

Who is God?

It seems a bit presumptuous even to ask such a question. If God can create everything we understand to be real, then He is undoubtedly unlike anything or anyone we have ever known. How can one really *know* someone or something that is so entirely different? With these thoughts in mind, I embark on the journey to find answers to this first Essential Question with humility, a little fear, and the recognition that I will probably never fully comprehend the magnitude of His Being.

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.

Despite the limitations that may be present in our search, we are still encouraged to know Him.

Jeremiah 9: ²³ This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, ²⁴ but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD.

Philippians 3: ¹⁰ I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Proverbs 8: ¹⁷ I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.

Essential Question #1 is designed to discover answers that will help us know God, similarly to how we come to know others. This question does not seek to understand what it means to be God, that is, how God is different from His creation. Neither is it seeking to understand what “life” might be like on God’s plane of existence. Those might be interesting questions, but they are distractions from genuinely wanting to comprehend what it means to know and follow God.

Asking the question “Who is God?” is born out of a deep desire to experience a genuine relationship with Him: Does God have feelings like mine? What does God think or feel about me? Does God get angry? If so, what makes Him angry? Does God act differently when He is angry versus when He is pleased? What makes God sad? What are God’s goals for humankind and me? Any information that would help you understand another person is the same type of information that can assist you in better understanding who God is.

This first essential question is also motivated by a desire to *live out* the “Greatest Commandment” that Jesus identified in **Matthew 22:**

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.” We are called to develop an all-encompassing, loving relationship with God. The Essential Question, “Who is God?” is designed to provide answers that will help us understand God in a way that will enable us to enter more fully into a loving relationship with Him.

A simple internet search would provide many insightful answers to this Essential Question, but such a search would not be a truly fruitful process for two crucial reasons. First, the goal is not to arrive at a cognitive (or academic) understanding of God. Instead, this question (as well as the remaining three Essential Questions) is designed to elicit insights contributing to a holistic spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and relational **connection** with God. Each “right” answer you discover – answers God **leads** you to – should derive from a sense of being drawn closer to God. The second way this search is unlike most other learning experiences is that you must **own** each answer. These answers are not merely pieces of information that might become lost or misplaced. These learnings become a part of you, and that occurs because the insights come directly from experiences that **connect** you with God – they emerge out of your own life experiences as you search for meaningful answers from God Himself.

If I were to provide some of my answers to the question, “Who is God?” I would rattle off a list of descriptors such as He is good, kind, and loving; He is my protector, provider, teacher, and guide; He comforts, consoles, and encourages me. Each of these descriptors is supported by scripture, but neither the list of virtues nor the scripture references is what makes those attributes of ultimate value. **What is of primary importance is that God has demonstrated Himself to actually be each of these things in my life.** God has comforted me, God has encouraged me, God has carried me when I didn’t know if I could go on. God has embodied each of these descriptors – and many more – and that **experiential knowledge** is what matters. That’s how I **own** my understanding of who God is, rather than just being intellectually aware of some reliable information about God. And that’s how you must find answers to each of the Essential Questions. While there are many ways to gain **experiential knowledge** of God’s identity, I will provide three examples.

The first example is through the experience of reflecting on the reading of scripture. Over the past several months, my devotional readings have included Old Testament stories of God’s interactions with the Nation of Israel. Without recounting those stories here, I will list some questions that popped into my mind as I read. Among these readings, I noted the period between God’s first call to Abraham (Genesis 12) and when God changed Jacob’s name to Israel and began “building” the 12 “tribes” (Genesis 32), which was roughly 200 years. I wondered why it took God so long to move in this way. Later, I noted that the Nation of Israel was enslaved in Egypt for about 400 years. Why, I wondered, would God allow His people to suffer for so long before freeing them? What do these and other examples teach me about God’s timing? His

patience? Does He care when people are suffering? What, if anything, is He doing during this time?

Additionally, when I considered the transition of God's leadership over Israel from using judges (Samuel) to anointing their first king (Saul), why would God grant His people's desire for a king when that wasn't what He genuinely wanted for His people? (See 1 Samuel, Chapter 8) Later, I thought about how God removed His anointing from Saul and anointed David in Saul's place (but did not *make* David king at that time). Why would God allow so much time to transpire before allowing Saul to be killed in a battle so David could take his rightful place as king? These and many additional questions all caused me to reflect on the Essential Question, "Who is God?". As God gave me insights, additional truths were added to that *container* in my mind. These are just a few examples of how reading scripture can aid in finding meaningful answers to the Essential Question, "Who is God?"

The second example of how one can develop experiential knowledge of God's identity is by reflecting on events as they unfold in the world around us. As I write these words, we are just beginning to come out of an extended period of "lockdown" associated with the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Except for "essential services," the entirety of the American economy has been shuttered for approximately two months (so far). During this time, it is unclear how many people might die from the virus, as well as what the financial consequences might be. The American government has spent several trillion dollars to help support the vast number of people who are currently unemployed, as well as the many businesses that have closed and may never open again. Throughout this time, I wondered how God views America and the world. Why would God allow such a destructive virus to be released? Is this God's judgment? Is God "finished" with America? Is this the consequence of millions of abortions and America's drifting away from God? Is this the beginning of the "end times"? Each thought and the insight God provided added information to the "Who is God?" container. So, using Level 4 reasoning regarding life events is a second way to gain experiential knowledge of God's identity.

The third and most impactful example of how one gains experiential knowledge of God's identity is through reflecting on personal life experiences. The more significant a given life experience is to you personally, the more profound the learning will be for you. When our deepest thoughts, emotions, and motivations are brought into the light of God's Presence, we enter into an exchange with the potential for extreme levels of insight, wisdom, and transformation. One such instance occurred for me in July of 1985. I had just completed my first year of ministry experience as a youth pastor and was serving as the founding principal of the K-12 church school we had launched. It was an extremely hard yet fulfilling and thoroughly exhilarating year. Not only did I enjoy being invited into an extremely meaningful ministry experience, but we also just started our family in June of the previous year with the birth of our first child. When you add the



excitement and challenges of starting a family, moving into a new home, and launching a new career, it was almost overwhelming in every positive way!

When we were just days away from our first family vacation, our 13-month-old daughter began to exhibit flu-like symptoms. My wife took her to our pediatrician, who prescribed some OTC medications to deal with the fever and encouraged her to consume plenty of liquids. However, a few days later, our baby seemed to be getting worse rather than better. My wife and I returned to see our pediatrician. This time, when he looked into our daughter's eyes, the doctor turned to us and said, "This is something serious; head over to the hospital. I'll call ahead for them to reserve a room for you, and I'll meet you there shortly." Those were the scariest words we had ever heard. (I'm emotionally overwhelmed just recounting this incident.)

We drove the short distance to our local hospital, and as we entered and gave them our names, we were escorted into a small private examination room. We knew this was very serious based on our doctor's tone. My wife immediately sensed we needed prayer support and left me alone with our daughter as she searched for a public phone to call some of our closest friends and ask them to pray for our baby and us. As I stood there alone, holding our very sick little girl, scenes from the past many months flashed through my mind. I recalled the excitement of my wife's pregnancy and the many times I had read to my child as she was growing within my wife's womb. I remembered our hopes and dreams; I recalled the excitement of her birth and all the "wins" during her first year of life. I remembered her learning how to turn over, crawl, stand up, begin to take her first steps, and even speak her first words. All those thoughts and dreams filled my heart and mind as I held my sick baby, wondering what was about to unfold.

As I quieted my mind, the thought entered: "God, would you take our baby?" "Is it really possible that you might remove this great blessing from our lives?" After a quiet moment, I sensed the Holy Spirit asking me in return, "If I did take her, would you still love and serve Me?" "Would you still believe that I am a loving and caring God even if I were to take your baby from you?" After another pause – I'm not sure how long it took – I remember responding, "Well, I know she would be better off with You than with me. So, if it is Your will to take our little girl, then yes, I will not allow the outcome of this experience to undermine my commitment to know, love, serve, and follow You. I will still confess that You are a kind, compassionate, and loving Father."

Those interactions with God during that very tender time solidified something deep within my heart. I probably failed to capture it adequately, but God's dealings with me were tender, sweet, and comforting during those moments. Through those interactions, as well as the three weeks our baby spent in the hospital recovering, and the months and years that followed in dealing with the deafness caused by our daughter's battle with spinal meningitis, God has only further shown Himself to be a kind, loving, compassionate, and faithful Heavenly Father. That's the kind of experiential knowledge we seek when we ask the Essential Question, "Who is God?" That is also

the kind of experiential knowledge we desire as we search for answers to the other three Essential Life Questions.

Let me close this chapter with these thoughts: We wish to achieve two critical goals in finding answers to Essential Question #1: Who is God?

1. We want the insights we gain to aid us in connecting with God in ever-increasingly personal ways – and allow these divine interactions to bring about all the transformation God desires to accomplish within us.
2. We want the insights we gain to transform how we interact with others – especially those with whom we interact most deeply and frequently.

These two goals also apply to the remaining three Essential Questions. The next chapter will examine Essential Question #2: “How has God Designed Life to be Lived?” We will search for God's foundational principles for our spiritual, psychological, relational, social, and emotional well-being. The more we discover about who God is, the easier it will be for us to embrace the idea that God has established truths upon which ALL of life is to be lived! And integrating these truths into our lives will provide increasing stability and peace and contribute to the growth of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment.

If this discussion has been helpful, I'd like to let you know about a book I've written that explores this and other closely related topics in greater depth. The title of the book is: “Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Fulfillment: Making Sense of God, Life, and Success.”

My goal in writing this book was to help people better understand how God designed life to be lived and what He expects from each of us. In its broadest sense, God designed life as a journey of discovery with Himself as our guide, counselor, and primary resource. You and I are called to be students of life with God as our teacher!

If you didn't enjoy going to school, let me assure you that having God as your life teacher will be substantially better than any previous educational experiences. God is not angry with you, He is not disappointed in you, and He will never pressure or embarrass you. He is genuinely a kind, loving, and supportive teacher – more so than any teacher, coach, counselor, or parent you have ever known. A big part of your life as a student is discovering how truly awesome God is!

My book highlights the most important life principles God has established, guides readers in building and deepening their relationship with Him, and outlines ways to

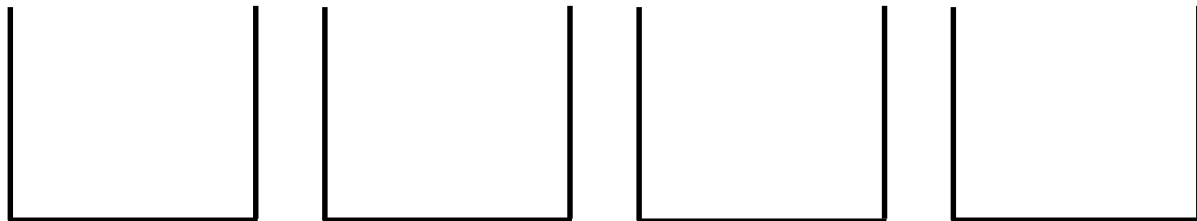
adjust their life practices to further God's purposes in and through their lives. ***In short, my book addresses one central question: What is life really all about?***

Each of us recognizes that we are responsible for how we live our lives. We each must find answers to the most profound and important questions of life. But what are the most critical questions for which we must find answers?

As I reflected on my life experiences in the months leading up to my retirement from teaching and pastoring, the Holy Spirit helped me realize that everything of value I had ever learned was an answer to one or more of four questions. In my book, I refer to these as the "Four Essential Life Questions."

1. Who Is God?
2. How Has God Designed Life to be Lived?
3. Who Am I?
4. What Is God Asking Me to Do?

What profoundly impacted me was the realization that as I have found answers to these Essential Questions over time, and followed God's guidance to bring my life into alignment, meaning, purpose, and fulfillment have grown in my life. I believe that is how God wants to bring meaning, purpose, and fulfillment into your life as well.



Who Is God?

How has God
Designed Life to
be Lived?

Who Am I?

What is God
Calling Me to
Do?

The Essential Questions serve as containers. The more you fill these containers with answers and align your life accordingly, the more meaning, purpose, and fulfillment will grow. You will experience the "full life" Jesus died to secure for you as you allow God to reveal answers to the Essential Questions and then follow His guidance. The book also provides detailed guidance on how to incorporate the Essential Questions into your daily life.