

Where in our society do you see evidence for an 'inner longing to become more than we are?'

God is Just

A further implication of God being light is that God is just. A light-filled, holy God cares about right and wrong. Actually, most of us do.

The challenge in thinking about God's justice is that while it is fine to talk about God being just and fair in a theoretical sense – most people don't mind that - it starts getting scary when people consider what it might mean for a perfectly just and fair God to apply perfect justice to the creation.

I find that a lot of people subconsciously distinguish between two types of justice: internal and external. Many people are passionate about external justice (we want to advocate for oppressed minorities, and rightly so) but we seem to ignore the issues of internal justice (when our own hearts produce words, thoughts actions, motivations that are out of step with a holy God). We need to start at home, we need to start within. God's plan for transforming the world (applying external justice) is to change one human heart at a time (applying internal justice). Jesus said, "Before you take the speck out of your brother's eye, first take the log out of your own eye." (Matthew 7:3)The application of justice begins at home.

But as soon as you start talking about justice applied personally, all sorts of barriers start popping up in people's hearts and minds. They do in mine! I'm very happy to believe in a God who made me and I'm hoping like crazy that God will love me, but I'm not so keen on a God who might apply justice to me, because that means he would have to . . . judge me!

Who does God think he is, judging me? This is a terribly offensive idea which runs contrary to the way our society operates. We believe that tolerance is a higher virtue than justice, but in actual fact, as soon as we experience *injustice*, our belief in *justice* suddenly comes to life – as is evidenced, in a negative way, by the litigious nature of our society. People sue one another without hesitation. Why? They believe they have been dealt with unjustly and that should be corrected.

On a more positive note, the widening support for many 'social justice' issues also is evidence of a deep desire for justice in our society. This is a wonderful thing. Some would argue that justice is written into the human psyche and the Bible supports such a notion. It says that a basic sense of right and wrong has been written on human hearts and within the human conscience (Romans 2:14-15), a gift from God for the ordering of creation.

Actually, I think that for most of us, the idea of God being a just Judge isn't all that bad as long as it's other people being judged. Most of us are quite happy for God to judge Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin,

Emperor Nero, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden. All the genuinely 'bad' people. With those sort of people, God can happily make judgments. But not me, not my family, not my friends. That's way too close to home.

Interestingly, the very same people who are offended at the thought that God might judge them, are often the first to complain that "Life's not fair!" If life is going to be fair, it requires Someone to make it fair. And if Someone is going to make life fair, that will involve the application of justice.

Actually, I want to *insist* that God one day applies justice to this world, simply because there is so much injustice in this life, that if God doesn't one day do something about that, if God doesn't one day put right all the things that are wrong, then I'm voting for a new God – I think God will have completely failed all divine responsibilities.

Notice how I keep saying 'one day'. One of the things the Bible teaches about God's justice is that it doesn't usually take effect straight away. When I suggest that God is just and fair, you could easily respond by saying, "God's not fair! Take a look around you. How can you possibly say that God is fair when so many good people suffer and so many bad people prosper?"

How do we respond? Imagine there is a student in a school who seriously misbehaves in the first lesson of the day. They bully other students, insult the teacher, vandalise the classroom. The bell goes at the end of the lesson, and the student moves to the next class. Nothing happens! An outside observer is horrified. "What is the school doing?" they ask. "That's so unfair. Where is the justice?" But if the observer keeps watching, later on in the day the student is called to the principal's office, joining the teacher of the class, the principal, their parents. Now the situation will be put right. Now justice will be done.

That's what God's justice is like. God doesn't immediately reward us every time we do something good, nor does he punish straight away in response to evil. God delays his reward hoping we will learn to do good for its own sake rather than because we want a reward; and delays discipline hoping that we will change our minds about doing bad – God gives us time to repent – to acknowledge the bad things we've done and ask forgiveness.

This is why we have so much trouble taking God's justice seriously. It appears to be inconsistent. Cardinal Richelieu once said, "God does not collect his debts at the end of every day, but in the end he collects."

Sorry for the doom and gloom so far – but one question remains, how does this affect me?

How Do I Measure Up?

This is by far the most confronting question in the Christian faith. The notion of a 'just' God invites us to search our own hearts and lives and see whether there are issues relating to the things we think, say and do where there would be some need for God to justly correct us.

Nicky Gumbel, creator of the Alpha Course: "I used to think I was a nice person because I didn't rob banks or commit other serious crimes. Only when I began to see my life alongside the life of Jesus Christ did I realise how much there was wrong." CS Lewis similarly wrote after becoming a Christian, "For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian Nobel-prize laureate, wrote, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor through classes, nor between political parties . . . but right through every human heart and through all human hearts."

Arthur Conan Doyle once played a practical joke where he sent a note to 15 prominent people in British society, reading, "Flee at once, all is revealed". By the next morning all had left the country.

There was a young man living by himself for the first time. When he needed to do his washing he was embarrassed by how dirty his clothes were. To avoid others at the Laundromat discovering his lack of hygiene, he stuffed all his dirty clothes into an old t-shirt and threw them in the washing machine. When the cycle stopped he threw the bundle into the dryer. He discovered, of course, that his clothes had been wet and then dry, but not clean. But this is what many of us do with our faults and flaws. If we try to hide our stained lives, we might go through the motions of trying to fix things up, but we never actually let the detergent of God's goodness and justice (and love) get into contact with our stains.

The degree to which you are willing to be open and honest about your flaws is the degree to which you can find wholeness and fullness and newness of life. And it's often the small things that matter. Our lives might be free of large obvious vices, but that doesn't mean we are in the clear. One tiny piece of dirt in a carburettor can prevent even the most powerful truck from climbing a mountain road. A tiny impurity, but all important in making the ascent!

Many years ago, The London Times ran a series of articles under the heading 'What is Wrong With the World?' The public were invited to write letters to the editor, outlining their understanding of the world's problems. Various letters were published outlining issues of war, poverty, education. The journalist G.K. Chesterton, a Christian, wrote the shortest letter indicating what is wrong with the world.

Dear Sir,

I am.

Yours sincerely,
G.K. Chesterton.

The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. Think about it. Why is poverty a problem in our world? It's not because there is insufficient food. There is plenty of food on the planet to feed everyone. But people are starving because human choices prevent that food being from being distributed. The United Nations indicated in 2006 that the amount of money required to feed every human being on the planet for a year gets spent on military weapons every fortnight by the governments of this world.

And what Chesterton's letter reminds us, is that we cannot sit back smugly thinking badly of all 'those others' who are the problem. What we have to realise is the same greed and self-interest that perpetuates poverty exists in our hearts as well. We are all the problem

There is a problem on planet earth and the Christian message is essentially about God's radical plan to deal with that problem. How? Is God going to deal with poverty by making more food? No. Is God going to deal with crime by killing all the bad people? No. Is God going to fix educational inequality by miraculously making people smarter? No.

God's plan is to transform the world, one human heart at a time. What I need is not a new code of ethics telling me what the right thing is. What I need is a new heart that wants to do the right thing, a heart that is filled with love rather than self-interest, a heart that is inclined towards goodness.

Prussian king Frederick the Great was once touring a Berlin prison. The prisoners fell on their knees before him to proclaim their innocence -- except for one man, who remained silent. Frederick called to him, "Why are you here?" "Armed robbery, Your Majesty," was the reply. "And are you guilty?" "Yes indeed, Your Majesty, I deserve my punishment." Frederick then summoned the jailer and ordered him, "Release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it."

We see in that little story a metaphor of what God is looking for as we approach him.

What is God looking for? Basic honesty. Our default position is to justify ourselves, to excuse our own flaws, to blame others. But God says, "No, I am simply looking for honest men and women, willing to step forward, to let my light shine in their hearts and own whatever darkness is in their souls.

All this talk about God and justice is often misinterpreted. It comes to us not as a threat, but as an invitation and must be interpreted not through the pointing finger of a scowling, judgemental God but through the open, nail-pierced hands of a dying saviour. God has better things to do with his time than trying to make people squirm or feel bad about themselves. Can I suggest God is more like a physician, desperate for patients to have an accurate diagnosis, so that the correct treatment can be applied. The invitation from God is to be honest about our flaws and failures.

As a psychologist, my wife knows that little progress can be made in relationship counselling until there is honest admission of the issues and problems involved by all parties. The Bible suggests the human race is estranged from its Creator and 'step one' in reconciliation is owning our contribution to the 'problem'. That's why confession is central to Christian worship. Honest confession is the first step to freedom for the human heart. The darkness in our hearts stops us experiencing life. God's light is essential to dispelling that darkness.

For Reflection:

Imagine if I told you that for the last 10 years you were secretly being filmed and a broadcast of your life was about to be shown on television. Yes, hidden microphones had recorded you every word and cranial implants had interpreted and recorded all your thoughts which would appear as subtitles to the film. How would you be feeling?

What are the thing you would love to be free from that you struggle with alone?

I began this section with a quote from CS Lewis and will finish with the same. Lewis tells the story of a man who stepped into a darkened garden shed, closing the door behind him. Splitting the darkness was a single beam of light, appearing to originate from a hole in the roof. There are at least two ways in which that beam can be approached. A scientific approach would be to analyse the beam. You could count the number of dust particles within it, measure the brightness of the beam in photons, take temperature readings within and beyond it. Or, the man could simply step into the beam, look along its length and enjoy the warmth of the sun on his face.

A lot of people prefer to keep God's light at arm's length – to consider it academically. They are happy to talk about justice as long as it can be framed so that personal responsibility is avoided. They feel safer and more comfortable but remain slaves to their inner drives and habits. Others are willing to risk exposure for freedom. They step into the light, and a remarkable thing happens. They expect to feel the heat of judgement and condemnation, but instead, as they open their hearts, they feel the warmth of love.

God is Love

If the Christian message finished with God being 'Light', it wouldn't be good news. Thankfully there is more, much more. Not only is God *Life* (our Creator) and *Light* (holy and just) but is also revealed as *Love*. In fact, the Christian faith is the only world religion making the remarkable claim that 'God is love'. "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love." (1 John 1:16) Other religions assert that 'God loves' or 'is loving', but the Bible proclaims that God *is* love. Love is so much a part of God's character that it is defining.

God is Love

Also unique to the Christian faith is the idea of a Trinity. Somewhere in virtually every act of Christian worship, a three-fold formula describing the Christian God is heard: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We will later explore this much more, but the Christian faith claims that God is revealed as three 'Persons' within the one God. God is one in essence and being, but within that one God exists a community of mind, heart and will as Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another. If that leaves you scratching your head, you are in good company, for there is simply no parallel concept in human experience. But the simple fact is that Jesus both claimed to be God and related to his Father in heaven (also God), distinct from himself. At a human level, the reason for Jesus crucifixion, was his claims to divinity. Then Jesus further complicated the issue by saying that when he left planet earth, he would send 'another', identical to himself, but different, who would mediate God's presence to his disciples and even dwell within them, the Holy Spirit.

The only conclusion people could draw was to think of God as one but three! Various analogies partially assist. Think of an orange. It is one entity, but has various parts (pips, flesh and skin). Or think of water. It can exist as solid (ice), liquid (water) and gas (steam). In a similar way God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This analogy breaks down because one set of water molecules can only exist in one form (as ice, water or steam) at any one time. If the same water molecules could exist in all three forms in a single moment, then we begin to have a closer analogy to the Trinity. God exists as Father, Son and Spirit simultaneously.

The point of this is to consider the statement 'God is love'. If God exists as a Trinity (or a tri-unity) that means from the beginning of time, within the one God, the Father has been loving the Son, the Son has been loving the Spirit, the Spirit has loved the Father and the Son. God *is* love because within God's being exists a network of loving relationships. The nature of love seems to be that it wishes to share itself with others. This is frequently why couples have children. Love experienced between husband and wife desires the 'circle of love' to be enlarged. Could this explain God's creation of the human race? Love experienced within the Divine Being wanted others to share that love with.

But, the idea of God being 'love' should be carefully approached, for the word 'love' is so elastic, it can be stretched to mean many things.

When the Bible says 'God is love', not only must that love be viewed through the filter of God's sovereignty, holiness and justice, but it is describing a particular type of love. There are several commonly used words for 'love' in the Greek language (in which the New Testament was originally written): *epithumia* (selfish lust), *eros* (romantic love), *philia* (brotherly love), *storge* (family love) and *agape*. 'Agape' hardly ever appeared in other ancient Greek texts, because it was such a rare type of love. But as the writers of the NT searched for a word to express God's love for us, *agape* seemed perfect. They used it again and again. It describes a self-giving love. A love that loves, whether or not there is anything loveable in the one being loved. A love that continues, whether or not any love is returned. This is the way God loves. It means God's love for us isn't dependent on us, but on God.

Many years ago when I was teaching out in a country town, I got my first dog as a 'giveaway' from the local show: a German Shepherd/Boxer-cross called Jesse. Beautiful dog, but incredibly destructive as a puppy. One work day, I accidentally left the back door open, and Jesse got into the house. I doubt whether dynamite could have made more mess! She pulled sheets off the bed, chewed up my shoes, knocked over tables, ate pages out of books, tore my good trousers, broke my clock radio. She was a whirlwind.

When I was telling the cleaner (a retired farmer) at school about it the next day he said, "If you want my advice, shoot your dog. Dog like that is trouble. Need to shoot a dog like that." Naturally I was horrified. I said, "I don't want to shoot my dog . . . I love my dog." And as I said that, I realised something about *agape* love. It doesn't depend on the one being loved, it depends on the one doing the loving. My love for my dog isn't about whether she's good or bad, it's about me, about the fact that 'I love dogs'. God's love for us isn't about how appealing we can make ourselves, it's about the fact that God is loving, the very core of God's nature is love.

Further caution is needed. Some see in this definition an all-accepting sentimentalism that leaves individuals under the impression that God's love is completely unconditional. In my chaplaincy days a student once sat before me seriously asking whether she 'had to' return \$800 stolen from a friend's wealthy parent. When I asked this girl if she had any sense of what God might want her to do (she presented with some feelings of guilt), the student replied, "I don't think he cares, God will forgive me whatever I do." I doubt she realised she was paraphrasing Catherine the Great who uttered, "God is good. He is bound to forgive us. That is his job."

The comment made me realise the student made no distinction between providential love and relational love. Both are ascribed to God in the Bible, but are quite different. God's *providential* love is the motive for creation. This love leads the birds of the air to find food, with each accounted for in God's sight; makes the rain to fall alike on both the just and the unjust; leads God to proclaim to a rebellious Israel, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love.' This is the love that pursues everyone, even those who ignore God. "For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that those who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life." Even those who are God's enemies are the objects of his love.

But God's *relational* love goes beyond providential love. Imagine if I taught a class of students, genuinely saying (with God's help), "I love each one of my students." But imagine if one of those students was my own son or daughter." Would my love for everyone in the class be the same? Of course not! That student and I are in special relationship that would profoundly affect my love for them: *relational* love.

But relational love is not unconditional, as is providential love. For, as its name implies, it must be reciprocally experienced. The Bible exhorts us to 'Keep ourselves in God's love . . .'. Obviously this means we are able to remove ourselves from God's love. Imagine a young girl, loved by her father but rejecting his care. She runs away from home, removing herself from his provision. The father loves no less, but by breaking the relationship, relational love cannot be experienced by the daughter. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remained in his love."

In one sense, God's love is unconditional. In another sense, it is not. We have to hold these two competing ideas in tension. Entertaining only God's providential love will lead to the mistaken idea that God approves of whatever I do and, even if he doesn't, will forgive me anyway (this is often called 'license' in Christian thinking, i.e., God gives us a license to live however we want).

But the opposite is equally dangerous. If we only hold to God's relational love we will assume his love is dependent on our performance and response (called 'legalism' in Christian thinking). This is pretty common too, for this is the way virtually everything else in life works. We learn this mode of operation early by reading our parents faces. We do something good, they light up; something bad, they frown. Our friends treat us this way too, as do our teachers in school and bosses in the work place. The common message: reward follows good performance. Why would we not apply this to God? We are like a little girl in a field of flowers, pulling petals from a daisy, "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not . . ." The adult version is a little more sophisticated: "I've had a great week (he loves me). My kids are sick (he loves me not). I got a raise (He loves me). The car broke down (he loves me not) . . ."

Daisy-petal Christianity is singularly unsatisfying. It leaves us subject to the whims and uncertainties of superstition. It becomes a set of shackles chaining us to a performance mentality which will eventually grind us down, as we assume that every unfavourable circumstance in life is a sign of God's disfavour. But, God's loves is much bigger than that, large enough to accommodate both the wonderful and terrible events in life. We need another way of thinking and Jesus gave us an ideal image to think through the implications of God's love, holding in balance providential and relational love.

Points to Ponder

- How do you react to the ideas in this section? Where do you lie on the spectrum between 'daisy-petal' and 'anything goes' understandings of God's love?

God as Father

When Jesus taught his disciples about prayer he suggested something that was a radical revolution in his day. He said, "When you pray say, 'Father in heaven . . .'" This was an amazing thing in the ancient world. In ancient times, the gods were thought to be capricious, indifferent and distant. The story of Prometheus illustrates the attitude.

According to the ancient Greeks, Prometheus was a god who lived in the days before humans possessed fire. Life without fire was cheerless and comfortless. In pity, Prometheus took fire from heaven and gave it as a gift to men and women.

But Zeus, king of the gods was outraged that humans should receive a gift such as this. So he took Prometheus and chained him to a rock in the middle of the Adriatic Sea where he was tortured with the heat and thirst of the day and the cold of the night. As if this wasn't enough, Zeus prepared a vulture to tear out Prometheus' liver, which always grew back, only to be torn out by the vulture again and again. This was what happened to a god who tried to help men.

The story of Prometheus reflects something of the ancient Greek view of divine beings. Gods were to be feared. They were vengeful, grudging and jealous. The last thing a God would do was to assist a human.

The Ancient Jewish view of God was a little gentler, but the Jews still portrayed God as a distant, often disinterested and unapproachable being. God, to the Jewish mind of Jesus' day, was so feared that a Jew would not even utter God's name for fear of being struck down by a bolt of lightning. As a result, no one today exactly knows how to pronounce the Hebrew name for God. Out of reverence and fear it hasn't been spoken for thousands of years.

Into that fear-filled, God-alienated, lost and lonely environment, Jesus burst, in his day, and created an ideological upheaval with the utterance of the prayerful word, 'Father.' Jesus didn't instruct his followers to address God as, "Our great and merciful benevolence", or as "The ground of our being", but personally, intimately with the simple word 'Father'.

It is worth making a brief comment here about gender and God. Most theologians agree that God is not male in the same way humans are. God is beyond human gender and possesses the qualities of both masculinity and femininity (there are several feminine divine images used in the Bible, e.g., God is likened to a mother hen gathering chicks under her wings). But God is intensely personal and it is difficult to relate personally to an 'it' or a non-gender-specific-being. In an age when there were many female goddesses, Jesus chose to reveal God using the image of Father. Christianity, like Judaism, is often criticised for being patriarchal and perpetuating a male-dominated culture. My reading of the gospels is that Jesus was a 'child of his times' with regard to virtually no social issues. His teaching cut through his culture's expectations with regard to women, children, class, health, religion, death, money etc. So whilst desiring to honour gender equity issues wherever possible, my references to God in the remainder of this material, whatever the limitations might be, will continue to use the masculine term 'Father'.

Thinking of God as a Father might not be good news for everyone. Many people associate the word "father" with significant pain.

There's a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate action, the father put an advertisement in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father." On Saturday 800 young men called Paco showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

Bad experiences with our fathers can affect our capacity to trust a God who has chosen to reveal himself as a heavenly Father. When I was little I thought my father was perfect. I thought he knew everything and could do anything. But as I got older I slowly realised that he had faults and made mistakes. Now that I'm a father myself, I realise how far fathers are from perfect.

Some would therefore argue it is inappropriate to associate God with a father. But I'm yet to find any concrete research to say that fathers are any worse now than they were in any other period of history.

In fact, as we read between the lines of ancient history texts, (no laws to protect women and children) I suspect that in Jesus time, generally, fathers were at least as bad, if not worse, than they are now.

If your human father disappoints you it is so import to realise that God is different.

Three of the most powerful words in the whole of the Bible are the words, “how much more!”

Jesus said, “If you, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.”

We have a “how much more” sort of God. He’s bigger, better and wiser than any human dad and if we let him, he can become the Father we never had. Alternatively, if we had a good dad as a child, we can appreciate the benefit of a heavenly Father who wants to help plot our course through life, to provide for our needs and love us unfailingly.

Points to Ponder

- In what ways has your relationship with your human father affected your thinking about God?
- What parallels between the roles of human parents with their children and God’s role with us as our heavenly Father?

Personal Implications

So, why use the image or metaphor of Father? What does it mean to think of God as a Father? What does it tell us about what God thinks and feels about us? One of the stories Jesus told in the bible is helpful in answering these questions. It is found in Luke 15 and is usually called the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

- If you have never read the parable, it might be helpful to do so in Luke 15:11-32

A wealthy man has two sons. The younger of the sons goes to his father and says, “Dad, I want my share of the family inheritance now.” This request would have amazed Jesus original listeners. Primarily because the son is requesting his inheritance whilst his father is still alive. This was akin to wishing him dead. “I want my father’s things, but not my father. My father is just a means to the end of enjoying his wealth.”

Jaws would have dropped even further as Jesus described the father’s response. A traditional middle-eastern father receiving this request would be expected to drive his son from the home with a sound beating. Instead, enduring tremendous loss of honour and the pain of rejected love, with a remarkable economy of words, Jesus simply says, “The father divided his property between them.”

The younger son travels to a far country – gets in with the wrong crowd, and quickly squanders everything. When the money runs out so do his “friends”. Unable to keep himself, the younger son gets a job feeding pigs (a disgrace for a Jew) and when the pig-slop starts to look appetising, he realises just how far he has fallen. “In the far country, the son came to his senses.”

It was time for Plan B. Perhaps he could work for his father, just for food. His labour would begin to pay back what he wasted and he could at least survive. His dad was pretty good to his employees.

Off he sets. Can you imagine him, step after step on the road, all the way home, rehearsing the speech he would deliver? "Dad, I'm not even worthy to be your servant. Please just let me be a hired hand. I'm not fit for any more than that."

When the young son came within sight of home, 'still a long way off', it says, the father saw him (yes, he was out looking, watching, waiting, hoping, praying for his son to return). Despite the embarrassment, pain and rejection, this heart-broken Father held a daily vigil. But then, on spotting his son on the horizon, defying all social etiquette for a distinguished middle-eastern patriarch, he *runs* to meet his son. He picks up his robe, bares his legs like a boy and runs to meet his son, openly showing his emotion, falling before him, kissing him. No stern lecture here, just sheer delight and relief.

The son's rehearsed apology is ignored. The Father shouts orders to his servants, "Bring the best robe to replace my son's filthy rags. Prepare the fatted calf." What a scene!

The American author Tim Keller suggests this parable should be renamed the *Parable of the Prodigal Father* ('prodigal' means to 'spend recklessly') Without hesitation this father sacrificed his wealth and went on giving to bring his son home and restore his place and relationship in the family. The message is clear. If God is likened to the father in the parable, then there is no evil that the Father's love cannot pardon and cover. The father absorbs the cost of his child's sinful ways. No sin is a match for his grace, his undeserved love. He loved his son whilst dividing his estate. He loved his son during the boy's years of destructive living. He loved his son as the child returned. In contrast to the daisy-petal version of God's love, a good and true father loves through all circumstances, even if his relational love cannot be experienced because of the son's choices.

But Jesus began the parable by saying, "A man had two sons."

There is an older brother in the story. He dutifully remained faithful to his father. At no point did he ask for anything. He 'fulfils all righteousness.' But now as he watches his father restore his younger brother in the family, he cannot cope with his father's generosity. He's furious. And now it is his turn to do what his younger brother just did, he rejects his father.

This elder brother becomes as lost as the younger brother once was. He refuses to go in to his Father's feast, publicly disgracing and insulting his father. Both sons were lost. One was lost in a far-away place the other was lost while he stayed at home.

And whilst one son came to the realisation he was lost, the thought never occurred to the other. In the parable Jesus puts words of explanation in the older brother's mouth. Why will he not go in to the father's feast? "Because I've never disobeyed you," he says. It is not his wrongdoing, but his goodness, that stops him sharing in the father's feast. His answer reveals the state of his heart. Although going about it in different ways, each of these sons initially wanted the same thing. They both want their inheritance. Neither son loves the father for himself. Both are using the father for their own self-centred ends, rather than enjoying, loving and serving him for his own sake. The older son's 'goodness' was simply a strategy to make sure his inheritance stayed within his grasp.

Subconsciously too, many of us do that. We try to be good in life so that God will owe us answered prayers, a rewarding life and a ticket to heaven when we die. Morality becomes an attempt to get leverage over God.

Both types of son still feature in the human race today. There are two basic ways people around us are trying to find happiness and fulfilment: the way of pleasure seeking self-discovery (doing whatever you want whenever you want - the younger son) and the way of moral conformity (doing the right thing all the time - the older brother).

Jesus simply says both these approaches are profoundly incorrect. Neither will allow you to be in relationship with the Father. There is a third alternative . . . which is to enter the Father's care, enjoy his provision and love. One of the sons, the younger, got to this in the end. But he had to do something before that was possible. He had to turn around. He had to stop walking away from his father, turn around and start heading back towards him.

Points to Ponder

- Which of the 'sons' in the Parable of the Prodigal Son do you most identify with, the younger son, or the older? Why?
- How does the image of the Father in the parable challenge or confirm your understanding of God?

Repentance

The word the Bible uses to describe this turning towards God is 'repentance'. In the Greek of the New Testament the word 'repent' is *metanoia*, which literally means 'change mind'. It could be argued quite convincingly that repentance is the starting point in the Christian faith. When John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, he encouraged people to undertake a '*baptism of repentance* for the forgiveness of sins.' When Jesus began speaking and teaching publicly his first words were, "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. *Repent* and believe the good news."

Coming to terms with God means rethinking some things. Instead of thinking that life is our right, our possession, under our control, we need to rethink and see it as a gift from a loving Creator whose help we need to experience life as that Creator intended. We receive life with **appreciation**. Instead of trying to hide our faults and flaws, we need to rethink the content of our hearts next to God's holiness, letting God's light shine in our souls, illuminating our hidden desires and motives. Our response is **admission** of that which is wrong within us – the first step to freedom. And instead of seeing God as a distant, disinterested being, we need to rethink and perhaps even dare to see him as a heart-broken Father daily watching to see if we might be walking in his direction, returning his love for us with **adoration**.

This is by no means all that is involved in the Christian faith, but it is a likely first step.

Copernicus lived when people believed the earth lay at the centre of the universe. Accordingly, the sun must revolve around the earth, appearing to rise and set each morning and evening. Copernicus proposed an alternative. In 1415, after years of assisting astronomers with measurements and calculations, he suggested the earth rotates in daily motion around its axis and in yearly motion around a stationary sun. This revolutionary idea met strong resistance. Theological, social and moral implications of a de-centric earth were difficult to swallow when humanity had always assumed universal centre-stage. People were called to repent. For them a difficult and even violent process.

To come to terms with the Christian faith, we each need our own Copernican revolution. For most of us, by default place ourselves at the centre of things. If there is a divine being, then probably God revolves around us: God is there to meet our needs, heal our hurts, attend to our desires, improve our lives. I think God does want to do a lot of those things, but for that to happen, we have to grasp a different reality. Instead of me at the centre of everything, we have to realise that we revolve around God. God is the centre. In relation to God our movement is defined, our meaning discerned. Are you willing to look again at the way things are?