

WHO IS GOD?—1

2 Corinthians 6:1–10; Psalm 91; Matthew 4:1–11

Jesus said:

Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’

We are asking the question this morning, and in the Lenten studies this week, ‘Who Is God?’ It’s an important question. Firstly because there are many who say, ‘There is no God’ or ‘If there is a God, who cares?’. I’ve been reading a book by Tom Frame called *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia*. Tom Frame was formerly the Anglican Bishop to the Armed Forces in Australia; he is now Principal of St Mark’s College in Canberra. He goes through all the things that have come against belief in God—from early Greek atheism and agnosticism before the time of Christ, through 18th century rational humanism and 19th century science-ism and Darwinism, to the ‘Secular Christianity’ of the 1960s and 70s and the so-called ‘Progressive Christianity’ of the present day, right up to the militant atheists like Richard Dawkins. It’s a very good book—it names all these things for what they are, and for what they are not. And you realise that there is nothing much that is new—it’s all been around for a long time. He says that unbelief has always been pretty strong in Australia, while faith in God has also persisted. At the end of all this, Tom Frame speaks personally and says that for him there is still this man Jesus, and he cannot ignore who this man is and what he says.

And here this morning we hear this man Jesus saying: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” Whether we believe in God or not—and I’m not making any assumptions about any person here one way or the other—this man Jesus *knows* the one he is talking about, and we do well to listen to what he says.

There is another reason why the question ‘Who Is God?’ is an important one. Among those who do profess some kind of belief in God or gods,

there are so many variations and versions of who God might be—not all of them compatible with each other—that we need to know which one we are talking about. And in his other answers to Satan, Jesus gives us some helpful pointers as to the nature of who God is.

When Satan tells Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple so that, if he is really God's Son, God will have to save him so he doesn't get hurt, and everyone will see that and think he's wonderful. Jesus said, You don't try to force God's hand. You don't put God to the test or 'tempt' God in that way. Trying to control or manipulate God will not work. God is not at our beck and call—He's not there to do what we want or what we think He should do. You and I are not God. God is God.

Satan says, But "it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" God has said that in the Bible so, if you jump, He'll *have* to come and save you. Make Him do it! Satan there is quoting from Psalm 91, which we sang. If we read Psalm 91, we find that Satan has completely misconstrued it. The whole tone of Psalm 91 is very different from putting God to the test—standing back and seeing if He will do something. 'I will say unto the Lord, "You are my hope and my stronghold: my God, in him will I trust"'! It starts from that close relationship of faith and trust in God that Satan knows nothing about, but that Jesus knows everything about—of course God will uphold me—I already know Him to be utterly reliable—He is always with me, and I am with Him—I don't need to test that out, as if there was some doubt about it!

Can we say that we have a relationship with God like that? Is that possible? I remember the sermon Lionel Renfrey preached when he was consecrated as bishop. It was on Psalm 27: 'My heart hath talked of thee, Seek ye my face: Thy face, Lord, will I seek.' We hear God saying to us, Come on—'Seek my face', and something rises up within our hearts to say, Yes, Lord! 'Your face I will seek'. A face-to-face relationship with God! So close—can we be like that? That is how Jesus' relationship with his Father God was described—'the word was with God'—literally face-to-face with God. And, do you know, Jesus came so that we might know God with that same closeness that he has? What did Jesus want us to say when we talk with God?—'Our Father . . .'

How can we have a relationship with God like that? Let's listen to the other thing that Jesus said to Satan:

It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'

We get to know God by hearing what God tells us about Himself. How else do we get to know anyone? How could you get to know me unless I tell you something about myself?—I am married to Vivien, I have four children, I have been a priest for nearly forty years, I love music, I've done a bit of acting—and that's only the start. We get to know God by hearing what God tells us about Himself. How do we know what God is saying? Did you notice what Jesus said to Satan each time? 'It is written . . . It is written . . . It is written'—it is written where? In the Scriptures. God has spoken to human beings in His words and in His actions, and God has made sure that what He has spoken has been duly written down. That is why we read the Bible here. That is why in the Lenten studies we will be simply looking at what is in the Bible. Not so we can say, 'Now we know the Bible', but so we can hear God speaking to us, so that we come to know God. Face-to-face.

Why do we need to have a relationship with God like that? Let me ask you a question: How well do you stand in life? You may say, Well, I'm doing OK. Paul the apostle thought he was doing OK—until he met Jesus. That upended him. Ever thereafter, Paul knew he could only ever do OK by the grace of God. And he needed all the grace he could get—did you hear from the epistle reading some of the things Paul had to go through? 'in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes [floggings], in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings [going without food]'. How did Paul stand in the midst of all that? Well, in the midst of all that he managed to come up with things like 'purity . . . knowledge . . . longsuffering . . . kindness'. How would we go in the same circumstances? How did he do it? he says, 'by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God'. And so he found that he had weapons 'of righteousness on the right hand and on the left'—very powerful. So he was able to take both 'honor and dishonor', whether people spoke well of him or not—through 'evil report and good report'. He said, we are being treated 'as deceivers, and yet true; as

unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.’ Would we like to be able to live life like that? Well, says Paul: As workers together with God we ‘plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain’. In Jesus, God has come to us with salvation and help. So take it up! ‘Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation’!

Jesus said to Satan, and he says to us: ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve’. We have some words in this service which give wonderful expression to that—from the *Gloria*:

We praise thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory, O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.

We’re using the old language there—‘thee’ and ‘thy’ for ‘you’ and ‘your’—and if we are using the old language we need to understand what it means. Some people like to use the old language because they think it is more formal and respectful to a high and holy God. We must take care that in our thinking this does not put God at some far remove from us. Because that is not what the language is saying. Many languages have an intimate and familiar form of address, such as ‘tu’ in French or ‘du’ in German, and a polite formal address, such as ‘vous’ in French and ‘Sie’ in German. When English used to make that distinction, what was the formal address? It was ‘you’. And what was the intimate or familiar form of address that you would use with someone very close to you? It was ‘thee’, or ‘thou’. When I began my ministry in Mount Gambier nearly forty years ago, I was boarding with a widow who told me about her father. He had used normal language when speaking generally—‘you’ and ‘your’—but she said when he was speaking to his wife, her mother, he would say ‘I love thee’! We are speaking from just this far away when we are saying to God, ‘We praise thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory’. Can we have that in our hearts and on our lips when we say or sing those words to God this morning—‘I love thee’?