

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few weeks we’ve been studying popular sayings people think are in the Bible—but they aren’t. We’ve already discussed several pseudo-scriptures including, “God helps those who help themselves” and “God won’t put more on you than you can bear.” Today, we are focusing on the saying, “God moves in mysterious ways”—No, that’s NOT in the Bible.

These words come from a hymn written by William Cowper in 1774. The first stanza says: “God moves in mysterious ways/ His wonders to perform. / He plants his footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm.” We’ll learn more about Mr. Cowper later.

This statement may be uttered as an expression of praise after God has done something so miraculous it cannot be explained in human terms. Or it may be shared as a hollow explanation when troubling circumstances come into our lives—and God is blamed. Someone may use this statement as an excuse for not seeking to know or understand God—after all, He’s so mysterious, He can’t be known. Is that the truth? For the answer, let’s look at Isaiah 55:6-9:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. 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. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

With this passage as our launching pad, let’s explore the lofty heights of three important facets of who God is and how He relates to us:

1. GOD IS MYSTERIOUS, BUT YOU CAN KNOW HIM!

In the movie “Rudy,” the undersized Notre Dame football player endures some tough times because his dream to play for Notre Dame is not being fulfilled. He goes to see a wise Catholic priest named Father Cavanaugh. In one of the best lines ever to come out of Hollywood, Father Cavanaugh says, “Son, in 35 years of religious study, I have only come up with two hard incontrovertible facts: there is a God and I’m not Him.” I would add to that a third incontrovertible fact: There is a God, you’re not Him, but you *can* know Him personally!

Isaiah 55 teaches us about the majesty and mystery of God. His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. But the very fact we that we can even talk about God is amazing. In his book *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis compares our human talk about God to shellfish talking to each other about humans. If a mystical shellfish catches a glimpse of what a human is like, he will attempt to share his vision with his fellow clams. He begins by telling them how unlike themselves humans are. Humans have no shells, like clams; they aren’t attached to rocks; and they do not live surrounded by water. Those three dynamics, shells, rocks, and water are important to clams, so the clam begins to have a negative image of a human. Lewis writes, “Uncorrected by any positive insight, they build up a picture of Man as a sort of amorphous jelly (no shell) existing nowhere in particular (no rocks); and never eating (because there’s no water to

bring nutrients to him). So the shellfish would conclude that man is a 'famished jelly existing in a dimension less void.'"

Lewis says in the same way our human limitations prevent us from thinking and talking correctly about God. That's why God reveals Himself to us in the Bible. And the Bible says while God is majestic and mysterious, we can seek Him and know Him. Isaiah 55 instructs us on *when* to seek God and *how* to seek Him. We are to seek Him while He may be found, to call on Him while He is near. This implies there will be a time when He may not be found, and when He will not be near. God is not playing some kind of cosmic Hide 'N Seek. He wants to have a love relationship with you.

Right now, He *can* be found. But if you wait until after you die to seek God, He won't be found. That's why you must seek Him and get to know Him on a personal level today. After you die, you will not have a second chance to seek and find God.

The secret of how we can know God is found in Isaiah 55:7. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church is said to have preached on this verse over 200 times. Anyone can seek God, but in order to find Him, a person must be willing to turn from their sins and to turn to the Lord.

By doing this you can enter into a personal relationship with God. Some people can't find God for the same reason a crook can't find a policeman, because of sin in their lives, they really aren't looking very diligently.

Do you really *know* God? I wish I could know everyone who attends our church. Last week we had over 5,000 people here on Sunday morning. I know a lot of the folks who come, but I'll never know everyone. If someone asked you this next week, "Do you know David Dykes?" Some of you could say, "Sure, I've spent personal time with him." But some of you might say something like, "Yeah, I know him. I listen to him every week." But just seeing me and hearing me is not the same thing as knowing me. The only way you can get to know me is by spending time with me. If you have invited me into your home, and we've shared a meal together, chances are I know you. But if all you've ever done is come and sit and listen, I may not know you. The same is true with knowing God. You may know about God, and you may even know what the Bible says, but that's not the same as knowing God. The only way you will get to know God is by spending quality time with Him in prayer and Bible study.

It was the summer of 1967, and a young girl named Joni was riding horses near Chesapeake Bay. She decided to go for a swim and she dove into the shallow water, breaking her neck on a submerged rock. At first, Joni had a hard time reconciling her accident with the idea of a loving God. She was angry, demanding to know why this had happened to her. One day a friend told her, "Jesus knows how you feel. He was paralyzed. He couldn't move or change position on the cross. He was paralyzed by the nails." Joni began to understand God is a God of love, even when tragedy strikes in our lives. Today, God is using Joni Erickson Tada to touch others.

She once received a letter from an angry young man who had been in an accident. He was bitter at God for allowing his to suffer. He had written to Joni asking the big question: **WHY?** After relating some of her own feelings of bitterness and questioning, Joni wrote:

If God decided to explain all His ways to me, what makes me think I would be able to understand them? It would be like pouring million-gallon truths into my one-ounce brain. Didn't one Old Testament author write, "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things" (Ecclesiastes 11:5)? In fact, the whole book of Ecclesiastes was written to convince people like me that only God holds the keys to unlocking the mysteries of life and that He's not loaning them all out! If God's mind was small enough for me to understand, He wouldn't be God! Yet, in spite of this, He has chosen to have a personal relationship with me—that's the greatest mystery of all! (*A Step Further*, p. 173)

Having said that, notice also:

2. GOD IS SO GREAT THAT YOU'LL NEVER FULLY UNDERSTAND HIM!

So, while you *can* know God, He is so majestic our finite human minds can never fully comprehend all there is to know about Him. You may wonder if it's possible to know someone without truly understanding them. Well, I don't understand everything about my wife, but I know her, and I love her. That's what makes marriage exciting; it's a never-ending quest to know each other better. If you've ever heard someone say to their spouse, "I've got you figured out" you can know that they're lying. If you ever hear someone say, "I've got God figured out" you know they are also mistaken.

The Apostle Paul is so overwhelmed by the greatness and majesty of God He breaks out with these words in Romans 11:33-36: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For FROM him and THROUGH him and TO him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen."

Have you ever heard someone say, "I just don't understand how a loving God could ever send someone to hell?" When we hear that, our temptation is to try to defend God by explaining about sin, and free will. But the correct response is, "I just don't understand how a Holy God can ever let sinners into heaven!" This passage says God's judgements are unsearchable. His paths are beyond tracing out.

I love the three prepositions found in Romans 11:36. All things are FROM Him - God is the source of everything. All things are THROUGH Him—He is the course of life. All things are TO Him—He is the force of all life.

God's greatness is mind-boggling. Look at the stars and planets for example. The Psalmist writes: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, and the stars, which you have set in place. What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:3-4) See, the same God who created the planets and stars is interested in us. Let me use an illustration to demonstrate the greatness of God. Consider our own solar system. The sun is huge—865,000 miles in diameter. If we could reduce the sun until it was the size of a basketball (9") notice the size and location of

the other planets. Mercury would be the size of a dot made by a pen, and it would be 15 paces away from the basketball. Venus would be the size of a tiny BB and would be 15 paces further away. Earth would be 11 more steps away and would appear to be the size of a regular BB. After an asteroid field, Mars would be a smaller BB 20 more paces away. You’d have to walk 100 more steps to locate the largest planet, Jupiter, and compared to the basketball/sun, it would be the size of a golf ball. Saturn is 224 more steps, and as the second largest planet, would appear as a marble. Uranus would be reached in 302 more steps, and it would be the size of a cherry. Keep walking, because Neptune would be the size of a green pea located 302 more steps away—and we haven’t even gotten to Pluto, which some astronomers think isn’t a planet at all, just one of Neptune’s weird moons! From the basketball to Pluto would be almost a mile! That’s why they call it SPACE! It blows our minds, but in Isaiah 40:12 we read, “God has measured the heavens with the span of His hand.” (Note: study the solar system scale at http://www.exploratorium.edu/ronh/solar_system/)

Wow! And that’s just our solar system! Does anyone know the name of the star nearest earth? (Answer: our sun!) But the next nearest star is the Alpha Centauri systems (comprised of three stars). Traveling at the speed of light, it would take us 4.5 years to get from here to there. And scientists tell us there are over 300 billion stars in our own galaxy, the Milky Way. And there are millions and millions of galaxies comprised of billions of stars comprised of trillions of planets. And God says, “I measured the heavens with my hand.”

I love to sing the song by that says, “God of wonders beyond our galaxy, You are holy, holy. The Universe declares your Majesty, You are holy, holy.”

If our planet is only a BB to a basketball, and there are billions of other basketballs, what does that make me? I’m a microscopic speck of dust. And yet this God who created the Universe told me He cares for me like a Father, and that every hair of my head is numbered. So, remember, you’ll *never* fully comprehend everything about God: He’s so great. But don’t let that stand in the way of having a personal relationship with Him!

3. GOD HAS REVEALED HIS GREATEST MYSTERY!

Don’t you love a good mystery? I’ve read hundreds of mystery novels through the years. When I’m halfway through a good John Grisham book, I’m trying to figure out how it will end. Most people enjoy solving a complicated riddle or uncovering a mystery. There’s even a television show called “Unsolved Mysteries” hosted by Robert Stack. The web site for the show claims almost 300 real-life cases have been solved by the viewers of “Unsolved Mysteries.”

Many people think God is the same way. They think His ways are so mysterious they are beyond our understanding. Perhaps the phrase “God moves in mysterious ways” was coined because in the Bible, God often did the *unexpected*. For instance, instead of using Moses when he was 40 years old, God waited until Moses was 80—that’s moving in a mysterious way! Instead of using Gideon’s army of 32,000 soldiers, God told Gideon to whittle his ranks down until only 300 soldiers remained—that’s pretty mysterious. God seldom acts or moves the way we think He should.

Instead of having the Messiah, the King of the Jews born in a great palace, He was born to a peasant girl in a barn. Instead of having the Messiah placed on a great throne of gold, God had the Messiah nailed to a cross of wood. Unexpected? God specializes in the unexpected.

In the New Testament, the word "mystery" had nothing to do with a who-done-it story. Our English word comes from the Greek word "*musterion*." It's a word meaning "that which is beyond the range of natural understanding." It can only be made known by God. While much of what God does qualifies as mysterious, the Bible teaches us that God has chosen to reveal His greatest mystery to us.

The Bible says in Colossians 1:26: "The MYSTERY that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this MYSTERY, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

How are you relating to Jesus right now? There's a good way, a better way, and the best way to have hope. Do you have a sense that Christ is for you? That's good, He is. Do you have a sense that Jesus is with you, that's even better! Wonderful. But do you understand what it means for Christ to be *in* you? That's the best!

Years ago I read a beautiful little blue tract published by Campus Crusade. It asked the question, "Have you made the wonderful discovery of the Spirit-filled life?" For the first time I began to understand that the Christian life did not consist of me trying to do things *for* Jesus. Like that old hymn, I was trying to "give of my best to the master" and I was finding my best was not good enough. Instead I discovered it was much better to simply allow Jesus to live His normal life in and through me. Jesus in me could love people that I couldn't love—at my best. Jesus in me could forgive people I could never forgive—at my best. In other words I learned there was a tremendous difference between my best and Jesus' normal!

It's like putting a tea bag in a cup of hot water. Imagine I'm holding a cup of water that represents me, and the tea bag represents Jesus' life. The water is not the tea and the tea is not the water. This bag is *FOR* the water, but that doesn't really change the fact it's still just water. The bag is *WITH* the water, but it's still water. But when the tea bag is placed *IN* the water something changes. The water becomes indwelt by a new and dominant nature: the tea. The tea is in the water, and the water is in the tea. (just as we are "in Christ" and Christ is "in me") But the tea has changed the nature of the water so I'd never say, "Here would you like a cup of colored, flavored water?" I say, "Here is a cup of tea." When the tea bag is in the water, it transforms the water into a new and different entity.

When you understand what it means to be indwelt by Christ, the emphasis and focus is no longer on "ME" or "I" but on Christ in me. Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) What a tremendous resource is ours! Yet you may be like millions of miserable Christians are still trying to live the Christian life *for* Jesus rather than surrendering to allow Jesus to live His live in and through you. He is indwelling you and His power is available—but you may not be appropriating it.

I recently read a true story of a couple on their honeymoon. For the first night, the groom reserved the bridal suite in an expensive hotel. The reception ran late, so it was after midnight when they arrived at the hotel. Entering the bridal suite, they were surprised to find only a sofa, some chairs and a table—there was no bed in the room. But they discovered that the sofa was a sleeper sofa, so they put the sheets on it—only to discover that it was a lumpy mattress. They were too tired to protest or to ask for another room, so they just endured the disappointment.

The next morning, as they were packing to check out, the husband marched down to the lobby and accosted the manager with his complaints.

After listening for several minutes to the groom's complaints, the manager asked him, "Did you open the door in the room?" The groom went back up the room and he opened what he thought had been a closet door: It was the entrance to a beautifully furnished bedroom, where they also found a basket of fruit and chocolates. The management had provided everything to please them; they just didn't take full advantage of what was available.

I can imagine they felt rather foolish after learning what had been available. I wonder how many believers will enter heaven only to discover there were multitudes of blessings and awesome amounts of spiritual power God had made available to them—they just never walked through the door into the Spirit-filled life.

CONCLUSION

Do you remember our friend, William Cowper? He wrote the song, "God moves in mysterious ways." Maybe you're interested in "the rest of the story." Cowper was born into a pastor's home and trained to be a lawyer. From an early age he struggled with bouts of depression and anxiety.

At the age of 28, he had an opportunity to be hired as an accountant for the House of Lords, but when he stood before them to receive their questions; he froze and could not answer. He sank so far into depression he made the first of three attempts to commit suicide. He was admitted to St. Albin's Insane Asylum. Although he knew about God, Cowper was deathly afraid he was forever lost and destined for hell. While in the asylum, he began to read the Bible and gain a greater understanding about God's nature. He also started writing poetry.

Cowper, who never married, was so lonely and depressed on another evening; he decided to throw himself into the Thames River to drown. He called for a cab and directed the horseman to drop him off at a certain dock on the River Thames. On the way to the dock, a dense fog descended on London until the driver could only see a few feet in front of his coach. After wandering around aimlessly for over an hour, Cowper told the driver to stop, and just let him out. He would try to find the river on foot. The coach stopped and when Cowper exited, he was surprised to find that in the fog, the driver had made a circle and he was right back in front of the door to his flat.

Cowper concluded that God had a hand in the fog, and he never attempted suicide again. Not long after that foggy evening, he penned the words: God moves in mysterious ways; / His wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm. / Ye fearful

saints, fresh courage take; / The clouds ye so much dread / Are big with mercy and shall break /
In blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, / But trust Him for His grace; /
Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face.

Although he struggled for all of his 69 years, God used William Cowper to write such powerful lyrics as: "There is a fountain filled with blood,/ drawn from Emmanuel's veins;/ and sinners plunged beneath its flow/ lose all their guilty stains." Another verse of that wonderful hymn became the theme of Cowper's life: "E'er since by faith, I saw the stream; Thy flowing wounds supply; Redeeming Love has been my theme; and shall be 'till I die!"

Yes, God does move in mysterious ways—but Christ in you is His greatest mystery—and He delights to reveal that truth to you! Will you receive Jesus into your heart by faith? Only after you understand the mystery of Christ in you will you enjoy life to its fullest!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes