

**“THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM, AND
KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLY ONE IS UNDERSTANDING” (PROVERBS 9:10).
WHAT ASPECTS OF GOD’S CHARACTER WOULD BE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF
SUCH FEAR AND KNOWLEDGE?**

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1 Introduction

God is not knowable by us in strictly human terms, see Isaiah 46:9 "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me." Furthermore, Isaiah 55:8 states "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways". The fact that we can know God at all is from his grace and willingness to make himself known, via the words of Scripture, and his visible actions, mediated for believers by the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 9:12 "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us."

The fear of the Lord implies "a loving reverence for God that includes submission to his lordship and to the commands of his word" (NIV, p939). Rather than the modern aspect of "terror, promoting flight" the fear referred to here is a form of awe. Meanwhile, knowledge of God implies "knowing him as a person and what he is teaching us" (NIV p941). So to summarise, we need to spell out what we know of God's character and his instruction to us, stressing aspects that lead us to respect and reverence for what he is and what he requires from us. We shall address these issues in turn.

The characteristics of God can be divided into those which are essential to him for being God, and those which are moral characteristics, which are seen in God as he relates to his creation. We will find that both categories give rise to both knowledge and fear as defined above.

2 What do we know of God's essential characteristics?

The first key aspect of God's attributes is that he is Spirit. He is not physical or part of the created universe – he is its creator. He does not have a specific location. We must respond by worshipping him appropriately. Hence John 4:24 states "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth." We see immediately that the understanding of this point (that God is Spirit) leads to our response (worship which implies "fear").

If God were Spirit alone our understanding would be limited. Fortunately he has chosen to be knowable to us as we know another human, see Psalm 46:10 "'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.". Again note the link of our knowing God to need to exalt him. We may add that our knowledge is only partial as Romans 11:33 "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!". Arguably partial knowledge adds awe to understanding also, as we can only imagine how far God's wisdom extends.

Indeed, God is personal and communicates directly with humans such as Abraham and Moses, see Exodus 33:11 "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" – and he listens to our prayers, a fact which itself permits understanding and awe. God stoops to our limited minds by allowing anthropomorphic expressions to enter scripture, Exodus 33:23 "I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." But equally we are in awe as we realise that the maker of the universe cares about us, Psalm 144:3 "O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him?" Jesus' personal relation with God properly understood, deepens our own personal link, i.e. he as a man increases our knowledge and relationship with God also. See John 20:17 when Jesus says to Mary "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'".

God displays emotions also to which we can empathise, and which are indeed provoked by us, as in Deuteronomy 13:17-18, "None of those condemned things shall be found in your hands, so that the Lord will turn from his fierce anger; he will show you mercy, have compassion on you, and increase your numbers, as he promised on oath to your forefathers, because you obey the Lord your God". We are rightly in fear of God's anger, understood here and will seek to obey his will for that reason alone.

We furthermore know that God is infinite and eternal, and not limited by time and space as we are, understanding of which again must give rise to awe. See Psalm 90:4 for God's separateness from time "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night." Not only is he outside time, he is not limited in his location, as shown by Jeremiah 23:23 "'Am I only a God nearby," declares the Lord," and not a God far away?" declares the Lord. God's knowledge is perfect and unlimited as Job 37:16 "Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is perfect in knowledge?"

Finally, God is all-powerful as attested in Jeremiah 32:17 "Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you". The only limits to his power are those he imposes himself in accordance with his character. We can understand his power in relation to us as God being in control of our lives, although he gives us free will to act, see Romans 9:14-16 "Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Should we not be in awe of such a God?

3 God's moral characteristics

The essential characteristics set out above give us grounds to obey God as well as fearing him. God's moral characteristics give us strong guidance as to how he wishes us to live our lives.

Holiness is the first of God's moral characteristics that we should highlight. As noted in the text notes, "purity, freedom from sin and moral perfection" are aspects of holiness. God's actions are right, see Psalm 65:5 "You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, who formed the mountains by your power." Also there is faithfulness, see Exodus 34:6-7 "'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." God is willing to bind himself faithfully in covenants with his people, which he promises to maintain on condition they obey, Exodus 19:5 "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession".

Wrath in God's reaction to evil is another aspect of his holiness, see 2 Chronicles 19:10 when Jehoshaphat says "you are to warn them not to sin against the Lord; otherwise his wrath will come on you and your brothers". God's holiness is evident in the visions of the prophets of his glory, see for example Isaiah after seeing God in his glory and purity (6:3) "'Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'" Due to God's holiness we are called to be holy too as Leviticus 11:44 "I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy."

Justice is a second key aspect of God's moral character, a perfect justice which is totally impartial. See Zephaniah 3:5 "The Lord within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning

by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.” Note that God criticises the unjust, urging us to emulate him.

Love is the third of God’s relational characteristics – and again we are called to emulate him, see 1 John 4:16 “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” Note that such love (agape) is totally unselfish and for the benefit of the other person, as spelt out in what is surely a definition of God’s own love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” Note also the element of holiness (does not delight in evil). God’s love gives rise to his desire to redeem rather than condemning us as Isaiah 55:7 “Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” It is God’s love and willingness to forgive that balance fear from his wrath, holiness and justice, making rather for awe and reverence, that we should obey him not from terror but gratitude.

In this context, a key contribution to our understanding of God’s love is awareness of the suffering of God. This comes through the Old Testament when God is continually saddened and grieved by the rebellion of the Israelites. And in the New Testament, when Jesus died, we have the Father also grieving and not standing impassively by. God is with us in our suffering too, a God whom we rightly reverence in love and seek to obey his commands.

4 Conclusions

God’s character is amply shown by the scriptures, and the scriptures as well as our own hearts call upon us to respond by awe and by obedience. Following the moral characteristics set out above, a good summary of God’s requirements is in Micah 6:8 “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Hence knowledge and fear are indeed the grounds for wisdom and understanding in us as God’s people. We may add that Jesus displays all the characteristics of God and is thus co-equally worthy of our praise – but that is the subject of a separate essay.

References

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