

IGNITE



focus
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university students



Who Is God?

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Show us the Father (John 14:8-11)

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me."

"The desire for God is written in the human heart" (CCC 27). We have an innate desire to know our creator. We were made for divine life and every person, whether they actively realize it or not, wants to know: God, Who are You? Are You out there? Do You care?

A proper understanding of God's identity is also central to the Catholic Faith. Unfortunately, having serious misconceptions about God's identity is all too common—even among Christians. Too often God is viewed as a detached, impersonal force in the universe, a grandfatherly, Santa-Claus-like figure in the sky, or "a combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist" as one sociologist observed.¹ These misconceptions damage our faith, because they trick us

¹Smith, Christian. On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

into believing that God is different than He really is—that He isn't interested, that he doesn't care, and that following Him and His ways doesn't really matter.

In the passage above, Jesus points us toward a correct understanding of God. The Apostle Philip wants to know God and says, "Show us the Father." Yet, Jesus' answer is surprising. Instead of telling Philip about God, He points back to Himself, saying "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9). This statement reveals an incredible truth of Christianity: by knowing Jesus, we know the Father. The Catechism tells us, "Christ's whole earthly life—his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking—is Revelation of the Father" (CCC 516). If we want to know God—His love for us, His patience, His care, His zeal, His involvement in our lives—then we need only look to Jesus. Therefore, let's discuss what Jesus says about Himself, so that we can learn what God is truly like.

I AM

All of Christ's life reveals something about God. Yet, Jesus made a handful of statements that pointed directly to His identity. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes seven "I am" statements that give a profound picture of Who God is:

- I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)
- I am the Door (John 10:9)
- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)
- I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)
- I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)
- I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)

It's important to note that the phrase "I am" is not just an ordinary statement from Jesus. In the Old Testament, God revealed His holy name, "I AM" or "I AM WHO AM," to Moses in the burning bush (Ex

3:14).² For the Jewish people, God's name was considered so holy that it was only uttered by the High Priest once each year on the highest Jewish feast day, the Day of Atonement. God's name was full of meaning and power—and it wasn't to be uttered lightly. Therefore, when Jesus uses this holy name to speak about Himself, He is making a very bold claim. It is as if He is saying, "I am God and if you want to know what God is like, listen." While we can't examine all of them, let's look at a few of these statements to learn from Jesus about Who God really is.

I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Light is a key theme throughout the Scriptures. In the very beginning, God said, "Let there be light" to commence His creative work (Gen 1:3). In the Psalms, God's Word is spoken of as light for our path (Ps 119:105). And those lost in the world are spoken of as walking in darkness (Is 9:1-3). Light is a "common symbol for all that is good."³

Perhaps the most pertinent image of light in this context, however, is God's lighting of His people's way in the book of Exodus. As the Israelites journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land through the wilderness, God provided a pillar of fire that gave them light, allowing travel even in the dark of night (Ex 13:21). The Israelites were called by God to freedom in a new land, but they could not arrive there on their own. They needed the light of the pillar of fire to reach their promised destination.

² The revelation of the ineffable name "I AM WHO AM" contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church's Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is (CCC 213).

³ Hahn, Scott. Light, Catholic Bible Dictionary, p. 543.

This background is key to understanding Jesus' words. When He says, "I am the light of the world," He does so during the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. As part of the celebration, golden candelabras were lit with fire, symbolizing the fire that led the people in the wilderness.⁴ Thus, when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness," He is specifically referencing this Old Testament image. The point is clear: just as the pillar of fire led the people of Israel to freedom in the promised land, Jesus is the "light of the world" guiding us through this earthly life (see Jn 1:9). We are like the Israelites in the wilderness, totally dependent on God's light for our journey. Only with the light of Christ, we will be able to travel the path to freedom, life, and eternal joy.⁵

What does this tell us about God? First, it tells us that God sees the darkness in our lives and wants to bring His light to those places. We all walk in darkness. It doesn't take much work to look around the world and see that humanity is desperately broken. Indeed, many are wandering in great darkness, unsure of where to go, what to do, who to follow, or how to live the life of joy and happiness they so eagerly desire but find so difficult to achieve. God sees this reality and cares about it deeply. He also provides the solution, Himself, the Light, to illumine for us a path to true life. God isn't indifferently observing our plight from afar. He wants to meet our darkness head-on. In fact, His light is the only solution to our darkness, and He eagerly wishes for us to receive it.

It is important to recognize, however, that the "light of life" that God wishes to give requires a commitment. Indeed, Jesus says, "he who

⁴Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament note on John 8:12.

⁵The Church uses this same imagery in the Easter Vigil liturgy today. The Easter (or Paschal) candle is lit from a fire stationed outside the Church in the dark of night. The candle is then processed into the Church with the words "the light of Christ." The light of Christ leads us through the darkness. It is also from this light that the congregation will light their own individual candles as symbols of their enlightenment in Christ, which they have received in Baptism.

follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12, emphasis added). We cannot receive this great gift by simply asking God to give us what we want or begging Him to solve our problems. He wants so much more for us than that. His goal is not merely for us to feel good about ourselves and have a "positive outlook on life." Rather, God wants to meet the deepest darkneses in our lives and transform them. He wants to lead us along a different path that renews our minds and frees us from sin. But this transformation comes only when we are willing to follow Him wherever that might lead, even to those places that we might not currently desire to go. The light of life is available to us. We must follow Him to find it.

I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-15)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

We ought to notice a rather striking detail about Jesus' image of the Good Shepherd. Think for a moment about what being a shepherd must have been like. Most of the time, it probably involved remaining close to the sheep, walking with them in pastures and keeping them from getting too far away. Then, imagine what would happen when a wolf comes, hoping to steal a sheep for dinner. The shepherd would be responsible for fending off the wolf and keeping the sheep safe. No doubt many took this responsibility seriously, but surely others

considered the value of their own lives and were unwilling to put themselves in danger for the sake of an animal. Jesus, however, goes even further. What makes Him a good shepherd is that He is willing to give up his own life for the lives of His sheep. Can you imagine being a shepherd who is willing to die to protect his animals?

Of course, in context, Jesus isn't merely speaking about animals; He is speaking about us. We are His sheep, and He is willing to give His life for us. This is perfectly accomplished by His death on the cross. Indeed, Jesus doesn't merely claim He is willing to give His life for His sheep. He truly does it.

What does this tell us about God? One thing it tells us is that God wants to do something for us, not merely demand something from us. Too often, we get it backwards. Instead of thinking God wants to save us and bring us new life, we convince ourselves that He wants to impose His rules upon us. While following Christ certainly has demands, God doesn't need our subservience like a tyrannical king. His desire is to save us. He demands something of us because He desires something good for us. Think of a good parent who asks their children to do their homework. The parent doesn't need the homework to be done. They simply want to help their child become a person of greater character and achievement. God is the same. He is interested in us, personally. In fact, His chief desire is for us, not merely what we can do for Him. Jesus says explicitly that He "came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28).

Similarly, this passage also tells us that God wants to have mercy on us and save us from our sins. Again, we often get this backward. Instead of thinking that God, in His love, wants to save us from our sins, we believe that He wants to hold our sins over our heads and

condemn us. Instead of seeing God as a merciful savior, we view Him as a tyrannical judge. This false image couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus says elsewhere, "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). Indeed, we believe in a God of mercy.

Finally, at least one other element of this passage merits our attention. Notice the intimacy of the shepherd and his sheep. He knows them and they know him. You can imagine the closeness and proximity of a shepherd to his sheep. He is always with them, leading them, guiding them, and keeping them out of danger. God wants this same sort of closeness with us. Rather than being distant, uninterested, and uninvolved, God is radically attentive and present in our lives. He isn't merely "out there" somewhere "watching from above." He is personally close to us. In fact, He is with us "always" (Mt 28:20).

I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)

In this final "I am" statement from Jesus, we get not one but three identifying characteristics: way, truth, and life. Certainly, much could be said about these identifiers. For the sake of this study, we are going to limit our discussion to one key point about God's identity, one that is often misunderstood in today's culture.

Today, it is not uncommon to encounter the idea that all religions are basically the same, and that the goal of these religions, is also largely similar: be a good person and when you die, God will let you into heaven. This proposition, however, is inconsistent with Jesus' words. Behind this be-a-good-person proposal is a misconception about God. The be-a-good-person God is not the God of Christianity; He is

the cosmic pushover. He has no real standards, no great dream for humanity, no passionate love.

Jesus' statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" points us to the one, true God. There are not many ways, nor many truths, nor many types of life. There is one way and one truth and one life: Jesus Christ. In our pluralistic culture, such an idea might seem exclusivist, judgmental, or even intolerant but nothing could be further from the truth. God is so passionately dedicated to our good, to our union with Him, to our living the fullness of life that He won't bend on His principles. God made us. He knows what makes us tick. In fact, He knows us better than we know ourselves. Therefore, when He proposes to us one way and one truth that leads to life, He does so as the God of love. He loves us so much that He won't settle for our mediocrity. We are willing to compromise, but He is not. We are willing to sell ourselves short, but He is not. We are willing to settle for a mediocre, self-centered, uninspiring life, but He is not. Indeed, God loves us so much that He wants not merely the decent, the okay, the better-than-average for us. He wants what is truly best for us and is unwilling to surrender to our pursuit of lesser things.

Finally, what is best for us? If God truly wants what is best, what is it that He wants for us? The answer is simple: Himself. God is the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, His deepest desire is for us to know Him. He wants this for our sakes, not His own. For it is only in God that we find the best path for our lives, the deepest truths of our existence, and the joy of living for which we so ardently long. In the words of St. Augustine, "When I am completely united to you, there will be no more sorrow or trials; entirely full of you, my life will be complete" (CCC 45).

(Optional) Supplemental Resource: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Sociologist Christian Smith examined the beliefs of young people in 2010. He found that while many claimed a particular religious tradition, they also overwhelmingly adopted “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” This set of beliefs expressed what young people actually believed, even if they claimed a specific religious affiliation. While the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism have elements of truth in them, they present a distorted image of God and Christianity. In this chapter, take note of these misconceptions, so that you can respond to them accordingly. Here are the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.⁶

Smith summarizes his conclusion this way:

[W]e can say that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of “Christianity” in the United States is actually only tenuously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least

⁶Smith, Christian. On ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ as U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

some Christian organizations and institutions. The language — and therefore experience — of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be being supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. It is not so much that Christianity in the United States is being secularized. Rather more subtly, either Christianity is at least degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.⁷

⁷ Smith, Christian. On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: John 14:8-11, 8:12, 10:11-15, 14:1-6

Introduction

1. (Optional) Launching Question: Have you ever met someone, thinking they were going to be one way (maybe mean or uptight or careless or something else), but once you met them, they turned out to be very different? What was your misperception and what was the reality?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: In this study, we are going to explore God's identity. Who is God? And what does that mean for our lives today? To begin:

2. Launching Question: When you think of God, what do you think of? What is God like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: There are a lot of ideas about Who God is. In today's study, we are going to discuss what Catholicism teaches about Who God is. To start, let's begin with a question from one of Jesus' disciples, who wanted to understand Who God was.

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Read John 14:8-11

3. What does Philip ask for? And how does Jesus answer?

Answer: The Apostle Philip wants to know God and says, "Show us the Father." Yet, Jesus' answer is surprising. Instead of telling Philip about God, He points back to Himself, saying "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9).

4. Jesus' answer to Philip tells us something about how we can know God. What do you think Jesus' answer suggests to us about learning what God is like?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: By knowing Jesus, we know the Father. The Catechism states, "Christ's whole earthly life - his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking - is Revelation of the Father" (CCC 516). Therefore, if we want to know what God is like, we need to know what Jesus is like.

Please read aloud: In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes several "I am" statements.⁸ These statements are Jesus' way of telling us Who He is, and thus, Who God is. Here is the list of statements:

- I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35)
- I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)
- I am the Door (John 10:9)

⁸ The revelation of the ineffable name "I AM WHO AM" contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church's Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is (CCC 213).

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- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)
- I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)
- I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)
- I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)

5. What do you think it might mean to “walk in darkness” and where do you see this in the world today?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: We all walk in darkness in many ways. It doesn't take much work to look around the world and see that humanity is desperately broken. Indeed, many are wandering in great darkness, unsure of where to go, what to do, who to follow, or how to live the life of joy and happiness they so eagerly desire but find so difficult to achieve.

6. What do you think Jesus means by “the light of life?”

Allow the group to discuss. Note to the leader: You do not need to fully answer the question until after the next question.

Please read aloud: Here is some additional Biblical background about light: Light is a key theme throughout the Scriptures. Perhaps the most pertinent image of light in this context, however, is God's lighting of His people's way in the book of Exodus. As the Israelites journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land through the wilderness, God provided a pillar of fire that gave them light for their journey, allowing travel even in the dark of night (Ex 13:21). The Israelites were called by God to freedom in a new land, but they could not arrive there on their own. They needed the light of the pillar of fire to reach their promised destination.

This background is key to understanding Jesus' words. He says, "I am the light of the world," during the feast of Tabernacles. As part of the celebration, golden candelabras were lit with fire, symbolizing the fire that led the people in the wilderness.⁹ Thus, when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness," He is specifically referencing this Old Testament image.

7. Given this background, what might it mean to have the "light of life?"

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: Just as the pillar of fire led the people of Israel to freedom in the promised land, Jesus is the "light of the world" guiding us through this earthly life (see Jn 1:9). We are like the Israelites in the wilderness, totally dependent on God's light for our journey. Only with the light of Christ, we will be able to travel the path to freedom, life, and eternal joy.¹⁰

8. What does all this tell us about God? And how do we find this "light of life?"

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: First, it tells us that God sees the darkness in our lives and wants to bring His light to those places. He also provides the solution, Himself, the Light, to illumine for us a path to true life. It is important to recognize, however, that the "light of life" that God wishes to give requires a commitment. Indeed, Jesus says, "he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). The light of life is available to us. We must follow Him to find it.

⁹ Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament note on John 8:12.

¹⁰ The Church uses this same imagery in the Easter Vigil liturgy today. The Easter (or Paschal) candle is lit from a fire stationed outside the Church in the dark of night. The candle is then processed into the Church with the words "the light of Christ." The light of Christ leads us through the darkness. It is also from this light that the congregation will light their own individual candles as symbols of their enlightenment in Christ, which they have received in Baptism.

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Please read aloud: Let's read one more of Jesus' "I am" statements:

Read John 10:11-15

9. What does a good shepherd do and how is that different from what a bad shepherd does? How is Jesus a "Good Shepherd" and what does this tell us about God?

Answer: A shepherd would be responsible for fending off the wolf and keeping the sheep safe. Jesus, however, goes even further. He says that what makes Him a good shepherd is that He is willing to give up his own life for the lives of His sheep. Unlike a bad shepherd, Jesus is willing to lay His life down for His sheep. But Jesus isn't merely speaking about animals; He is speaking about us. We are His sheep, and He is willing to give His life for us. This is perfectly accomplished by His death on the cross. One thing it tells us is that God wants to do something for us, not merely demand something from us. Too often, however, we get it backwards. Instead of thinking that He wants to save us and bring us new life, we convince ourselves that He wants to impose His rules upon us.

10. Many people today view God as distant, uninterested, and uninvolved in their lives. How does this image of the Good Shepherd present a different picture of God?

Answer: You can imagine the closeness and proximity of a shepherd to his sheep. He is always with them, leading them, guiding them, and keeping them out of danger. God wants this same sort of closeness with us. Rather than being distant, uninterested, and uninvolved, God is radically attentive and present in our lives.

Note to Leader: You may omit this last "I AM" statement if you don't have sufficient time.

(Optional) Please read out loud: Okay let's discuss one more "I AM" statement from Jesus:

Read John 14:1-6

11. This is a bold statement. What do you think Jesus means when He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life?"

Allow the group to discuss.

12. Sometimes Christianity is reduced to merely a moral code that guides us in being kind to one another. And, so the thinking goes, basically all God is asking of us is to be a good person. While there is some truth in this idea, what is it missing?

Answer: Behind this be-a-good-person proposal is a misconception about God. The be-a-good-person God is not the God of Christianity; He is the cosmic pushover. He has no real standards, no great dream for humanity, no passionate love.

13. If God isn't *only* looking for us to be good and kind to one another, what does he want for us? And what does that tell us about God?

Answer: The answer is simple: Himself. God is the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, His deepest desire is for us to know Him. He wants this for our sakes, not His own. For it is only in God that we find the

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best path for our lives, the deepest truths of our existence, and the joy of living for which we so ardently long.

(Optional) Wrap-Up:

Please read aloud: In this study, we learned about who God is by examining Jesus' "I AM" statements. You could spend your whole life learning more about Who God is. Therefore, consider continuing to come to Bible study so that we can continue this journey together. Thank you for being here.

(Optional) Supplemental Resource: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Please read aloud: The Catholic sociologist, Christian Smith, examined the *de facto* beliefs of many young people. He found that while many claimed to believe in their particular religious tradition, many overwhelmingly adopted what he termed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." This set of beliefs was what young people *actually* believed about God, even if they claimed affiliation with a particular tradition. While the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism have elements of truth in them, they generally fall short of a full picture of God and Christianity.

Here's how Smith summarized the beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.¹¹

14. How does this set of beliefs align or fall short of a proper understanding of God and Christianity?

Allow the group to discuss.

¹¹ Smith, Christian. On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.