

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

How can anyone really know God?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why might it be a good thing to acknowledge that our knowledge of God is limited?



Understanding the information (15 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

It is natural to ask, as finite human beings, how much we can really understand or know God, or how we can really say anything about God at all. It is clear in the Bible that we do know from the beginning that God is a God of covenant love. Yet it is also clear from the beginning that our knowledge is limited. When Moses approached the burning bush in the desert (Exodus 3) and asked to know God's name he got two replies: "God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, '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.'"



God reminds Moses of the covenants He made. But He also refuses to give His name. The meaning of "I am who I am" is best translated as "I will be there as I will be there". In other words, you can only come so far, know so much about Him – He refuses to be tied down by any human idea.

Far from being a problem, this is something which helps us approach God as God. As St Aquinas said, "a comprehended God is no God at all." CS Lewis put it this way, "...my idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself." That is why in Scripture God is often revealed as spirit and fire—things that cannot be contained or easily approached.

For everything we say about God, there will always be more to be said. It is most helpful to see our knowledge of God about trying to point in the right direction, rather than giving a final answer. We can say, “The truth is in this direction, and not that way.” We can know God, but never completely. Paul put it like this, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13) This is why we say we believe in God, and have faith, rather than knowledge which comes from complete proof. So, perhaps a better question to ask is... How much can we know?

We can discover aspects of God’s character in various ways:

By looking at creation – what does the way the world and universe works reveal? By examining ourselves – what do our longings for beauty, truth, justice and meaning point towards? By looking at the way God is revealed and acted in Scripture. And ultimately by looking at Christ, who is the “image of the invisible God.”

Over time, we have come to see that, even without the whole picture, there are aspects of God’s being and character that we can know to be true. Some of these things (attributes) describe God’s powers and some His personality. Or to put it another way, some reflect His greatness, and others His goodness. And while some describe who God is, some can only describe who He is not (such as, for example, saying He does not change). God’s defining attribute is self-giving, covenant love. But a further list might include this definition: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." (Westminster Shorter Catechism)

Discuss: Which attributes of God matter most? Why?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

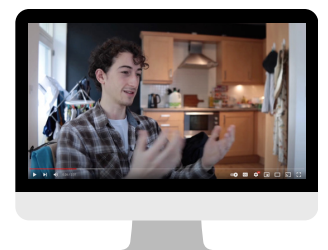
Read Isaiah 55: 6-9 which describes how we can know God, but never completely.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCaFyUo9Yys&t=9s>
What struck you as important in the video?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

This understanding can help us in several ways. It stops us making God in our own image. It helps us to keep wondering at and exploring God. Augustine said, “If you understand, it is not God. God is ever greater, always bigger, than anything we think we know of him.” Another writer puts it like this: “God introduces us into this mystery, but not in such a way that it simply stops being mysterious. It cannot be exhausted by being revealed;....Every aspect of God’s mystery that he gives us to understand is surrounded by mystery and opens into greater mystery .” The wonder of God is there is always more to be explored!

It gives you the right balance in your relationship with Him. Solomon wrote in his Proverbs: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. This fear isn’t because we can’t trust in God’s love or goodness, but it’s the kind of awe and deep respect we have for a being who is, “beyond my utmost heights and more inward to me than my inmost depths.” (Augustine). We are drawn towards God’s wonder, but we cannot fathom Him. God is both holy and completely unapproachable – filling us with awe and wonder – and completely within and around us, closer to us than we can understand. We call these qualities God being transcendent (above everything and mysterious) and immanent (within and alongside us, available at all times). He holds the whole universe and knows every atom. We tremble before Him AND draw close to Him in intimate love.

There are times in our lives as disciples when we need to remember the fear of the Lord. There are times when we need to draw close to His intimate love. Both are true, and both are needed. Different churches emphasise different approaches to God. Some are very aware of His transcendence in the way they worship and live. Others reflect the closeness of God’s love. It’s good to experience both in being with God. This balance is actually in the first words of the Lord’s Prayer. We call God, “Our Father”, a description of trust and love, and then say, “Hallowed be your name.” In other words, this God who is not “tame” has a name which should be honoured and respected.

While we are always aware that we cannot possibly know everything, or even much, about God, what we do know makes all the difference. The writer A W Tozer puts it like this, “What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us...Were we able to extract from any person a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that person.” There are many false directions and ideas about what God is like that can lead us away from the relationship of covenant love we are made for and towards a destructive fear. Many people, even Christians, either subconsciously, or consciously, might believe that: God punishes and blesses us according to our actions – this both leads to us feeling unable to please Him all the time and/or raises questions about those who suffer for no reason. God punishes us eternally for a single sin – this makes God worse than a human parent. God only loves us according to our behaviour – this leads us to believe that God is not generous, and does not genuinely delight in us.

Discuss: Why is my “picture of God” so important? Can you think of pictures of God which have been unhelpful?

Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Lord God,
You appear to us in unexpected places:
In forests and on mountain-tops
On city streets and in neon lights.
You come to us in the lives of others
In loved ones,
in unloved ones on the street.
We see you shine out from the ordinary.
We hear your still, small voice.
We feel your presence in our hearts.
We know your glory in our worship
In bread and wine shared
In music made together
In fellowship with one another.
Help us to name your glory
In our words and in our witness
So that all may find you for themselves.
Amen.





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Additional notes:

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