

## I. Set Up

A. Happy New Year. Welcome, guests, etc.

B. If you are here because of some resolution you made – congrats. One Sunday down, 51 to go! You can do it!

C. Today we return to the series *Planted* – in which we are setting out the foundational ideas that should shape, not just our faith, but our lives and our thinking. These are the first things we need to get clear about. This is a study designed for people who may be bright about many things, but who are not as informed about spiritual truths.

D. If you have been here for any of the other talks in this series, you know that Mike is taking a systematic approach – that means that it is based on lots of passages. But there is usually one that stands out. And today it is Jeremiah 9, where this great prophet says:

1. Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, 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.

E. Today’s sermon is based on a couple ideas: first, that what we think about God is the most important thing about us – it silently shapes 10,000 decisions. And second, that our views of God are too small.

F. Right now....

## II. Quotes:

A. NT Wright states that, “When we begin to glimpse the reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him. Not to have that reaction is a fairly sure sign that we haven't yet really understood who he is or what he's done.”

## III. Introduction

A. Let me start the year with a confession, Sheri and I didn’t actually marry each other. It turns out, we both married people who do not exist. It happens all the time. A couple meets, sparks fly, they start to spend time together, get serious and fall in love. At some point they decide to spend their lives together. Wedding plans are made. A wedding happens, followed by a honeymoon. And about a month into marriage, they look at each other and ask, so “Who are you? Have we met? A month ago, I thought I knew everything about you, but apparently, I was wrong. You keep surprising me.”

B. I say this because a similar thing happens in our relationship with God. We decide to sign up – to step over the line. We are persuaded to become a Christ-follower, we are

converted, born again. And at that time, we assume we know who God is – what He is like.

C. But then, over time, He starts to surprise us. Although we probably had not stated it this way – even to ourselves – our assumption was that God was a lot like us. Bigger, kinder, smarter - and perhaps a bit stricter - but our assumption is that His thoughts about life, sex, money and politics all line up with ours.

D. And then, He starts to surprise us. In fact, if you haven't been surprised by God, it's quite likely that you are still simply worshipping a projection of yourself, which is one of the most popular forms of idolatry out there.

E. Today I want to share nine things God has told us about himself – some of which may surprise you – **so as we launch into 2020, your view of God can come more fully into alignment with who He is.**

IV. Today's sermon is part of this forty-part Planted series, which is designed to help you establish a biblical foundation. To reform your thinking, to help you build a Christian worldview. I am setting out the first forty ideas you need to know.

A. On the one hand, this is a 101 class. We are focusing on the simplest ideas. But in another sense, it's like Physical Chemistry – or whatever the hardest class at the university might be. (There was a debate at DePauw between those who argued it was P-Chem and those who said it was a senior economics seminar. Who knows?). I say this because, when it comes to the Christian faith, the introductory concepts, while simple to state, are very disruptive. Because they upset our starting assumptions – our preconscious thoughts. They provide new answers to the foundational questions: What is most important? Who am I? Where did I come from? What is expected of me? What happens when I die? How do I know any of this? And when they do this, everything is upended.

B. In almost every other discipline, you learn simple things, like  $2 + 2 = 4$  or your ABCs before you move on. **With faith, you hear: you are not the most important person in your life; what you see is not all there is; we are saved by grace not works; the way to be great is to serve.**

C. Today I want to provide you with a flyover about God. We all have one – we all orient our life around something; we all worship something. As you may know, the Bible doesn't spend much time trying to persuade us that God exists. Instead, it spends a lot of time trying to help us understand who He is, and to steer us away from the false and small gods we latch on to.

D. It is very important that we get God right.

1. The Bible makes it clear that this is important to God. He makes it very clear that He is who He is and not who we think He should be. This is on display with His name – He tells Moses, I am who I am! - and also with the heavy focus

against idolatry.<sup>1</sup> Yahweh makes it clear. He defines. He is in charge. He is who He is, and we need to learn to bend our wills to His.

2. We need to note that it is important to us.<sup>2</sup> Augustine wrote at length about the fact that we become like what we love – and that needs to be God. A. W. Tozer who is famous for suggesting that what we think about God is the most important thing about us, because it silently shapes ten thousand decisions. He noted that: 1) Our thoughts about God are more important than any creeds we affirm... because we tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. And 2) The person who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of 10,000 problems.”<sup>3</sup> Others have pointed out that “If our conception of God is radically false, the more devout we are, the worse off we are.”<sup>4</sup>

E. Let me note, what we are after is not just right thoughts, but a right relationship.

1. Some people are obsessed with knowing about. In fact, Kirkegaard joked that given a choice between lectures about heaven and heaven, some might choose the lectures. No.

2. In a famous, important and brilliantly insightful comment written nearly 3,000 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah said: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

3. The word that is used here for *know* is the Hebrew term *yada*. Which speaks not just of knowing about but of knowing, of having a relationship. In fact, in Genesis 4, we are told that Adam knew Eve and she conceived. We do not simply want to know about God, we want to know him in a growing, intimate, transformative way.<sup>6</sup>

F. Of course, knowing starts with knowing about, so we start by learning all we can about God. The good news is, He has made Himself Know.

1. God wants to be known and has revealed himself to us. We learn about him through creation (what we call general or natural revelation), and through special revelation – which we divide into:

a) The Word of God Written: The Bible is about God. He is the author, architect and hero.<sup>7</sup> It opens, “In the beginning, God ...,” and thirteen hundred pages later, it closes, “The grace of the Lord Jesus (i.e., the Son of God) be with all.” From start to finish, He is the ultimate focus.

b) And the Word of God incarnate – Jesus Himself.

V. So, what do we know about God? What does the Bible reveal? Let me share nine things we need to know about God

A. One: He is Personal: Because we have been shaped by a Judeo-Christian ethic, the question we ask is not “what is God?” but “Who is God?” That is because, the God revealed on the pages of Scripture is personal. He is nothing like the Unmoved Mover or passionless First Cause envisioned by the Greeks. He is a person. Jesus introduces him as our Father – which was scandalous.<sup>8</sup>

1. But is a loving Father who formed you in your mother’s womb and who knows the number of hairs on your head. The Bible tells us that God hears our prayers and sings lullabies over us when you sleep.<sup>9</sup> And He is personally involved with you. He knows you – He knows everything about you. Not in a creepy voyeuristic, Big-Brother, NSA kind of way. But in an interested, concerned, attentive way. **But like a watchman guarding the wall at night.**

2. **I understand that it does not always feel that way. The Psalms are full of the screams of those who think God is fumbling his responsibilities. But over time you come to see that He is there, and that His plans for you are perfect. In fact, in the end we will see that if we knew what God knew and could see the beginning and the end, as He can, we would always choose his path.**

B. Two: He is Joyful: Though some think of God as a kill-joy,<sup>10</sup> the God who made you is the happiest being in the universe. He has always existed in the perfect and amazingly loving fellowship of himself.<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards wrote that God is “infinitely happy in the enjoyment of Himself.” Once you start to look for it, you will find frequent references to the Joy of the Lord.

C. Three: He is Powerful. God displays his power in several ways, but the principal one is creation itself. In Psalm 8, David highlights this when he writes, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” This Psalm teaches us that there are things we can know about the Creator by looking at creation. Consider just one thing, it’s size.

1. The measuring stick astrophysicists use to determine distances in space is not the twelve-inch ruler you keep in a desk drawer, it’s a light-year – that is, the distance light travels in one year.

2. Given that light travels 186,000 miles per second – or seven laps around the earth while you snap your fingers – it can travel nearly 6 trillion miles per year. To be more precise, 5,880,000,000,000 miles. Which means, the ruler used to measure distances in space is nearly six trillion miles long.

3. It takes hundreds of thousands of light-years just to measure the backyard of our home galaxy, which is reasonably small as galaxies go.<sup>12</sup> The distance between our galaxy and those far out in space is billions of light-years.

4. I could go on, but the point is made. Billions of years traveling at six trillion miles per year to measure a back corner of what he made. The universe is vast beyond comprehension to reflect the glory of God, who created it out of nothing.

5. If we follow David's counsel and "consider the heavens," we begin to sense the magnitude of God's power.

6. Clearly, our view of Him is too small. And a small view of God leads to lots of unnecessary trouble.<sup>13</sup>

D. Four: He is Trustworthy. The Bible says over and over that God is faithful and He keeps his promises. But here again, in order to appreciate what is going on, we need to see how the stories and the various attributes work together – as one writer says, how they "sing in harmony." – in order to appreciate what is being said.

1. He is Immutable – think unchanging, completely consistent and stable. This can get philosophically heady, but I do not want to go there.

2. Instead I want to briefly note that in spite of rumors to the contrary, the God of the Old Testament and God of the New Testament are the same. Some say the God of the Old Testament is a deity of wrath and judgment, while the God of the New is a God of grace and love. No. If you are familiar with the Scriptures you know this is ridiculous.

a) When you read the Old Testament, you do not come away thinking of God as an ogre, you come away thinking He allows himself to be taken advantage of – like a woman who keeps returning to an abusive husband.<sup>14</sup>

b) The Bible makes this point in several ways – and it states it by noting that God is slow to anger. More significantly by biblical writers asking, "How long are you going to wait, Lord?" The Psalms are full of that question. Act, will you?<sup>15</sup>

c) He does occasionally get angry. Finally. And people do not like that. Well, we want his patience if we are the bad guys, otherwise, we scream about it.

d) In both the Old and New Testaments, we discover a God who serves sinners—not because of our goodness but his. This morning you may not feel deserving of God's kindness, and you are right. Our servant God chooses to love and serve you anyway. Take a moment to consider the many ways he has clothed you with his love and cleansed you of your sin.

3. The other point I want to make is that God keeps every promise. Though we may struggle to understand what He is doing, He has everything under control and things end better than we can hope or imagine. No matter how dark it might get, His Kingdom will come. You can bank on every promise He has made.

E. Five: He is Infinite: Psalm 147 among others not only tells us that God is omnipotent (all powerful), it also says He is omniscient (all knowing) and omnipresent (everywhere). These are ways of stating that He is bigger than we can grasp.

1. It's important to note that eternity will not be long enough for us to fully understand God. He is too far beyond us for that. A thimble cannot hold the ocean. In Isaiah 40 we are told that God is unsearchable – meaning incomprehensible, indescribable, unfathomable. Five hundred years ago, John Calvin wrote: *Finitum non capax infinitum*,<sup>16</sup> which translates, the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. A thousand years before that, Augustine wrote, *Si comprehensis non est Deus.* " If you understand Him, He is not God. This was his way of saying, we can never fully know God. He is too grand, majestic and amazing to be fully grasped by our finite brains.

2. Let me suggest that you understand this: if you start with yourself and try to supersize, you are headed in the wrong direction. Yes, there are qualities of God that we can relate to. Theologians note that God accommodates us and that in the process of using "baby talk" he anthropomorphizes. But both Augustine and Anselm felt as though they had breakthroughs in their understanding of God when they started with God and looked down, not started with us and looked up.<sup>17</sup>

F. Six: He is Wild: Your view of God is almost certainly too small and too domesticated. God is not safe,<sup>18</sup> predictable or vanilla. The God revealed on the pages of Scripture surprises, upsets and overwhelms.

1. Reflecting on how the Incarnation suggests that if Jesus would come where he did, when he did, he will come any time to anyone, Frederick Buechner writes: Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of [us]. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in the least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound, but that holiness can be present there, too. And this means that we are never safe, that there is no place where we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from his power to break in two and recreate the human heart because it is just where he seems most helpless that he is most strong, and just where we least expect him that he comes most fully" (The Face in the Sky).

G. Seven: He is Holy: Neither the Hebrew nor the Greek languages use adjectives. Rather than say something is very salty, they say it is salt salt – i.e., when they want to emphasize something they repeat it. (English translations often say "very salty," though occasionally this format makes it's way into our versions, such as when Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you." Why am I sharing this? Because while many things get repeated twice, almost nothing is repeated three times. But holiness is. In Isaiah 6 God is described as "Holy, holy, holy."

1. This suggests a goodness and a perfect justice. Holiness has an unfriendly, religious vibe to it. No. Perfectly good and right.

H. Eight: He is Jesus: Next week we will focus here. By saying He is Jesus, I am not only claiming that Jesus is God. I am making a different point. God looks like Jesus. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is not simply the creator and heir of all things, He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. Jesus and the Father are alike. There is no God in Heaven who is not like Jesus. If you want to know more about the Father, study the Son.<sup>19</sup>

I. Nine: He is Loving. The fact is, in I John 4, the Bible doesn't just say He is loving, it says He is love. We find similar kinds of statements throughout the Psalms, in John 3 and John 17. And I find the stories and metaphors on this point more compelling, especially the Parables.

1. Jesus tells one parable about God as a shepherd, who leaves the 99 behind to go looking for the one. This makes no sense – looking for a lost sheep was a dangerous, foolish, risky and almost certain to fail proposition. The only reason you'd do it is because of a profound, loving concern.

2. Of course, the parable of the Prodigal Son is even more telling. The way it is set up makes the father – who stands watch for his son long after he left, and then runs to greet him (something no self-respecting older male did) it makes him look foolish. Desperate. But we are willing to be foolish and desperate for love.

VI. If you are paying attention, you know, this is not a complete list.

A. I did not say much about God as Creator or Triune. I did not say much about his Justice and commitment to the poor. I did not mention majestic, righteous, unique. I did not even mention the sheer godness of God. Matthew Barrett, a professor of theology, says this was the big breakthrough for him. He needed to realize that God is bigger and better than the sum of his parts. That the attributes sing in harmony in a way that changes everything.<sup>20</sup>

VII. This is a quick introduction to God. We will have eternity to learn more – and even that will not be long enough. But as I end, I want to suggest that the single best move you can ever make is to move closer to God. To get to know Him more fully and accurately. A right view of God – which is a lifelong quest – is the path forward. To see him is to be amazed and encouraged.

VIII. Closing Prayer: O Lord God Almighty – not the God of the philosophers but the God of the prophets and apostles, and most importantly, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – meet with me. Help me know you. Forgive me for trying to make you in my own image. Enlighten my mind so that I can know you as you are and find rest in the fact that you are bigger than all of my problems and better than my grandest hopes.

IX. Books:

- A. None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God, Matthew Barrett, Baker, 2019
- B. Knowing God

X. Questions:

A. Which attribute do you like most? Are you most surprised by? What is missing?.

<sup>1</sup> Skye Jethani writes: Unlike Egypt’s fragile gods that required human help to build their temples, and human sacrifices of animals and grain for food, and human rituals to maintain the natural order, the God who is “I Am” requires nothing from us. Therefore, he cannot be controlled by us or anything else. Many believed that discovering a god’s true name was like hacking their PIN. It was the key to accessing the deity’s power and manipulating the god to do your bidding. This cultural knowledge should inform the way we understand Moses’ encounter with God in Exodus 3.

<sup>2</sup> I was reading about the Hubble Telescope this week. As you may remember, for a few years after we launched it, this \$4.7B telescope was a complete bust because it was out of focus. Remarkably, the error was that edge of Hubble’s 8-foot lens was off by 2200 nanometers – that is by 87 micro-inches, which is less than 1/50 of a hair’s width. Apparently, that is a big deal when you want to look out billions of miles.

<sup>3</sup> I get this. As I have said before, if Sheri said, “I am married to Mike, who is a 59-year-old pastor outside of Chicago. But I like to think of him as a 30-year old, former Navy Seal named Dante who is a professional surfer and an expert on French wine. Oh and he has a Net Worth of 50 M dollars. Mike is none of those things, but I like to think of him as something different.”

<sup>4</sup> William Temple GET HIS QUOTE ABOUT IT BEING BETTER IF WE ARE AN ATHEIST.

<sup>5</sup> See also John 17:3: Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

<sup>6</sup> There is knowing and there is knowing. Think of it this way:

	<b>Do Not Know About</b>	<b>Know About</b>
<b>Do Not Know</b>	Category One	Category Two
<b>Do Know</b>	Category Three	Category Four

The horizontal categories of *Do Not Know About* and *Know About*, are pretty self-explanatory. The vertical labels are a bit less clear. I am using *knowing* God to refer to those who have placed their faith in Christ. With these things in mind, we can make a few observations:



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- Category One is made up of those who do not claim a relationship with God nor express any interest. The Apostle Paul would challenge them on part of this. In Romans 1 he says that we all know that God exists, even though some choose to suppress this knowledge because it is inconvenient. (FN, R 1, things you cannot not know)
  - Those in Category Two know some things about God, but they have not placed their faith in Christ. This describes those who grew up in a Christian home – or have attended church – but never embraced the faith on their own.
  - Category Three either describes someone new to faith or someone who is spiritually staled. (It’s OK to be in Category three for a few months, but it is not the place to park).
  - Category Four is the ideal.

It’s worth pausing to figure out what category you are in. And while you do, let me remind you that I am writing for those in Category Three.

By the way, none of this is meant to suggest that knowing about God is not important. It is! But many never move beyond “book learning.” As Soren Kierkegaard joked, given a choice between a door labeled heaven, and a door labeled “Lectures on Heaven,” some would choose the second.

<sup>7</sup> Fifteen years ago, Rick Warren opened his all-time best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, with a line meant to drive this home. “It’s not about you!”

<sup>8</sup>When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, he encouraged them to begin, “Our Father who art in Heaven.” We’ve heard this enough to think little of it, but at the time it was scandalous. No one called God “Father.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus actually went one step further. He used the Aramaic term Abba, which is closer to Dad. In Jesus we become children of God. Just as the children of the President of a country enjoy access members of his or her staff, other world leaders and big donors can only dream about, we can have intimacy because God is personal.

<sup>9</sup> The image of God singing lullabies over us comes from Zephaniah 3:17. In Psalm 56 we are told that he knows the number of tears we have cried. God is personal, and that is glorious news. We are not alone.

<sup>10</sup> Get title of book from 70s that had God as Traffic Cop.

<sup>11</sup> We must understand that God leads a very interesting life, and that He is full of joy. He is undoubtedly the most joyous being in the universe. The abundance of His love and generosity is inseparable from His infinite joy. All of the good and beautiful things from which you and I occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in their complete breadth and depth and richness. Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*

<sup>12</sup> The Milky Way is ~100,000 light-years across at its widest. That means, to get from one side to the other, you would have to zoom at 186,000 miles per second for 100,000 years. Our solar system is only one of hundreds of billions of stars and is located ~27,000 light years from the center and the Milky Way, around which we pivot, making one revolution every 240 million years. See for instance, “Milky Way” and cross-references therein, at *Wikipedia*.

<sup>13</sup> Two theological terms come into play here. The first is omnipotence – meaning He has all power, and the second is Aseity – which suggests that he has no needs that he cannot met himself. While we have

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limitations, God does not. Moses' first glimpse of the Lord through the burning bush displayed this impossible reality. "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not consumed." Our God, Moses discovered, is a fire that needs no fuel. He never grows weary; he never gets tired. He is dependent upon nothing and no one. Even the sun will someday run out of fuel, collapse upon itself, and extinguish. But God is not like that. He needs no fuel.

<sup>14</sup> The book of Hosea makes this point in reverse. God is like a faithful husband married to a woman who keeps sleeping with other men.

<sup>15</sup> See Job 21:7, AND OTHERS

<sup>16</sup> Because God is both transcendent and infinite, theologians refer to him as incomprehensible. This does not mean that we cannot know him personally, but only that we cannot know him exhaustively. In addition to Calvin's quote, several others make similar comments: 1) Tozer wrote: "I could sooner pour the Pacific Ocean into a thimble than write on one sheet of paper all that might be said about the 'greatest and best of beings;" 2) A story is told of a pagan emperor who visited Joshua ben Hananiah, a Jewish rabbi. The emperor wanted to be shown Joshua's god. The rabbi replied that this was impossible. When this failed to satisfy the emperor, the rabbi took the emperor outside and told him to stare at the midday summer sun. When the emperor said that this was impossible Joshua replied, "If you can't look at the sun, which God created. How much less can you behold the glory of God himself;" In Psalm 147:5, David declared that God's nature was, "too wonderful for me. I cannot contain it;" and 4) Saint Augustine makes the same point when he wrote - *Si comprehendis non est Deus*, which translates, "If we understand Him, He is not God.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*, Baker, 2019, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> As Mr. Beaver said of Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "He is good but he isn't safe."

<sup>19</sup> Another way to say all of this is that He is Triune. God has eternally existed as one God in three persons – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This claim is not bad math, it's just a mystery beyond our grasp. But we've already noted that this is to be expected. And let me suggest that rather than try to grasp, you marvel instead. It is only by being one God in three persons that God can be both loving and just. If the claim was that god was one and three in the same time and at the same way, it would be. But the claim is different than that. It is that God exists in three persons who have one essence.

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, p. xii.