



Elizabeth Klein

God

WHAT EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW

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We Should Desire to Know God

Given the title of this book, you may be wondering why it is so short. How could there be a shortcut or quick guide for knowing about God? Isn't the Christian life about coming to know God more and more? It is true that we can never know everything about God, and that we as Christians are always seeking to know God better. This book, however, has a specific focus: in it you will find a starting point for understanding what Christians mean when they say "God," and to whom they are referring when they use this name. Maybe it should be obvious what we mean when we say this word ("God"), since it is so central to our faith, but we encounter misconceptions about its meaning all the time. And, if we are honest, even we might admit that lurking somewhere in the back of our minds we have an image of God as a nice old man sitting in the sky.

There is, however, sometimes a resistance to thinking about God, especially in a theological or philosophical way. We might protest that we are not smart enough to do theology and that less is more when it comes to contemplating the divine. We might even think that too much theology detracts from simple faith. In fact, we all know people with a strong faith who have not opened a single theology book! But if God is perfect, wonderful, all goodness, love itself—as the Bible tells us in 1 John 4:8—it would be strange indeed if we did not want to give our whole selves to God, including our minds.

The Lord himself, when asked to state the most important commandment, responded: “[Y]ou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30). Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, but he adds the words “with all your mind,” making clear to us that we should love God with our whole selves and with all the faculties available to us as human beings. It would be a bad sign in a marriage, after all, if a wife told her husband that after the wedding day she no longer wanted to learn anything more about him, and that knowing too much about him might make her love him less! She would probably end up loving the image of her spouse that she had in her head rather than a real person. Likewise, we should want to love the one true God and not the God of our imagining. And, since God is perfect, knowing more about him can only make us love him more, not less. When we profess faith in God, or experience a conversion to faith, this is not the end of our coming to know God, but the beginning.

It is easy to see at once, moreover, how foggy thinking about God can deeply affect our faith and our ability to communicate it to other people. To take the example of God as an old man: if we think of God, even in the back of our minds, as a giant version of a human being, it is no small wonder that our faith in God remains only a version of our faith in other people. And, we might add, we can see why many people around us reject God out of hand, because they judge God by the standards of human behavior and limitations, and therefore ultimately see God as an invention of the human imagination. Thinking about God as a human being whose power, love, and size have simply been multiplied by a very large number is only one example of how we might think about God in a wrongheaded way. We might think about God as a nebulous force of goodness and happiness in the world,

about whom we can say very little in specific terms. Or, we might think that God is roughly equivalent to the Big Bang, that he is the “something” that sets the world in motion, but that he remains at a distance. In these cases, the God of the Bible is a fairy tale and religion has really nothing to do with us or our everyday lives. All of these ways of thinking about God (even if I have exaggerated them) represent ideas that we have encountered or that we ourselves have perhaps even entertained to a greater or lesser degree.

If we want to love God, to serve God, and to make God the center of our lives, we would do well to settle this question at least in some small way: Who is God? What sort of God is the Christian God? To return to the analogy of marriage: when two people intend to get married, they spend time getting to know one another before they pledge to live their lives together. Neither the bride-to-be nor the groom-to-be would be discouraged by the fact that one person can never completely know another. Therefore, if we intend to spend eternity with God, we should also spend some time getting to know something about him. Let us not be discouraged by the fact that God is beyond our complete knowing.

This book will therefore begin by asking what we mean when we say “God.” Who does God say that he is in the Bible, and what do we mean when we use words to describe God: words such as “all-knowing” (omniscient), “all-powerful” (omnipotent), “infinite,” “eternal,” and the like? By attempting to understand our words, we can push ourselves a little further in coming to know what the word “God” means. The term that is often used to refer to the *what* of God is the word “nature.” So, we will first consider the nature of God and why it matters for our faith. We will then discuss what is called the doctrine of the Trinity, the uniquely Christian claim that God is three-in-one. When a Catholic professes faith in God, it is in God as Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Coming to

know God as Trinity is essential to understanding to whom the word “God” is referring. After we have some sense of the *what* of God (the nature of God) and the *who* of God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), we will turn to the Incarnation—that is, we will talk about what it means for God to have become a human being in Jesus Christ. It is only through Christ that we can meet God in the flesh and, therefore, understand the destiny of humankind and our hope of heaven.

Hopefully this book will serve as an occasion for you to love God with your mind, and to equip you to explain the essentials of the faith to others. There are many rich aspects of our Christian faith, but compared to God himself these are nothing. For this reason, in the creed, the first thing we profess is belief in God (“I believe in God, the Father almighty . . .”). Or, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them.”¹

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 234 (hereafter cited as CCC).

2

God's Name

If we want to understand what a Christian means by the word “God,” the best place to start is the Bible. We can hear about a person from others, we can gather information about someone from various sources, but we would not say we know a person unless he speaks with us. Likewise, it is in the Bible where we encounter God and his own words about himself, where we can hear him speak to us and therefore come to know him. One of the most dramatic moments in the Bible when God tells us something about himself is found in Exodus 3, where Moses has the gumption to ask God directly for his name. Moses, at this time, is living as a shepherd in the land of Midian. One day, while he is minding his own business and tending his sheep, he sees something strange—a bush that is on fire and yet is not burning up—and he turns aside to find out what this sign could mean. When he approaches the bush, the voice of God tells him to remove his sandals, for he is standing on holy ground. God then proceeds to introduce himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to tell Moses that he has been chosen to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses is not initially pleased with God's plan. He protests that he is not equal to the task and that no one will believe he has been commissioned by God. Moses then asks for God's credentials—some divine identifier—in order that he might tell the Israelites who has sent him. God's response?

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." (Ex 3:14–15)

To me, this story is the perfect starting place for our quest to gain some understanding of God. Let us follow Moses's example and turn aside for a moment from our daily concerns and allow ourselves to be drawn in by God's brilliance. And what better place to begin to understand God than with his own chosen calling card? "I AM WHO I AM."

What does this name mean? Whatever it means, it immediately banishes any thought of God as an old man in the sky, for even the oldest of men would not have a name like this one. In the Christian tradition, this name has been taken not only as a true name by which we might call upon God, but also as God revealing his nature to us in a way that we can understand it. Remember that the word "nature" refers to *what* God is, the essence of God and what he can do. The name "I AM WHO I AM" or simply "I AM" tells us that God is not one living thing among many things, not one form of existence in the universe that can be counted with others, but that God *is*. God is life itself, God exists through himself and not by the power of another, and without God there is nothing else. God does not change or pass from doing one thing to another. The God of the burning bush is "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1:17). Or, as Hebrews says of Christ, God is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). A philosophical word that is used to capture some of these ideas about God is the word "transcendent"—it means that God is not one thing or person in the world, but completely different

from the world, above and beyond it. God is not huge, for he occupies no such thing as space. God is not old, for he passes through no such thing as time. Time and space are dimensions of the created world, which God surpasses, because God is transcendent. God *is*, eternally present and existing.

We might nod our heads and think we have understood this fact about God. Of course, once we have begun to think about it, it may seem obvious that God is beyond all things and not restricted by space or time. But we should not be so hasty to assume that we have grasped the entire meaning of this name in one intellectual swoop. The Israelites seemed to have struggled with it considerably, frequently thinking that their God was just one god among many who, although very powerful, might not be the most worth worshipping (or, at the very least, not the easiest one to worship). For this reason, the prophet Jonah could casually comment that he “fears the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (Jon 1:9), while at the same time trying to escape that very God in a boat *on the sea*. Jonah seemingly grasps that his God is not an element in the universe but the creator of it, and yet he certainly does not act like it! We too, although we know that God is beyond everything in this world, can act as if we have him completely figured out, whereas, in fact, we will not understand completely until we see God face to face. We will continue to speak about the further implications of God's existence in the following three chapters, but for now let us return to the speech that God made to Moses and to another foundational truth it reveals about God's character: God's name reveals not only that he is *above* all things, but also that he is *present to and in* all things.

If the revealing of God's name demolishes all false notions of God as an elderly man, it should equally demolish any idea of God as a distant watchmaker or impersonal force. God reveals his actual name to a particular human being at a particular location. God's “I AM” is not in the first instance a

philosophical statement, but it describes God's actions in the Exodus story. In Hebrew, God's name could just as well be in the future tense, and so it could be translated into English as "I will be who I will be." In some sense, then, God's name is a bit of a joke on Moses. Moses has asked God for his name so that he will have a guarantee of success with the Israelites in Egypt, and God responds that his name is "the one who will be with you"! In other words, Moses asks, "Who is going to be there with me in Egypt?" and it is to this question that God responds, "I AM." Moses is told in that name—"I AM"—not simply that God is all-powerful, the source of existence, and so on, but that he truly has God for his ally. God will be with him in any situation. For this reason, God adds a reminder about the past to his promise about the future: Moses is also to tell the people that "I AM" is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to make sure that they remember his name throughout all generations. One of the facts about God we have just discussed above then, that God does not change, does not make him impersonal or distant, but reliable and present. It is true that God is not one thing in the universe, but God's name also tells us that he is present to all things in the universe, and not merely present as a warm fuzzy feeling or as an all-pervasive force, but present as an actor and cause. From the story in Exodus, we know that God has made that presence and love known in time and space to real people. He is not just the God of the cosmos, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The word sometimes used to describe this quality of God is "immanent" (not to be confused with "imminent"). Immanent means right here, present, with us.

As with God's transcendence, God's immanence can also seem rather obvious once we have labeled it. Of course God is everywhere present, and we know that the Bible speaks frequently of God's intimate acting in the history of the world. But, once again, this fact about God is one that we need to

encounter again and again in order to begin to understand it and live according to it. It is one that we will only know securely by frequent hearing of the Bible and by prayer, because we may know that God acts in history in theory, but we cannot know that he acts in our own lives except by experience. There is nothing more sobering than prayer for helping us come to terms with God's immediacy and his desire to work in the world and in us. For example, although frustrated by great suffering, it is in conversation with God that Job is able to express God's care for him, that God is not a distant creator of the world, but Job's own creator: "You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit" (Jb 10:11–12). Likewise, it is often in psalms—which are prayers—that we see a biblical author reflecting on the amazing fact that the God of the universe is also the God of every individual:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it. (Ps 139:1–6)

The psalmist marvels at the God of the universe who knows all things, and praises God not just because he knows all the facts there are to know about the universe, but because God knows each person and what is in our hearts. Let us

accordingly follow the advice of 1 Peter, which captures our proper response to the greatness of God and his regard for us in our smallness: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pt 5:6–7). God is certainly a God of the big picture, but that does not prevent him in any way from being a God of the small picture too—because he *is*, he is in all things great and small, he causes all things great and small.

Another wonderful biblical passage that demonstrates that God is in both great and small comes from the vision of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings. In this passage, Elijah is fleeing Jezebel in fear for his life and has fasted forty days and forty nights when he arrives at Mount Horeb. There God makes his presence known to Elijah in portends of all kinds:

And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. (1 Kgs 19:11–12)

Here, Elijah sees awesome signs of the might of God—a terrible wind, earthquake, and fire—but the Lord transcends all these. God is creator and master of these elements of the world. But, after all these terrifying displays of his power, the Lord speaks to Elijah not by thundering from a cloud but in “the sound of a low whisper.” In this still, soft voice, God commands Elijah to return to Israel and to continue to act as the prophet that the people of God so desperately need. God, in other words, has a plan for his people (and the whole world), but he still acts through a small voice spoken to a frightened man in the wilderness.

By our study of God's name, and by coming to understand God's transcendence and immanence, therefore, we can see the task set out for us in this book in miniature: to understand how the God of the universe, who is above all, is also the Lord who loves us and comes to us personally. In this way, we can come to appreciate the magnificence of God and yet his nearness to all his creatures.

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