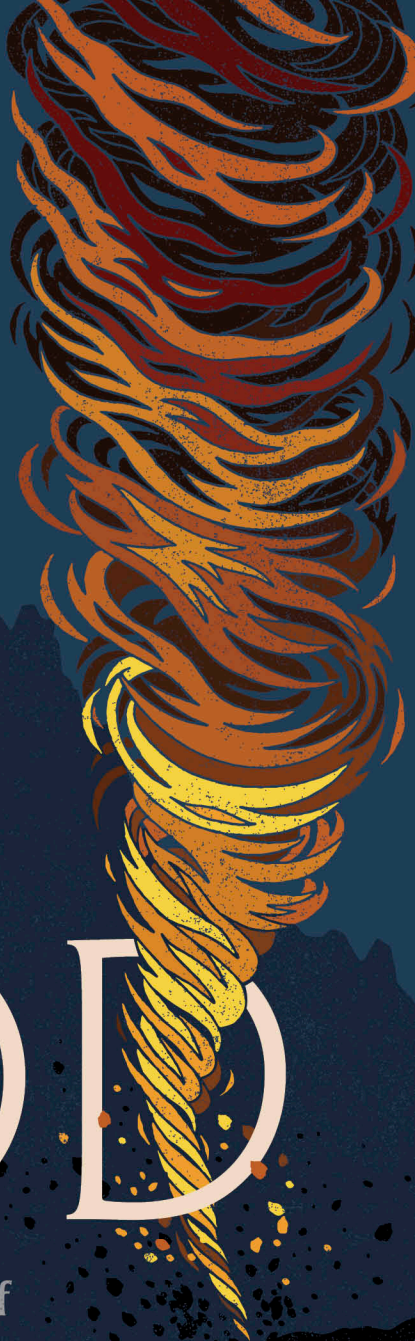


Foreword by Henry T. Blackaby

RICHARD
BLACKABY

THE WAYS OF GOD

How God Reveals Himself
Before a Watching World



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**RICHARD
BLACKABY**

THE
WAYS
OF
GOD

How God Reveals Himself
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FOREWORD

I believe the church would be radically altered for the better if its people ever came to understand and practice the ways of God. God has made it clear: his ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8–9). He has told us, but we don't believe him. The church continues to develop its own goals and plans and then asks God to bless its efforts. Pastors lead their congregations the same way a CEO would guide a secular company. Worship leaders conduct themselves as if they were the star of a Broadway musical. Church members behave as if they belonged to a political organization. Then we wonder why God is not working powerfully in our life and church. It is imperative that we return to the ways of God!

In 2000, I wrote a book with Roy Edgemon called, *The Ways of God*.¹ In it, we outlined the ways God works in our world. I am so pleased that my oldest son, Richard, has returned to this important matter to provide a fresh look at this important subject. Richard has a keen eye for biblical truth as well as a knack for drawing practical applications from profound theological doctrines. I know you will be challenged, encouraged, and inspired by what he has written.

We live in an age where people assume that the end justifies the means. But with God, this is never the case. It matters to God how things are done. That's because the way we do something reflects on him. It is possible to do the right thing, the wrong way. I have known well-meaning Christians who sought to defend Christian orthodoxy, but they did it in a prideful, condescending, vindictive manner. I have known sincere pastors

who diligently served the Lord, but they did so in a way that alienated them from their family. I have known churches that attracted large crowds, but they failed to build a church. When you serve God the wrong way, you present God in the wrong light. And God cares very much how you represent him to a watching world.

Thankfully, God has revealed to us, through his word, the way he acts. It is all there in the pages of Scripture. You will find that when you do God's work, God's way, power, and resources are released to you. The world does not need you to give them your best. It desperately needs what only God can give. There is an enormous difference between your ways and God's. Now is the time to reflect on how you have been leading, serving, and living. Don't assume that if something makes sense to you, it is from God! I have often said, if something makes perfect sense to you, it probably is not from God!

Read this book carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. There is too much at stake for you to continue living as you have been. Ask God to reveal areas in your life in which you have been doing things your way instead of God's. Then quickly repent of your presumption and adjust your life back to God. The world desperately needs what only God can give. They will receive it, in abundance, when God's people, serve God, God's way.

Henry T. Blackaby

President Emeritus, Blackaby Ministries International

Author of *Experiencing God*

PREFACE

There are many people today who are urgently praying for revival to sweep across their land. Our world desperately needs to experience God's life-transforming power. Nations need healing. Families require restoration. Sinners yearn for forgiveness. The broken long for mending. This only happens when the Holy Spirit moves powerfully among his people as he has done repeatedly throughout the ages. Looking at the current spiritual condition around the world, it appears that darkness is prevailing, and God's kingdom is in retreat in many places. Yet revival is closer than it might seem.

Since Christ's resurrection, he has assigned the church the Great Commission. That is, to make disciples, by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). After 2,000 years, there is still much work to be done. The church is struggling in much of the western world. Attendance in most of today's churches is plateaued or declining. Thousands of congregations close their doors each year. A growing percentage of Americans no longer attend church or claim to believe in God. The nation's moral condition is plummeting. Behavior traditionally considered to be immoral is now publicly celebrated. Politicians, rather than addressing the nation's ills, only seem to make them worse.

Obviously, the church cannot keep doing things the way it has been. Something must change. The church, as it functions now, is not the salt and light the world desperately needs. God made it clear that our ways are not his ways (Isa. 55:8–9).

Tragically, the church has become enamored with secular thinking. It is foolish to assume we can conduct God's work, the world's way. Historically, such thinking has always led to catastrophic consequences for the church and the people it serves.

The problem is that we are so immersed in the world's ways, we don't recognize when we have departed from God and his ways. We are working hard and praying for God's kingdom to come, but we are not seeing the results we should expect from almighty God. This ought to alarm us. We ought to grieve at the absence of power and advance in today's church. We must take a spiritual audit of our ways to discern where we have jettisoned God's ways for worldly methods. We must study God's ways, so we know what they are. Then we must fervently embrace them.

In 2000, my father, Henry Blackaby, and his good friend, Roy Edgemon, wrote, *The Ways of God: How God Reveals Himself Before a Watching World*.² In that insightful book, they clearly outlined the difference between the world's ways and God's ways. If you have never read that book, I encourage you to do so. Dad and Roy asked if I might produce a new version of this important book. God's people still need this message! The book you are reading is the result.

The more I studied and wrote on this topic, the more convinced I became that the church desperately needs this message. We simply cannot keep doing "business as usual" in God's kingdom. We ought to be wholly dissatisfied with the meager results we have been achieving. In light of our nation's current spiritual condition, we ought to long for the mighty power of God to be expressed in our life and ministry. We must radically adjust our ways back to God's.

Can you imagine what would happen across our land if God's people started to act the same way God does? What if we began serving God in holiness? What if we truly denied ourselves, took up our cross, and followed Christ wherever he

led? What if our speech was seasoned with grace? What if we were quick to forgive? What if we began to love people, even our enemies, with the love of Christ? How long do you think it would take before the world felt the impact?

As you read the following pages, ask the Holy Spirit to alert you to any of God's ways you are not currently practicing in your life and church. When God shows you, quickly make whatever adjustment is necessary and begin to enthusiastically think, serve, and live God's way. The world around you will be forever grateful that you did.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I believe this is one of the most important books I have written. Several people deserve special thanks for the invaluable contribution they made so this would be possible.

First, thanks to my father, Henry Blackaby, for the way you taught, and modeled, that God's ways are not our ways. You have always lived contrary to the way many ministers and Christians lived, and you have repeatedly demonstrated that God's way is best.

Thanks also to Roy Edgemon, who wrote the original version of *The Ways of God* with my father. You were the first person to encourage me to work on this project. I so appreciate your heart for God and for the church.

A special thanks goes to my wife Lisa. As of this writing, we have been married thirty-nine years. Thank you for "coming out of retirement" to edit this book! You are still the best editor with whom I have ever worked! Thank you for your unfailing love and support over all these years.

Thank you to my two sons, Mike and Daniel, who both offered important contributions to this material. Thanks Daniel, for helping me think through chapter 13 on "Beauty," and letting me draw ideas from your PhD dissertation!

Thank you also to special friends, Rick Fisher, Bob Royall, Scott McLellan, Lou Leventhal, and my sister, Carrie, for taking time to read over the manuscript and offer me rich insights that made this work incalculably better.

This has been a challenging project. At one moment I felt like I had a handle on what I was trying to say, and the next moment I realized I was barely scratching the surface of some amazing truths that God's people desperately needed to hear. I could have taken years to ponder over and think through this material. Hopefully it will spark many thoughts and insights for you as you read.

INTRODUCTION

WHY STUDY THE WAYS OF GOD? AREN'T THEY OBVIOUS?

*“He revealed his ways to Moses, his
deeds to the people of Israel.”*

(Ps. 103:7)

Your Money or My Life

On January 4, 1987, evangelist Oral Roberts announced that God had told him, “I’m going to call you home . . .” if he did not raise eight million dollars for his university and medical center by March. This was certainly not the first time a television evangelist had made a dramatic appeal for funds, but it struck many people as odd that God would kill one of his servants if he did not take in a certain amount of money by a particular deadline. No one could cite a Scripture passage that provided biblical precedent for such a homecoming. In the end, sufficient money was garnered by concerned supporters, so Roberts was spared, until he died twelve years later at the age of ninety-one from complications of pneumonia.

In 2018, evangelist Jesse Duplantis announced that God had told him to obtain his fourth private jet, a Dassault Falcon 7X, at the cost of 54 million dollars. Duplantis explained, “If Jesus was physically on earth today, he wouldn’t be riding a donkey.” He proclaimed that God had instructed him to preach the Gospel to every creature on earth and that would be an impossible task if he travelled by car or train. But he could accomplish that goal with a state-of-the-art airplane. Duplantis also revealed that God occasionally asked him for advice.

Assertions like these understandably raise the eyebrows of many Christians. Though these claims are passionate and accompanied by ample tears and biblical proof-texts, they appear contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture. These preachers zealously proclaim that their teaching aligns with what God has done throughout the Bible. Others suggest God is doing a new work in the modern day.

The question is: How can you know if a statement is “from God” or not? How can you identify false claims about God? Are there means by which you can evaluate what you sense God wants you to do? To help us grapple with these questions, we must ask, does God act consistently, and if so, how does he act? What are God’s ways?

Biggest, Boldest, Best Ever

God’s ways dramatically captured my attention several years ago. The head of a large Christian organization asked me to dinner. I was a young minister in the early stages of my ministry. The veteran Christian leader invited me to undertake a role at a massive conference he was developing. His vision was awe-inspiring. It would be unprecedented in scope and magnitude. It seemed like the chance of a lifetime, especially for an unknown speaker such as me.

As he waxed eloquent about his vision for the conference, I couldn't help but be impressed. It would be the largest event of its kind. It would be headlined by some of the biggest names in contemporary Christian music. The venue would be amazing. The crowd, immense. The technology, cutting edge. I'd be a fool to decline his invitation and I was no fool. But something seemed odd. I had difficulty putting my finger on it at first.

Here was a man who sincerely wanted to strike a mighty blow for God's kingdom. Shouldn't I jump at the chance to join such an undertaking? Eventually, it dawned on me what was "off." Everything he was saying about the Christian event sounded like an advertisement for an impending Hollywood blockbuster, or the release of the next iPhone. He spoke effusively about the size of the budget and venue, but little about God's leading. He boasted of headliners and concerts, but never mentioned prayer. In essence, he was speaking the same way the world talks about its major events. And that seemed wrong.

Over the years I have had many Christian leaders explain that God deserves the very best. They conclude that if businesses are going to spend millions of dollars advertising their products, then Christians ought to be even more zealous about promoting God. If places of business are constructed with impressive architecture, then places of worship certainly ought to surpass commercial outlets in beauty and grandeur. Such people will argue that if people in the marketplace will develop sophisticated programs and systems to increase sales and profits for their business, then surely God's people ought to produce cutting edge programs that will accelerate the advance of God's kingdom as well.

On the surface, such arguments appear to make sense. After all, doesn't God deserve the best? Shouldn't we use our best thinking and most advanced resources to promote his causes? Why should secular endeavors enjoy our best efforts while

Christian enterprises are relegated to leftovers? Why shouldn't the church learn from the dizzying success of popular music stars, professional athletes, and politicians, so it, too, can garner a larger, younger, and more enthusiastic following?

As I listened to the Christian leader effuse about his plans to take the best the world had to offer and baptize it for the cause of Christ, I couldn't escape the nagging feeling that everything I was hearing was ringing hollow. If God really does need the best, why was his Son born in a stable? If God's work requires sophisticated systems, why did Jesus build his leadership team predominantly using unlettered fishermen? If God's work requires the best marketing campaigns, why is Jesus's "brand" symbolized by a cross, a gruesome symbol of torture and death? Yes, almighty God does deserve the best, but at least on the earth, he generally chooses to forgo it. And, perhaps more importantly, who says that our best is the same as God's? I think it was at that dinner when I first realized that God doesn't accomplish his work the same way people do. His values do not match those of Wall Street, Washington D.C., or Hollywood. What gets us excited doesn't necessarily impress him. In short: God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8–9).

Nevertheless, I agreed to participate in this grand undertaking for God. After all, what if it was a great kingdom building, soul-winning, God-glorifying success, and I passed on it? But alas, it was not to be. The result was, to put it mildly, an unmitigated disaster. Sadly, it was another case of God's people trying to do God's work, the world's way. The results were, as should have been predicted, a catastrophe.

Understanding God's Ways

Jesus was different from every other rabbi of his day, or any day. He stood out. He went against the cultural norms of

his generation. Notorious sinners generally liked him. He was invited to parties. He would attract enormous crowds and then make statements that turned away followers. Jesus was so unconventional that even his own disciples were bewildered by him even after having lived and worked with him for more than three years. He acted so differently, in fact, that society's gatekeepers ultimately killed him.

This book is about the ways of God. There are some great books on the attributes of God. There are heavy tomes on the doctrines of God. There are also books on the names, commands, and promises of God. But here, we will specifically focus on the ways of God. Some clarification will be helpful as we begin:

1. God's Ways Are Not His Acts

It is important to understand that, while God's acts reflect his ways, the two terms are not interchangeable. This has caused God's people no end of confusion over the years. The psalmist observed: "He revealed his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel" (Ps. 103:7). The Israelites witnessed the mighty miracles God performed when he freed them from slavery in Egypt. They observed the ten devastating plagues that humbled Pharaoh. They walked through the Red Sea on dry land and then watched the Egyptian army drown in it. They saw a cloud leading them through the desert by day and a pillar of fire guiding them by night. They collected manna every morning that God miraculously provided.

Have you ever wondered how the Israelites could watch God annihilate the seemingly invincible Egyptian army by manipulating a sea, but then worry and fret that God would not provide them enough to drink when they were in the desert? Does it seem strange that they could witness so many amazing miracles and then be filled with anxiety over something as mundane as

drinking water? The reason is simple. They never made the connection between God's acts and his ways.

The acts, or deeds, of God were obvious for all to see. It was impossible to miss devastating plagues descending on Egypt, or a Red Sea parting. But the ways of God were something entirely different. Only Moses, and a handful of others, including Caleb, Miriam, and Joshua, recognized those. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *ways* as "a method, style or manner of doing something. One's characteristic or habitual manner of behavior or expression." To understand a person's ways, you must connect the dots between their character and their actions. People's ways derive from their character. God may accomplish his goals through various deeds, but he will never act contrary to his unchanging character and ways.

For example, every day for forty years, the Israelites needed food while they wandered in the wilderness. So, God sent manna every morning. The people received nourishment every day for forty years. Each morning when they emerged from their tents, there was manna scattered over the ground. However, one day they needed water (Num. 20:1–13). Panic ensued! What were they going to do? They were certain they would all die. Sure, God had provided manna for them like clockwork, but this was different. Now they needed water!

What did Moses see? He saw that God's way was to keep his covenant. As promised, he hadn't let them miss a solitary meal. And, if God was faithful in providing food, he'd be just as reliable in providing water, protection, or whatever else they needed. God's character is trustworthy, so his *ways* are always faithful. This faithfulness would be expressed in a wide variety of specific actions. When you don't recognize the ways of God, then dozens of previous miracles will not be sufficient to prevent you from panicking the next time you need one. But when you learn the ways of God, you'll understand that God always acts

in a manner consistent with his character. You can take that to the bank.

Unfortunately, many Christians today still operate at the same level as the Israelites. They have been blessed over the years by God's practical involvement in their life, yet they have never moved beyond the specific acts of God to understand his overarching ways. As a result, every new need or problem they face provokes within them the same worries and fear as the previous ones. They fail to learn from their encounters with God.

\$400 or \$40? When I was in university, I walked a financial tightrope every year. Each summer I worked hard to save enough money to pay for another year of school. One winter I asked a teenage friend to move my car for me. I erroneously assumed he knew how to drive. He drove it right into the back of a parked vehicle. He had no money or insurance, so I ended up owing \$400. At that time, \$400 might as well have been four million dollars. My only hope was to land a temporary job during spring break. Considering the fact that minimum wage at that time was \$3.25/hour, earning \$400 in a week was a long shot. All my friends were praying for me, but no job materialized. I grew discouraged. As spring break commenced, some college friends invited me to accompany them as they went home for the week. It seemed irresponsible to quit trying to find work and go away for a week. However, in my distress, I decided that if I hadn't found a job by then, perhaps what I needed was a vacation!

When we arrived, I learned that one of my friend's father was going into the bush country to check on his logging operation, and I was welcome to tag along. I ended up spending the next four days helping to clear brush. At the end of the week, my friend's dad took me aside and asked what I felt I deserved to be paid for the work I had done. I said, considering how much I had eaten, if he would simply not bill me for the food I had consumed, we could call it even. He insisted on paying. I adamantly

refused to give him an amount. He finally handed me a \$400 check.

After that marvelous provision, I should have been forever convinced that God was absolutely trustworthy. After all, this was Friday and the \$400 was due on Monday. God had proven himself faithful and timely once again. We headed back home early Sunday morning. We planned to arrive in time to attend our church's evening service. On the ten-hour drive, I was struck by a troubling thought. My parents had taught me to tithe on everything I earned. That would be \$40. But the entire \$400 was due on Monday. Surely God would understand if I gave him an IOU until the upcoming summer when I had a job once more. I was torn. It seemed foolhardy, to say nothing of legalistic, to tithe on money God had just given me to pay a bill. But I could get no peace. So, I wrote out a check for \$40 and then fervently prayed we would experience car trouble on our way home, so we missed the church service that evening.

Everyone who had been praying for my financial need asked how I was doing. Rather than celebrating God's \$400 provision, I was sullen about the \$40 shortfall I was about to incur when the offering plate was passed.

Imagine! God had proven he could provide for a \$400 need, but now I fretted about \$40. But that is what happens when you see the acts of God but fail to learn the ways of God. God could graciously perform 1,000 acts on our behalf, but unless we translate those into an understanding of his ways, we will worry when we face our next need.

I reluctantly gave my tithe. I was not a cheerful giver. After the service, Erin, a sweet girl from my college group, hugged me and told me she had been praying for my financial need. I mumbled a thank you and hurriedly excused myself. When I got home, I discovered an envelope in my jacket pocket. It was from Erin. She must have put it there when she hugged me. Inside was

a note telling me she had prayed for my financial need throughout spring break. She said she wanted to do what she could to help. Enclosed were four ten dollar bills. I fell to my knees, overwhelmed. I realized in that moment that my God was not a God who gives \$400 or \$40. He is a God who provides for his children's needs. Period. Whatever they might be. That evening I began to understand one of the ways of God.

Many people who have attended church all their lives, who read their Bibles regularly, and pray daily, still don't know God very well. They may realize that God periodically intervenes in people's lives, but they have never come to know his ways.

2. Troubling Bible Passages

God's ways sometimes confuse us. They can appear troubling, or even offensive from our modern perspective. Common examples include when God commanded the Israelites to obliterate every person in Jericho, or to stone adulterers to death. Some people claim they cannot believe in a God who is so harsh and merciless. Other actions, such as calling for the sacrifice of untold thousands of animals in Old Testament worship, or kosher laws where God's people are forbidden from eating prohibited foods (such as bacon), seem unduly harsh.

There are some who view the Old Testament God as far more wrathful than the New Testament Jesus, as if the Bible portrays two different Gods. There are many modern Christians who are happy to dispense with the Old Testament altogether as outdated and no longer applicable, thus excising many of the most troublesome biblical portrayals of God. Other Christians resort to picking and choosing which of God's behaviors are to be jettisoned from modern Bibles so God's ways do not offend the sensitive souls reading it today.

An important issue we'll address is, where do we learn what the ways of God are? Should we even look in the Old Testament

for them? Are those revelations of God outdated? Do we restrict our search for God's ways to the life of Jesus? Even there, though, Jesus overturns tables (Mark 11:15–17), curses a fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–21), and casts a legion of demons into 2,000 swine, causing them to rush headlong into the sea and drown (Mark 5:1–20). Jesus also said that if someone rudely slaps you in the face, you should turn your other cheek toward them so they can slap it too (Matt. 5:39). Did Jesus really expect people to live that way in the modern world? Or was that just the way he lived his life? After all, living that way got Jesus killed.

As we study this subject, we'll see that we can't be selective about God's ways. They are revealed in the Bible. They come as a package. And they don't change. God's ways are the same today as they were in the biblical era.

3. Confused Christians

A final problem related to God's ways concerns those who claim to be following his ways, yet their behavior, and its consequences, appear incongruent with clear biblical teaching. Many of the worst abuses in Christendom have been perpetrated by people asserting they were following God's scriptural teaching. The infamous Crusades of the Middle Ages were based on stories of Joshua and the Israelites conquering the land of Canaan. European Christians grimly marched off to conquer it once more to the glory of Christ. The Prosperity Gospel is based largely on certain passages (typically in the Old Testament) that appear to teach that God intends for his people to grow wealthy and to enjoy old age. Television preachers will point out an isolated Bible verse and zealously proclaim it summarily represents how God works in people's lives today.

There are also sincere people who assume they understand God's ways, but when they attempt to live out what they believe, they experience painful failure. Devout pastors may assume that

if they preach God's Word faithfully and keep their heart pure, God will protect them from their enemies and grow their flock. Then they are cruelly fired by an oligarchy of deacons or elders and left bewildered as to why a loving God would allow such a cruel injustice. Or a Christian businessperson decides to be salt and light in her workplace, assuming God will honor her courageous efforts. Then she is summarily fired by a hostile boss. Or a Christian entrepreneur starts a new company that is to be run on Christian principles, for God's glory. But a large chain store opens an outlet nearby and the smaller business is forced into bankruptcy. A young man believes the Bible teaches that if he delights himself in the Lord, God will give him the desires of his heart. He immerses himself in Scripture and prayer, volunteers at his church, and tithes on his income. Yet the woman of his dreams turns him down flat.

And what about sincere young people like William Borden, who gave away an enormous fortune, investing it in missions. Then he travelled to the Middle East where he intended to be a missionary. He fully devoted his life to the cause of Christ, only to die of meningitis before ever beginning his missionary service. Why does God allow the lives of some of his finest saints to be cut short while he allows brutal dictators to live long, diabolical lives? Let's face it. On the surface, at least, God's ways can be confusing.

Have you known people who grew disillusioned and disheartened by God's ways? They thought they understood biblical principles, but when they attempted to live according to this understanding, they experienced grievous disappointment. Perhaps this describes you. Hopefully this book will help you understand the ways of God. God wants you to know his ways, and to live your life accordingly (Isa. 30:1–2). Those who grasp and follow God's ways can change the world. But we must know what they are.

Some people insist on doing things their own way, or in ways that make sense to them. Frank Sinatra famously crooned, “I did it my way!” History is filled with the carnage of people, churches, and nations that chose their own way rather than God’s. It is enormously costly to ignore God’s ways and choose to live according to our best thinking. The prophet Isaiah noted,

“Who gave Jacob to the robber and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord? Have we not sinned against him? They were not willing to walk in his ways, and they would not listen to his instruction. So he poured out his furious anger and the power of war on Jacob. It surrounded him with fire, but he did not know it; it burned him, but he didn’t take it to heart.”
(Isa. 42:24–25)

What may be more tragic than brazenly refusing to follow God’s ways, however, is to mistakenly assume you are following God’s ways when, in fact, you don’t know what they are. Many people who have attended church for most of their lives assume they know what God’s ways are. Yet they do not know God’s Word beyond a surface level, and they are unaware of how the world’s thinking has saturated and influenced their own. As a result, there are powerless, defeated Christians today who erroneously assume they are living the life God intended. The truth is, only by understanding and following God’s ways will you be able to experience genuine Christianity.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. What are some examples of churches and Christian leaders using the world’s methodology rather than following God’s ways?

2. Consider your own Christian life. Do you have habits that reflect the world's way of operating, but not necessarily God's way?
3. In focusing on God's acts, how have you sometimes missed his ways?
4. What are some Scriptural examples that trouble you? What are some that encourage you?
5. When was a time you misunderstood God's will and made a bad decision? What did you learn from that experience?

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways.” This is the LORD’s declaration. “For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

(Isa. 55:8–9)

Make your ways known to me,

LORD; teach me your paths.

(Ps. 25:4)

God’s Ways

Take a moment to consider God. Infinite. Spirit. Dwelling in an unimaginable celestial world. Governing trillions of galaxies and stars. Creating a universe so vast it takes more than thirteen billion light-years for the glimmer of distant stars to reach Earth. Not only does God know the furthest extent of the vast universe, but he is cognizant of the minutest details of every human being, animal, and plant on Earth. God knows the future, including

every event still to come. God will bring time to a climactic close at the precise moment he has sovereignly destined. He comprehends every mystery in the universe. He is fully aware of every creature lurking in the depths of the sea, every cosmic activity in the far reaches of the universe, and every interaction of each cell on Earth. Consider also that God knows every sin that every person in history has committed, and he fully intends to execute perfect justice upon every wrongdoer.

Now imagine the audacity of assuming, or demanding, that God act in ways that make perfect sense to us or in a manner that we, ourselves, would behave. Ponder the hubris required to insist that we will not believe anything God says unless we understand it completely. We can't grasp what it is like for God to act today while he already knows what will happen tomorrow. We can't imagine how God can be fully aware of what billions of people are doing and thinking simultaneously. We are exceedingly ignorant of much of what exists in our physical world, yet we assume God, who inhabits a heavenly, spirit domain, should act in ways we understand. We are but creatures of dust. How could we assume the source of life would conduct affairs in ways that are logical to us?

Misunderstanding God's Ways

A god who makes perfect sense to us is no God at all. This is, of course, the absurdity of idol worship. Frail humanity cannot begin to fathom the vastness of God. That is the insanity of carving an idol out of wood and assuming you have captured the likeness of the almighty. A. W. Tozer said, "Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on his character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than he is—in itself a monstrous sin—and substitutes for the true God

one made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges.”³ Idols are humanity’s misguided attempt to downsize God to a level they can understand and control.

**Frail humanity cannot begin to
fathom the vastness of God.**

The prophet Isaiah described the foolishness of worshipping a god that is microscopically less than is the true God:

All who make idols are nothing,
and what they treasure benefits no one.
Their witnesses do not see or know anything,
so they will be put to shame.
Who makes a god or casts a metal image
that benefits no one?
Look, all its worshipers will be put to shame,
and the craftsmen are humans.
They all will assemble and stand;
they all will be startled and put to shame.

The ironworker labors over the coals,
shapes the idol with hammers,
and works it with his strong arm.
Also he grows hungry and his strength fails;
he doesn’t drink water and is faint.
The woodworker stretches out a measuring
line,
he outlines it with a stylus;
he shapes it with chisels
and outlines it with a compass.

He makes it according to a human form,
like a beautiful person,
to dwell in a temple.
He cuts down cedars for his use,
or he takes a cypress or an oak.
He lets it grow strong among the trees of the
forest.
He plants a laurel, and the rain makes it grow.
A person can use it for fuel.
He takes some of it and warms himself;
also he kindles a fire and bakes bread;
he even makes it into a god and worships it;
he makes an idol from it and bows down to it.
He burns half of it in a fire,
and he roasts meat on that half.
He eats the roast and is satisfied.
He warms himself and says, "Ah!
I am warm, I see the blaze."
He makes a god or his idol with the rest of it.
He bows down to it and worships;
he prays to it, "Save me, for you are my god."
Such people do not comprehend
and cannot understand,
for he has shut their eyes so they cannot see,
and their minds so they cannot understand.
No one comes to his senses;
no one has the perception or insight to say,
"I burned half of it in the fire,
I also baked bread on its coals,
I roasted meat and ate.
Should I make something detestable with the
rest of it?
Should I bow down to a block of wood?"

He feeds on ashes.
His deceived mind has led him astray,
and he cannot rescue himself,
or say, "Isn't there a lie in my right hand?" (Isa.
44:9–20)

The admonishment is clear: if people attempted to create their own version of God, it would be infinitely inferior to the reality of who he is. People cannot comprehend God's nature. He is exceedingly greater than we can possibly imagine. He inhabits a world we have never seen. He has power we cannot fathom. He functions with wisdom that dwarfs ours. No wonder the first of the Ten Commandments is, "Do not have other gods besides me" and the second is, "Do not make an idol for yourself" (Exod. 20:3–4).

The reason for the first commandment is obvious. God tolerates no rivals for his people's affections. But why would he care if his people crafted images and idols that represented him, the true God? Many religions construct elaborate idols to symbolize their god. The worshippers understand that the idol is not the actual god. However, it makes their god tangible and hence easier to worship. If you went to a temple of Zeus, you would find an idol of Zeus inside. The same is true for Apollo, Athena, and Buddha. But God will have none of that. Inside the holy of holies in the temple was the ark of the covenant but no image of God. History records that when the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem, he brazenly forced his way behind the veil into the holy of holies to examine the Jews' most sacred place. To his surprise, there was nothing there. He couldn't understand how people could revere an invisible god. How could they worship a being when they had no idea what he looked like? Why was God so insistent that his people refrain from portraying him with an idol or image?

God undoubtedly had many reasons, but the most obvious is that any image, no matter how grandiose, and regardless of how much gold and precious metals were used, would merely be a pathetic attempt to duplicate something that was far beyond human comprehension. It would be like handing a two-year-old child a paintbrush and asking her to paint a replica of the *Mona Lisa*. I have visited Buddhist temples in Bangkok. They house large statues of Buddha. You can purchase gold leaf to apply to the statue as an expression of your devotion. Over time the metal statue becomes clothed with a thin layer of gold, pressed upon it by thousands of worshippers. God refused to be subjected to such a demeaning exercise, for it was infinitely beneath him and it misled worshippers into believing he was far less of a God than he really is.

The problem with fashioning idols, beyond grievously insulting God's majesty, is that we don't know what we don't know. We have no idea what God looks like. He is spirit, inhabiting a spirit world. He rules the universe and is fully aware of what every person, star, planet, asteroid, and black hole are doing. How do you portray that? You don't. So whatever image you envision for God falls vastly short of reality.

We become like that which we worship.

The psalmist declared, "Those who make them [idols] are just like them, as are all who trust in them" (Ps. 135:18; see also Ps. 115:8). We become like that which we worship. If we make wrong assumptions about what God is like, we will also develop erroneous beliefs about how God acts. And, if we misunderstand the ways of God, our Christian life will inevitably experience disappointment, frustration, and failure. A. W. Tozer advised:

Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God. . . . I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. . . . The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems.⁴

Common Misconceptions about God

Because people tend to envision God in terms that match their personal preferences, they view the ways of God through a variety of lenses. Although not himself a Christian, Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, argues insightfully that people generally choose their beliefs based on their feelings.⁵ Then they use their reason to justify what their emotions have already decided. He gives the analogy of a monkey riding an elephant. If the monkey represents our reason, the elephant symbolizes our emotions. Haidt suggests that though the monkey is in the driver's seat, the elephant will go wherever it chooses. We like to assume we are rational beings, driven by reasonable decisions. Haidt suggests we base our religious beliefs far more on our feelings than we care to admit.

Haidt points out in his book *The Righteous Mind* that when it comes to political or religious beliefs, people tend to have six primary values that influence their decisions about such things as politics and religion.⁶ He found, not surprisingly, that Democrats

and Republicans have different hierarchies of what they value most. Likewise, various religious denominations prioritize different values, so their members often develop their view of God and his ways based more on their feelings and values than on how God has revealed himself in his Word. We can be drawn to Bible verses that support our view of God and ignore other verses that challenge our theology. There are, of course, many faulty views of God. The following are some of the most common:

Greek God Model

The Greeks developed a religion in which their gods were essentially larger-than-life versions of themselves. Greek gods were lustful, adulterous, jealous, spiteful, vengeful, and prideful. They were no more moral than were ordinary people, and often their behavior descended to levels of depravity that would have shocked the average Greek. The difference was that the gods were immortal, and they were more powerful than mortals. Rather than setting a high ethical standard for people to follow, the gods behaved shamefully, pursuing their lusts and nursing their pride. Because the gods supposedly hungered for sacrifices that were offered to them in worship, the Greeks hoped to influence them through generous sacrifices and homage. At the same time, these mythological gods could be capricious and turn against you on a whim.

Stories of Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, and Hades have entertained people for centuries. It is man-made religion at its most creative. The gods were nothing more than sinful people writ large. Yet this same approach to religion has permeated Christianity, as is demonstrated in numerous ways. When someone claims they prayed and God granted them permission to divorce their spouse and to marry their lover, they treat God like a Greek deity who is equally as lustful and deceitful as the adulterer. When Christians justify their greed, cruelty, pride, or

dishonesty by claiming they are doing God's will, or that the ends justify the means, they are acting as if God is nothing more than a Greek deity who shares their vices.

This attitude is evident when people say things like, "I just can't believe God would not want me to be happy" or "Why would God give me this desire if he didn't want me to satisfy it?" Be careful! If your religion perfectly matches your preferences and desires, you may in fact be the author of your faith. Whenever you act as if God always agrees with your desires, never chastises your indiscretions, or upgrades your lapses in character, then your god probably belongs on Mount Olympus.

Whenever you act as if God always agrees with your desires, never chastises your indiscretions, or upgrades your lapses in character, then your god probably belongs on Mount Olympus.

God in a Bottle

A similar faulty view of God's ways is the Aladdin model, owing to the popular ancient tale of the young man who discovers a magical lamp occupied by a powerful genie who grants him his wishes. In the story Aladdin encounters problems in part because he does not always know the best things to ask for. Nevertheless, the genie never questions his wishes but grants them immediately.

Many people treat God like a genie in a bottle. This is most infamously seen in the "health and wealth," or "prosperity" gospel pervasively promulgated through the media. Proponents boldly proclaim that God is there to grant you whatever will make your life more prosperous, happy, and comfortable. Want

a new Cadillac? Rub the lamp. Want to be rid of that chronic back pain? Summon the genie. Want a bigger house? Well, you get the picture. In this misguided theology, God serves us. He exists to fulfill our every desire. When he does not provide what we ask, the fault must be that we lacked the requisite faith. Faith is the equivalent to rubbing Aladdin's lamp. Our faith opens the door to God's power in our life, so God will grant our every wish. Though this view of God can be found on the Internet, you will look for it in vain in the Bible.

Laissez-Faire God

Another theology holds that, while there is a God, he is either preoccupied or disinterested in peoples' day-to-day affairs. Famous Americans, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, were deists. They believed God was like a cosmic clockmaker who created the universe and then left it to run according to laws he established. People were to use the reason God bestowed on them to solve their own problems. Such thinking led Franklin to famously declare, "God helps those who help themselves." God is viewed as uninterested in humanity's daily endeavors, so people must do their utmost to create the best possible life.

A second variant, promoted by many Christians, insists that God granted Christians the Bible, and thus we have in its pages every command and principle needed to live a God-honoring life. It is true that "all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). However, we must not minimize God's active involvement in our daily living (Heb. 4:12). This view has no practical role for the Holy Spirit in the life of believers (John 14–16). But the Holy Spirit does not indwell believers at conversion and then mutely take a back seat

and hope we make wise choices. There are those who squirm at the thought of God directly communicating with people (despite his doing so regularly throughout Scripture). Rather than God guiding us specifically, some hold that if we need direction, we simply follow biblical principles. Absolutely, the Bible *is* indeed the best guide for Christian living. But biblical principles can only take us so far. For example, when choosing a spouse, the Bible admonishes us to marry a fellow believer and someone of Christlike character, but there is little more direction than that. Likewise, in choosing which job to take, or where to live, how to respond to a prodigal child, or many other crucial decisions, principles are a good place to start, but they still leave much of our decision-making to our own best thinking.

Many Christians have been taught that God does not give specific guidance to people. He gave us a brain, and he intends for us to use it. Of course, that's what Abraham was doing when he slept with Hagar to have a son, or Moses when he murdered an oppressive Egyptian. Likewise, deists lived their lives by God-given principles, but they had no personal relationship with Christ. Yet the consistent testimony of the Bible is that God wants to be intimately involved in our life. He promises to give specific guidance if we seek his will (Jer. 33:3). Whether it was giving Adam and Eve clear guidelines on living in the garden or the risen Christ delivering a vividly detailed message to the apostle John on the Isle of Patmos, the Bible is filled with examples of God's being practically involved in the lives of his people. If you assume that, when you become a Christian, God provides you a Bible and says, "Take it from here," then you will believe God's ways are impersonal and general. When facing a decision, you may search the Bible for pertinent commands or injunctions. You might make a list of pros and cons. You could ask friends for advice. But you won't go to God himself for guidance (Isa. 30:1). In this you behave just like an eighteenth-century deist.

Totalitarian God

Antithetical to the laissez-faire approach is one that suggests God is a universal micromanager. He enforces his will on everyone and leaves no room for individual choice or free will. This type of thinking, known as determinism, is based on certain assumptions. It holds that God has predetermined every detail of your life, and therefore your free will is an illusion. Though God tells you to believe and obey, the reality is that every one of your actions has been predetermined and you have no choice but to do what God has decreed. Events unfold exactly according to his preset and detailed agenda. If you lose your job or come down with the flu, God must have wanted that to happen. This approach contains inherent problems.

It is crucial to understand that God can retain his sovereignty while still allowing people free will. We will discuss this subject in greater depth in chapter 6. For now, A. W. Tozer offers this counsel: “God sovereignly decreed that man should be free to exercise moral choice, and man from the beginning has fulfilled that decree by making his choice between good and evil. When he chooses to do evil, he does not thereby countervail the sovereign will of God but fulfills it, inasmuch as the eternal decree decided not which choice the man should make but that he should be free to make it. . . . Man’s will is free because God is sovereign.”⁷

Tozer provides this helpful analogy. He notes that God’s sovereignty and people’s free will are analogous to an ocean liner sailing from New York to Liverpool. The destination has been determined, and the ship moves steadily on its course. But aboard the ship, passengers exercise their autonomy in various ways. They choose which meal to eat. They decide what recreation to engage in or whether to enjoy a nap in their cabin. While passengers are living out their lives aboard the ship, the

captain continues with his plan to steer the vessel to its desired end. Of course, passengers have limitations. They may decide they would rather swim to Liverpool, so they leap into the water, but they will drown. They are not able to change the destination to the Bahamas. There are certain aspects of the journey that they have no freedom to alter. However, for those freedoms granted to them, they can exercise a wide variety of choices, though it will not in any way affect the captain's overall plan. If a passenger determines to spend the entire trip in the cafeteria, gorging himself at the buffet, he will reach the destination far worse for the wear, but he will arrive, nonetheless. If the passenger frequents the ship's exercise room instead, he will arrive in a much different condition. Granting people freedom to choose does not in any way hinder or thwart God's grand design for human history.

While holding a high view of God's sovereignty is rightly a biblical perspective, there is a danger in equating sovereignty with determinism (the belief that your life has been predetermined to the smallest detail). We must not assume that for God to grant people free will, he must necessarily yield a portion of his sovereignty. God has established his rules and the consequences for breaking them. Within those divinely set parameters, we are free to choose.

Just as laissez-faire theology leaves too much for us to handle on our own, the micromanager approach leaves us too little. In it, we are merely spectators of our life, helplessly watching it unfold before our eyes. It is impossible to read the Bible and not see that God demands much more responsibility from us than that. God is fully in charge of history and world events. His power is even more impressive because it is not in any way infringed upon by people's choices. God is still sovereign, and he will achieve his purposes, regardless of what people choose to do.

Political God

This is a misguided mindset that assumes God accomplishes his work the same way people do, by using power, money, and influence. Clearly this is not the case. For example, God's way of reviving a nation is to first revive his own people and then release his Holy Spirit to work powerfully across the nation to initiate spiritual awakening. The Holy Spirit works through the preached Word of God, which leads people to repent of their sins.

The human, worldly approach plays out differently because it does not depend on the Holy Spirit's working to accomplish its work. Instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to convict and transform, supporters are enlisted to boycott those with opposing beliefs. The focus is on getting the "right" people in influential positions so power can be leveraged to pass laws that curtail sin. Celebrities and politicians are enlisted to support "Christian" causes. One danger of this approach is eagerly embracing people who are unbelievers, or who have questionable morals, because they are willing to support our goals. At times these efforts, though ostensibly for good causes, can look more like a political campaign than an endeavor to advance God's kingdom.

There is an alluring temptation for believers to place our trust in people rather than in Christ. The focus is on whom we know rather than Whom we know. When we have a need, we immediately begin reaching out to our contacts rather than calling out to Christ in prayer. Those who trust well-placed people rather than God are constantly expanding their network and sizing up others based on who can help promote their causes or meet their needs. Such people focus on persuading or manipulating people in order to achieve their desired ends. The key for them is having the right people on their side.

Oftentimes this is how churches conduct their business. If church leaders want to build a new auditorium, they may

approach the task in a similar way to getting a bill passed through Congress. They enlist the support of influential members. They cast the vision for their plan and then campaign for people's votes. They seek to win popular support; they develop a slick promotional campaign; they make promises and say what people want to hear. This is a classic example of trying to do God's work the world's way.

The mindset of trusting people instead of God is perhaps most evident in the way many Christians view politics. Christians certainly ought to be active and informed citizens who work to elect the best candidates possible for the office. We have been commanded to pray for our government leaders (1 Tim. 2:1–2). But we must be cautious about placing our hopes for national revival or moral renewal on getting our preferred politicians elected to office. We often assume that if our candidate is elected, God is blessing, and if our candidate loses, all hope is lost. Some go so far as to believe even God cannot save their nation if the “wrong” people hold office. When we begin to act as if God's work is best accomplished through politicians, our view of God's ways is far too small! We must always remember that God's kingdom is conducted in ways that are vastly different from today's politics. For that we should be exceedingly grateful.

Businesslike God

God is masterful in his management of people's lives, churches, and his kingdom (Isa. 40:6–31). He knows how to earn a hundredfold return on his investments. He owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). Yet, again, he does not operate the way we do. His plans always succeed because of the power of his Spirit and because he is omniscient; he alone knows the future. When Zerubbabel was concerned about how to lead his people, the Lord told him, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6 ESV).

We can mistakenly assume that God's will can be accomplished through business and leadership principles, apart from the working of the Holy Spirit. Many best-selling business/leadership books, podcasts, and blogs circulating today herald guaranteed methods for success. Christians often look at these and conclude that what works well in the marketplace will be equally effective in God's kingdom.

Just as many business books highlight a successful company so others can copy their methods, so pastors of megachurches write books and hold conferences teaching other pastors how they, too, can experience "success" (which usually equates to a large and financially prosperous congregation). The faulty assumptions are: (1) numerical growth equals spiritual success; (2) growth is the result of leadership decisions rather than God's guidance and blessing.

Some church leaders believe God intends for his people to always live within their means and to never take financial "risks." It is true that God's property and money should be carefully stewarded. Yet biblically, God often told people to take actions that *appeared* risky if not hazardous. Jesus stated that if you tried to save your life, you would lose it (Matt. 16:25). Of course, apart from the working of the Holy Spirit, this can seem foolhardy. If you give yourself away, how can you prosper at the same time? But for a Christian, the key is not your business savvy but the power of the Holy Spirit working in your life. God's power comes by faith. The writer of Hebrews claimed that "without faith it is *impossible* to please God" (Heb. 11:6). Yet many Christians believe God would never ask them to do anything that required them to exercise faith. Walking by faith might have been encouraged by Paul, but it will alarm your accountant!

Congregations, using the business approach to God's ways, might assume success depends on how businesslike they conduct themselves. Churches can act as if accomplishing their mission

depends on their location, attractive and accessible facility, well-run programs, high-tech equipment, and professional quality worship band. While none of these is inherently bad, the danger is trusting in strategies and marketing over the working of the Holy Spirit. Efficiency can be cherished more than evangelism. If churches don't function any differently than popular retailers, they are grossly limiting their capacity to experience the Holy Spirit at work.

There has been a spate of high-profile leaders who grew massive ministries using creative marketing, high-tech worship performances, *New York Times* best-selling books, and large doses of charisma. Tragically, many of these popular figures have been exposed for adultery, staff abuse, dishonesty, or addiction. It becomes painfully clear that their numerical success is primarily due to their adept use of business principles, not the power of the Holy Spirit working through their sanctified life.

This businesslike view of God's ways can motivate Christians to take their cue from Wall Street rather than from the Holy Spirit. For example, if you assume God relates to you in a businesslike manner, you may be surprised by what God tells you to do. He may lead you to pass on a promotion that would require extensive overtime hours, so you have time for your volunteer work. Or he may want you to quit a lucrative job and assume a modest position at a nonprofit. Or he may ask you to give generously to Christian and charitable causes rather than investing more into your retirement portfolio. These directives may not line up with astute career moves, but they align with God's ways of strengthening families and building his kingdom.

Military Model

There are some similarities between how the military operates and God's ways. Yet again it is hazardous to assume God's ways follow common military strategies. How does the military

operate? It follows a clear hierarchy from the top commanding officer down to the lowest level recruit. Officers design strategy and expect their ranks to obey their orders. Some churches assume God works much like the modern general, so they should too. As a result, senior pastors or religious leaders may lead their followers much like General Patton led the Third Army. Questioning authority is considered treasonous. This view places different values on people, based on their position. It makes celebrities of those on the highest rungs of the organizational chart.

Viewing God with a military mindset sees him waging continual warfare against his enemies and enlisting people to engage in his battles. The apostle Paul noted that Christians do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens” (Eph. 6:12).

The danger of using a military lens to view God’s ways is that we can begin to regard people as our enemy. Paul said we *don’t* wrestle against flesh and blood. God does not call us to be constantly embroiled in conflict with others. We may like the lofty idea that we are waging “holy war” against God’s opponents (or at least, our opponents). It is a point of pride for some Christians that they have so many enemies. They proclaim, “I must be doing something right. After all, look at all the people who are angry at me!”

Such people tend to view others as either allies or enemies. Them or us. Much of their Christian life is invested in developing tactics that will defeat their perceived opponents. When you view people as your enemy, it is easy to justify all manner of unChristlike behavior to defeat them. Gossip campaigns, deception, manipulation, or whatever it takes to oust someone viewed as an enemy to God’s cause. After all, “All’s fair in love and war!” This mindset has led to countless family estrangements,

broken relationships, church splits, and pastoral firings as zealous Christians levelled their guns at those they consider threatening.

Social media has become a war zone. If you view someone as an enemy of the faith, you can ambush them on social media. Lies and misinformation are launched like an aerial bombardment. Character assassination and vicious trolling are fair game. Everyone is classified as friend or foe. Some people love a “good fight,” and thus they are often attracted to this understanding of God’s ways. Such people often celebrate more joyously when an enemy is felled than when a sinner is saved. They might not be overly inspired to attend a prayer meeting, but they come running the moment a new crusade against the heathen is launched. Mention “grace,” and they will sigh and cite the time in the Bible when Jesus cleansed the temple. Such people long for God’s judgment to fall. They just don’t expect it will land on them.

Summary

Humankind has not fundamentally changed since the Greeks fashioned gods to reflect their worldview and values. People continue to hold beliefs about God that coincide with their feelings and desires. Therefore, it is critical to base our view of God and his ways on what is revealed in Scripture. Picking and choosing our preferred verses will quickly lead us to a god that is nowhere to be found in the Bible. In the following chapters, we’ll take a closer look at what the Bible reveals about the ways of God.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. What is a misconception you have had about the ways of God?
2. How have you inadvertently assumed God was like you and did things in ways that made sense to you?
3. To which of the incorrect views of God have you been most susceptible? Why?
4. Why is it so important that you have a sound, biblical view of who God is?
5. What might you need to do so you have a more accurate view of God and his ways?
6. Why is measuring success by worldly metrics dangerous for Christians, churches, and ministries?

Have you ever been confused by God? Have you ever expected God to act one way only to witness him do something entirely different? God never makes mistakes, but we often carry incorrect expectations. That may be because we do not know God's ways as we should. His ways are wholly contrary to the ways of the world. And even if we have been a Christian for many years, that does not guarantee we understand how God acts. God's ways reflect his character. He is always true to himself, and his Word. His ways are eternal, even as they are mysterious. Once you understand God's ways, you will recognize him at work all around you. When you do things God's way, you'll be swept up into his eternal purposes and experience the truth that God's ways are always best.



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