

ENJOYING GOD

*FINDING HOPE IN THE
ATTRIBUTES OF GOD*



R . C . S P R O U L



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Foreword

I have said in print before, and having read this book I now say again, that if I were the devil I would make a special point of trying to stop R. C. Sproul (Pronounced *Sprole*, by the way. Get it right; he cares!). For R. C. is a man who not only believes God's revealed truth but spreads it; and in spreading it, not only does he make it clear, but he makes sense of it; and the sense he makes of it is not just abstract and theoretical coherence but a practical, moral, down-to-earth, life-changing challenge. Charles Simeon held that the pulpit should relay "the good sense of good men." Well, here in R. C.'s preaching on paper is good sense that could and should revolutionize us all. R. C. is a cross between Puck and Merlin (Frodo and Gandalf, if you prefer), and the lively freshness with which he states things is wonderfully enriching. If the devil does not see that men like R. C. are from his standpoint dangerous, he is a bigger fool than we thought.

This is R. C.'s second volume on God's attributes, meaning his being and character. Having scraped the surface of

this theme myself, I venture to say that no topic is greater, grander, or more important, and by the same token none is more demanding. It is a theological Mount Everest, and no one ever masters it or does it full justice. But all that is written here seems to me right-minded and momentous, and I am very grateful for it.

R. C. is a full-blooded believer, with no halfway houses in his thought. He does not dilute the supernaturalism either of the Bible or of the God whose portrait it draws. He is no God-shrinker, as so many are these days, nor does he try to tame God. R. C. does not forget that though in character terms God is Jesus-like, in his own being he is like nothing on earth; so R. C. declines to scale God down to our measure. In this he is correct. Ideas of God fashioned in man's image are idolatrous fancies, not spiritual facts. Would you learn to honor and praise and trust and love the real God, the God who dwells in impenetrable darkness and unapproachable light, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who becomes our God and Father in and through him? Read on, then; R. C. is just the guide you need.

J. I. Packer

Preface

My conversion to Christianity was a personal Damascus Road experience. It was sudden, unexpected, and for me, dramatic. All of our lives are lived in process. We change moment by moment. As Heraclitus once observed, “The only thing that is constant is change.” We cannot not change. It is our nature as finite creatures to change. But most of our changes are undramatic, laboriously slow, and almost totally imperceptible.

Conversion to Christ is different. The change from an unregenerate state to a regenerate state is the most dramatic a soul can experience. Our awareness of such a change may be gradual but the change itself, wrought by the Spirit of God, is immediate as it is brought about by a divine and supernatural quickening of the soul.

With conversion comes a new capacity for understanding and appreciating the true nature and character of God. We

are now open and receptive to an unprecedented degree of acknowledging, loving, and adoring the God who is.

Learning of the character of God is an experience that cannot be exhausted in a single lifetime in this world. Even with the new eyes of faith, we grope at times as blind men and squint with myopic eyes through a glass darkly. The more we interact with God's unveiling of himself in sacred Scriptures, the more light we are able to apprehend.

This light is designed by God himself to be a lamp for our pathway. Lest we stumble and trip, falling into unseen snares, God has been pleased to give such a lamp—a lamp that is illumined by the Spirit of Truth himself, who searches all things, even the very mind of God.

It is not enough for the Christian to know *that* God is; we must be driven by a holy passion to know *who* he is. The pursuit of the knowledge of God must never be undertaken as a casual exercise. It must be the chief business of our lives.

A brief word is in order to explain why this book was written. For many years I had the privilege of teaching systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, at the campuses in Jackson, Mississippi, and in Orlando, Florida. Part of my teaching responsibility was to teach what is called "Theology Proper," the focused study of the doctrine of God.

Teaching the doctrine of God was both a source of delight and frustration for me. My delight was in seeing students awaken not to a mere abstract cognitive awareness of doctrines *about* God, but to soul-stirring awakening to the sweetness and excellence of God himself. My frustration came from musing, *Why should such study be reserved for professional*

Preface

clergy or academics? Why do we provide so little teaching for laypersons in the church about the character of God?

This book is not written for scholars. It is offered to the layperson with the profound hope that it will edify them and stimulate an interest to dig deeper into the treasury of the knowledge of God.

1



Who Are You, God?

Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
And attend to the voice of my supplications.
In the day of my trouble I will call upon You,
For You will answer me.

Among the gods there is none like You, O Lord;
Nor are there any works like Your works.
All nations whom You have made
Shall come and worship before You, O Lord,
And shall glorify Your name.
For You are great, and do wondrous things;
You alone are God.

Teach me Your way, O LORD;
I will walk in Your truth;
Unite my heart to fear Your name.
I will praise You, O Lord my God, with all my
heart,
And I will glorify Your name forevermore.

Psalm 86:6–12

I remember Saturday mornings. No school bells, no boring classes, no peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. No having to sit still without fidgeting. On Saturday I could release the week's worth of energy trapped inside my eight-year-old body.

On Saturdays I played with my dad. Other children were fine playmates the rest of the week, but Saturday was special. This was the day Dad was home.

Our ritual began early. I awakened at the crack of dawn, tiptoed downstairs, and slipped quietly into my parents' bedroom. My father was still asleep. I gently poked my index finger into his ribs. The jab carried a message: "I'm here, Dad."

On cue he lifted the covers and, without opening his eyes, reached out a mammoth arm and scooped me up onto the bed beside him. Dad squeezed me to his side, nearly crushing me with his strength. His night's growth of beard felt like a rough-hewn board against my smooth skin.

I loved it. In his hug I felt his love. His beard scratched and the squeezing hug left me breathless, but I didn't mind; I was safe. As long as he held me tightly, nothing in all the world could hurt me. He loved me and was watching over me. He was there—every Saturday morning.

One night I panicked. I was flirting with sleep when suddenly a chilling thought burst into my mind: *What if my parents die?* A pain began to ache in my stomach. I was old enough to recognize the feeling—*fear*.

I threw off the covers and hurried downstairs, and knocked with a staccato burst on my parents' bedroom door. When

my mother opened the door, she looked at me with a puzzled expression. In tears I sobbed out, "Please don't die!"

They understood my fear. She held me until my sobbing stopped. Both of them comforted me and assured me that they would not die for a long, long time.

They were wrong. It was not a long, long time. Within seven years the happy, magical ritual of Saturday mornings ceased and was replaced by a grim daily ritual. Each evening at dinnertime, I went to my father's room. There, in an overstuffed chair, he sat, only a shadow of his former self. Gray stubble covered his chin, and his hair was snow white. His hands shook with tremors and one eye was canted aside, out of focus. His lower lip hung at a grotesque angle. Three cerebral strokes had decimated his vibrant strength. He was just fifty-one years old.

Trembling, Dad stretched out his arms toward me. I grasped his wrists and pulled him to his feet. He stood, uncertain, precariously, as I turned my back to him and locked his arms around my neck. I leaned forward, taking his weight on my back, and dragged him to the table for dinner.

Soon the daily ritual ended once and for all. A fourth stroke mercifully claimed my dad's life. I found myself standing at the graveside, the edge of the dark hole camouflaged by a cheap runner of imitation grass. In the distance cemetery workers, dressed in coveralls, leaned indifferently on their shovels. Like vultures they hovered in the background, waiting for the perfunctory ceremony to end so that they could close the grave and get on with their daily work.

I watched the minister standing at the head of the grave. As he uttered a litany of the dead, his voice rose above the

sounds of the wind and nearby traffic. In his left hand he held a small, black book with gold-embossed lettering that read *Book of Common Worship*. His right hand was closed, its contents concealed.

I heard few of his words; my attention was fixed on his right hand. Finally, nearing the end of his litany, the minister dramatically stretched forth his right hand and slowly opened his fist. Sand began to trickle from his fingers and fell on the lid of the coffin, forming a cross. “Earth to earth . . . dust to dust . . . ashes to ashes . . .” were his final words.

Final. The word played on my brain like a record stuck in a groove. Final. *Final*. FINAL.

The minister gently guided my mother away from the grave to a waiting car. I moved behind them in a grim stupor. I was confused. I was hurt. I was angry. Two questions pierced my soul, questions destined to become an obsession for me; they would soon emerge in my life as a single holy passion. Like Ahab in mad pursuit of an albino whale, I was stricken with a maniacal desire to find out: *Who are you, God? And why do you do the things you do?*

The Ultimate Search

A man lived thousands of years ago who was puzzled by the same kind of questions that bothered me. He was born shortly after a brutal king ordered that all male children be put to death. His mother hid the child for three months, but when she could no longer protect him, in desperation she placed him in a small boat and hid him along the bank of a river. The baby was discovered by none other than the cruel king's

daughter. She had compassion on the infant and took him home to the royal palace. There she reared the child as her own, carefully concealing his identity from her bloodthirsty father.

The lad grew strong. He was educated by the most advanced tutors of the world and was trained in the ways of royalty. His lifestyle was plush. He lived as a privileged prince, and his destiny for greatness seemed secure.

A rash act changed everything. One day the young prince saw one of the royal guards beating a peasant slave. The prince, boiling with rage at the sight of this obvious injustice, struck the guard violently. The rage turned to fear when the guard slumped at his feet like a rag doll—dead. Overcome with dread, the prince looked to see if anyone had witnessed the murder. Seeing no one, he quickly buried the guard in the sand.

But someone had seen it all. The witness threatened the prince with blackmail, forcing him to flee the country. No more palace, no more riches. He became a fugitive, doomed to wander as a nomad in the barren desert.

For decades the prince wandered, tending sheep. His skin wrinkled and toughened like leather. With the passing of years, the prince's sense of destiny faded with the memories of his privileged youth. It seemed the education and training had been wasted on this anonymous desert dweller.

But then in an instant, the former prince's life dramatically changed again. One day while walking the desert floor, he detected a burst of color in a plant such as he had never witnessed before. He turned aside and saw a bush that was on fire yet not being consumed, its flames so bright he was

forced to shield his eyes and shrink back in stupefied horror. Then from deep within the fire a voice spoke: “Moses, Moses!” (Exod. 3:4).

When the prince was able to respond, he asked the question—the same question we all ask. “Who are you, God?”

Another man asked the same question centuries later. This man was also a highly educated Jew. Some say he was the most educated Jew in Palestine, one of the most educated men of his day. He was not a fugitive. He was not the hunted. He was the hunter. He had been appointed to seek out those who were fugitives, to find them and cast them into prison.

This man also went into the desert. He, too, saw a light and heard his name spoken: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). Saul, blinded by the brightness of the glory of God, asked, “Who are You, Lord?” (v. 5).

From the day that my dad was lowered into the ground, I have been asking the same question. Like Moses and Paul, I have begged for an answer: Who are you, God? I know there is a God—we all know that. But that’s not nearly enough. I must know who he is. I must know what he is like.

Sure, I know what the creeds say, and the study of theology is my life. Theology is a worthy pursuit because its goal is simply for the individual to know God. But concepts, theories, and abstractions do not excite or ultimately satisfy me. I must know the God who is alive, who is real, who relates to me in my life.

I know that life changes. We decay. We hurt. We die. Nothing in this life is for sure. That’s why you and I need a God who is bigger than life, certainly one who is bigger than death. We

need a God who cannot be slain, a God who cannot die. Magic won't do. Myths won't work either. This God must be real.

God must be personal, too. We must be able to talk to him as well as about him. We need to know his character. That is the purpose of this book. I want to grapple with the majestic character of God. I want to climb the ladder of abstract concepts, but then quickly scurry back down to earth where we live. Where the creeds help, we will look at them. More than anything else, we will listen to the Word as we seek to hear God tell us something about himself. How did he answer Moses, Job, Paul? How does he answer us?

God Answers Moses

When Moses stood quaking in terror before the spectacular bush of fire, not only did he passionately want to know who was speaking to him, but he suddenly had another question of paramount importance. Although he had mused on it at different periods of his life, it now rushed rudely to the foreground of his mind. The question pressed on his temples like a throbbing artery: "Who am I?" (Exod. 3:11).

The two questions do go together. We live in a culture where there is much concern about self-identity. Young people declare that they are searching for themselves, trying to discover who they are. Men read about the dangers of a midlife crisis. Women struggle to define their role. We seem to be constantly searching for who we are.

The Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God. But can we accurately understand the image until we know the One whose image we bear? The reflection is dim; it is

obscure and vague until we discover the source of that reflection. John Calvin once said, “Man never attains a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.”

Moses understood that. The two questions he asked were the proper questions: Who is God? Who am I?

When God again spoke to Moses, instead of answering questions, he issued a command. He ordered Moses to remove his shoes. Moses was on sacred turf. He was treading on holy ground:

“Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who *am* I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exod. 3:9–11, emphasis added)

Moses was an old man, well beyond the appropriate years for a midlife crisis. He wasn’t searching for a new self-image. He discovered, however, that God had not stopped by for a casual conversation and a cup of tea. An intrusion by God like this always signifies a call to a weighty mission. God got right to the point and told Moses that he was to liberate the entire Jewish populace from the yoke of Egyptian bondage.

Moses’s self-identity was shattered. What was God up to? Moses had been forced to spend decades as an exile from Egypt because he had killed a palace guard in a moment of

passionate violence. Now God wanted him to take on Pharaoh himself. Moses was no longer a young man, and the aging process had ravaged his strength. Yet God was calling him to lead the most spectacular liberation movement in the history of the world.

Moses's self-understanding had never included the idea that he might be the liberator of his people. He had never entertained the idea that he might go personally to the court of Pharaoh and demand the release of the Jews. For Moses to adjust to this idea meant that he had to reevaluate his own identity. To do that he had to find out who God was.

Moses's dilemma is encountered by all of us. Before we can respond to the divine summons of discipleship or heed the vocation that God gives us, we must first grasp something of the character of the God who is calling us. Our commitment to our mission is only as solid as our understanding of the One who sends us on that mission.

At this point Moses pressed God to at least tell him his name.

Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Moreover God said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'The LORD 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 this is My memorial to all generations.'" (Exod. 3:13–15)

This seemed to be a strange answer to Moses's simple question. God said his name was, "I AM WHO I AM." Is that even an answer? What does it mean? It almost sounds as if God were saying, "Never mind what my name is. My name is none of your business. I am who I am and that's all you need to know. Moses, you can see that I am a very powerful force. But I came here to ask you questions, not to answer yours!"

But such an interpretation doesn't make sense, for God goes on to say that this name is to be his memorial. It is to be the name by which he is to be known by all future generations. No, God is not evading Moses's question. He has revealed his name. It is a strange-sounding name, indeed, but it is his real name.

The specific meaning of a name is very significant to the Jews. Often a name is selected that seeks to capture the essence of the person's character. Peter was "the Rock." "Isaac" means "laughter." Similarly, God's name reveals something profound about himself, something we must grasp.

As the name "Yahweh" was uttered by God, there was an explosion of knowledge about God on the Midianite desert. What is so revealing in the words "I AM WHO I AM"?