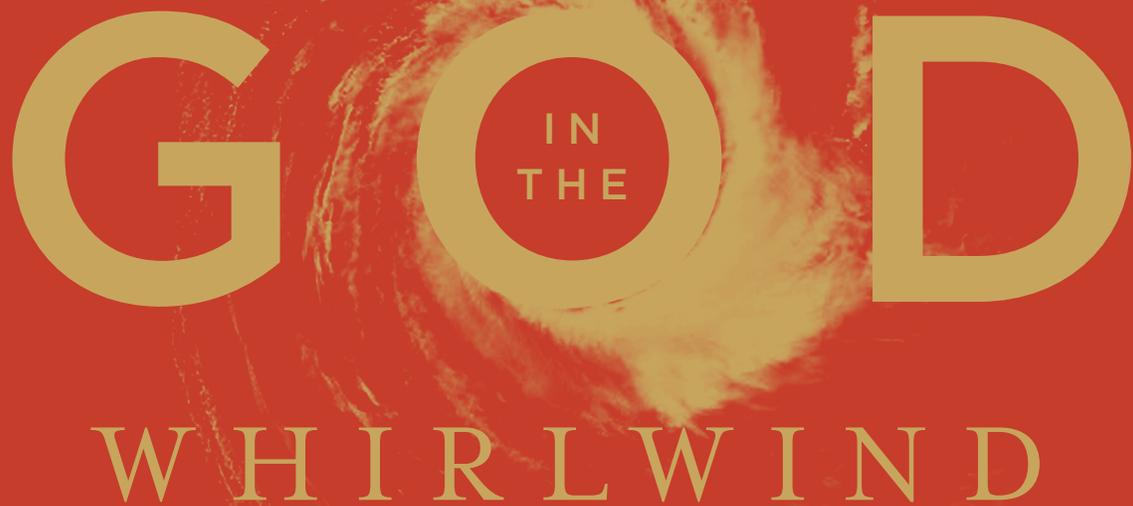


DAVID F. WELLS



GOD  
IN THE  
WHIRLWIND

*How the Holy-love of God  
Reorients Our World*

STUDY GUIDE

*Study Guide for*

# GOD IN THE WHIRLWIND

*How the Holy-love of God*

*Reorients Our World*

DAVID F. WELLS

*Prepared by Drew Hunter*

*Study Guide for “God in the Whirlwind”*

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# God Our Vision, Culture Our Context

## Overview

“We are on a journey. . . . Our destination is the character of God” (p. 15). This is a book about the character of God, and its main theme is what Wells refers to as God’s “holy-love.” In chapter 1, Wells leads us to step back and understand particular challenges to embarking on this journey. Specifically, there are two particular cultural challenges that we face in our pursuit of knowing God.

## Key Statement

“The goal of Christ’s redemption was that we might know God, love him, serve him, enjoy him, and glorify him forever. This is, indeed, our chief end. It was for this end that Christ came, was incarnate, died in our place, and was raised for our justification. It was that we might know God” (p. 15).

## Discussion Questions

1. According to the introductory paragraphs of chapter 1, this is a book about the character of God. We might be tempted to think we already know God’s character and therefore do not need a book like this. However, Wells reminds us of the goal of Christ’s redemption which immediately addresses this kind of thought. What is this goal, and how does it provide the primary motivation to pursue a greater understanding of God’s character?

2. Wells states that there are two things that we regularly encounter in our lives that challenge our pursuit of knowing God and his character. The first of these is a cultural challenge. According to the first paragraphs of the section on page 18 titled, “The Center of Reality,” how would you summarize this challenge? What is its great danger to our understanding of God?

3. Although many people in the West believe God exists, Wells notes that the real problem is that their belief in God doesn't have "weight" (p. 20). Summarize aspects of this common understanding of God.

4. What is the "American Paradox" and how does it shape our view of God (p. 22)? How have you seen this paradox in your own experience?

5. What does Wells mean by the phrase "holy-love" (p. 35)? Why are God's holiness and love difficult to hold together?

6. The second challenge to our pursuit of knowing God is distraction. Wells notes that computers, cell phones, and other forms of technology fill our lives with distraction. The great danger this poses is that we will be carried along by our culture and we will "lose our ability to reflect on the deep issues of life" and "begin to lose touch with the God who has called us to know him" (p. 38). Identify at least two primary sources of distraction in your own life. What is one specific way that you can "withdraw" for periods of time in order to combat this challenge and regain a greater degree of focus?

## **Response of Prayer**

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, reflect on the following Scripture and ask God to help us in our pursuit of knowing him better through this book:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (Ps. 42:1–2)



3. According to page 49, what are the two aspects of biblical *faith* in contrast to inadequate conceptions of it? From your observation and experience, what is the most common, yet inadequate, understanding of *faith*?

4. Wells notes that Christ as the exclusive ground of our salvation is clearly declared in the New Testament. But the difficult question is this: was this also true for believers in the Old Testament before Christ came, such as Abraham and David? Summarize how the Old Testament sacrificial system progressively developed in the Old Testament and came to final fulfillment in Christ (see p. 53).

5. According to page 54, how does God's "eternal perspective" help us to answer the question of how Christ is the ground of salvation for Old Testament believers?

6. This chapter has given us a big-picture overview of God's consistent plan of salvation across the ages. Salvation is always by grace (the cause), through faith (the instrument), and because of Christ (the basis). Which aspect of salvation was particularly impactful for you to consider? Why?

## Response of Prayer

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, reflect on the following Scripture and respond with thankfulness to God that salvation is by grace through faith because of Christ:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:8–9)

# So Much More

## Overview

In chapter 3, Wells continues to unfold God’s plan of redemption through history. The previous chapter walked us through the Old Testament with a focus on the similarities of God’s plan of salvation through the ages. This chapter leads us into the New Testament and emphasizes the differences between God’s plan of salvation in the two testaments.

## Key Statement

“Like Abraham, we have these great promises of the joy and deliverance to come. And like him we have to hold these in faith. We believe the promises—credence—because we are utterly persuaded of their truthfulness. We believe them because we are utterly persuaded of the greatness and trustworthiness of their Promise maker—commitment” (p. 75).

## Discussion Questions

1. In order to show some of the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament, Wells selects three “types of Christ”: Adam, the exodus, and David. As Wells notes, “a type is an event or person, within the flow of redemptive history, that foreshadows what comes later” (p. 60). What does Wells note that we need to be careful about when we consider typology? Why is this important?

2. Wells develops three theological and typological connections between Adam, the first human, and Jesus Christ (pp. 60–66). Summarize how Adam is a type of Christ

. . . through his life:

. . . through his death:

. . . and through his rule:

3. When we consider the exodus redemption of Israel we find that as Israel remembered this event their hearts were stirred with fresh hope and anticipation of another greater exodus redemption. This time, however, the “Egypt” that they would be saved from was sin. When we step back and see how Christ fulfills the longings of a new exodus, we see that he “was the true Israel; he was a new but far greater Moses; and he was the Passover lamb and the final sacrifice for sin. He was all of that in one person. And from him arises a deliverance far, far greater than the original deliverance from Egypt” (p. 68). How does this great contrast between the first exodus and Christ’s redemption help us understand why the “liberation theologians” of recent decades were misguided? (see p. 69).

4. Like Adam and Israel, David is also a type of Christ. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament longings for a new and greater David (pp. 70–72). Yet how does Christ’s kingdom differ from David’s?

5. Wells notes that the significant way in which the Holy Spirit’s work has changed between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that his work is now directly coordinated with Christ. His work is “to point us to Christ, to join us to him, to deepen our life in him, to make him our sovereign Lord, to fill our hearts with gratitude for what he has done, and to lift up our eyes to see all that is yet to come” (p. 74). How should this affect your understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and the centrality of Christ?

## Response of Prayer

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Prayerfully respond to the following Scripture by thanking God for his wisdom displayed in unfolding the gospel through all of Scripture:

O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

# The Love of God

## Overview

In the previous two chapters, we saw the unfolding of God's plan of redemption "across time." The following two chapters build on this foundation by focusing explicitly on God's character, on the "holy-love" of God. Here we see that the starting point for understanding God's character cannot be our own experiences, but rather the revelation of God. In these chapters, we see what it means for God to be a God of love *and* holiness, and the importance of holding these two aspects together. Specifically, Wells unfolds a biblical understanding of God's love in chapter 4 and of his holiness in chapter 5.

## Key Statement

"The most important point to grasp here is this: God's kind of love comes from *above*, not from below. It is the opposite of what we assume. It is contrary to the way our culture inclines us to think. In fact, it goes against our deepest instincts. It is politically incorrect, too. God's love *descends* to us. His is the initiative from first to last" (p. 81).

## Discussion Questions

1. Wells notes that the dominant image of many Americans about God is that he is love. In other ages, however, that "God is love" was not self-evident. Wells explains, "the harshness of life, its brevity, its seemingly random catastrophes, its hollowness, its moments of malignancy, and its violence have all seemed to point in another direction. Perhaps to a God of indifference or, worse yet, a God who is hostile to human life" (p. 78). Wells goes on to say that the primary way that the early Christians got a different view of God was by looking at the cross. How did the cross convince the early Christians that God was loving? How does this begin to help you see the power of the cross to reshape how we view God and life?

2. On pages 80–81, Wells states that our typical way of approaching the topic of God's love "could not be more wrong if we tried!" What is the typical approach today, and why is it so wrong?

3. Wells speaks of two families of religion (p. 83–85). They end up at different places because they start at different points. What are these? Is this still true today as people think of their religion or spirituality?

4. The hyphen in “holy-love,” we learn, is very important to keep in place. “It is easy to affirm both, but holding them together, and seeing his love in its constant relation to his holiness, has proved much more difficult” (p. 86). Indeed, on pages 86–87, we see how both liberalism and legalism have not held the two together. When God’s holiness and love are not held together, one aspect is neglected and the other that is emphasized becomes distorted. Wells shows us how this is worked out with both liberalism and legalism. Drawing from your own experience and observations, how have you seen this distortion of God’s holy-love in liberalism and legalism? Note one example for each.

5. “Grace is God’s undeserved love in its action on our sin. And sin, if it is to be forgiven, is where the holiness of God must necessarily be encountered and its demands resolved” (p. 88). Assuming that this bond between divine love and holiness is true, can you explain how it then defines how we approach God, how we find acceptance with him, and how it explains the nature of Christ’s work?

6. Wells addresses “those who know that God is neither distant nor ignorant and yet they are at a loss to know why, then, evil still persists. Why? Is he unconcerned? No. That, of course, is fallacious. Why, then, does he not act? Why does he wait?” (p. 97). The answer, Wells notes, is seen in God’s patience (see pp. 97–98). How does this perspective help us in the many situations in life when we wonder why God does not appear to be immediately acting in judgment or correction?

7. Pages 91–95 reveal the inter-Trinitarian love of God. In what ways do we see love displayed between the members of the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

8. Wells concludes the chapter by noting, “we have seen enough to have our souls filled with wonder and gratitude for who God is” (p. 100). What is the single thing you have seen in this chapter that should most fill you with this wonder and gratitude?

### **Response of Prayer**

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned about God’s character in this chapter, especially noting your response to question 4. Then respond to God with thankfulness and praise for these things, as well as for his love displayed in the following Scripture:

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)



3. On pages 104–109 we see Isaiah’s vision of God’s transcendent, *majestic* otherness, and on pages 112–115 we see Isaiah’s vision of God’s *moral* otherness. What aspect of God’s holiness stands out most to you as you read this vision? Why?

4. God is good, and he is the standard for all goodness. But why is it, if we know God, that our understanding of what is good is so often small and cramped? (p. 116–118).

5. God’s wrath is a topic that is often misunderstood or neglected. What part of the explanation of God’s wrath on pages 121–125 do you find to stand in the starkest contrast to common ways of understanding it? Why?

6. This God of majestic otherness and moral otherness stands before us, outside of us. Wells notes, “But what we see, the one whom we think is before us, may be vastly different from who is actually there” (p. 125). Why is this such an important point to grasp, especially in light of the focus of this chapter on God’s holiness?

7. This chapter has put God's holiness on display. The clearer the vision of God's holiness we have from the Bible, the more our own vision, shaped as it is in many ways from the culture, is exposed as distorted. What is one way that your view of God has been sharpened or, we could say, become more conformed to the image of the true God?

### **Response of Prayer**

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, respond to the following quotation by praising God for the intermingling of his holiness and love that is displayed here:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite." (Isa. 57:15)



3. Wells shows us three “word pictures” that the New Testament uses to explain how Jesus being our substitute is God’s solution to our problem of sin. These word pictures, or analogies, are the law-court image of justification, the human relations image of reconciliation, and the warfare image of ransom. Because these are so central to our understanding of the gospel, it will be helpful to ensure that we have a firm grasp of their meanings. Provide a one-sentence summary of the meaning of each of these (see pp. 140–145 for justification, pp. 145–148 for reconciliation, and pp. 148–151 for ransom).

4. Throughout Wells’s explanation of justification, reconciliation, and ransom, we see the central importance of Jesus’s *substitution*. In other words, we see how Jesus’s death *for* us and *for* our sins is specifically what brings about our justification, reconciliation, and ransom. Explain *how* Jesus’s substitutionary atonement makes each one of these three analogies of our salvation possible.

5. On pages 151–152 Wells draws attention to the tradition of emphasizing Jesus’s life as our example. Yet, Wells notes, if we separate Jesus’s life as our example from his death as our Savior, we will become legalists, we will inevitably fail to perfectly imitate him, and we will be crushed. He then approvingly quotes Martin Luther’s statement, “it is being children of grace that enables us to be Christ’s imitators” (p. 152). What does Luther mean?

6. How has this chapter broadened or deepened your understanding of the meaning and significance of the cross? And can you now better explain how the holy-love of God is revealed in Christ’s cross, and how it explains that cross (p. 154–156)?

## **Response of Prayer**

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, prayerfully respond to the following text, which was repeatedly quoted in this chapter:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

# Walking with God

## Overview

Chapter 6 focused on Christ's work on the cross. We saw how Jesus's death—in our place and for our sins—is the place where we see God's holy-love most clearly. In the following three chapters, we see that God's holy-love is at the center of three significant aspects of the church's life together: sanctification (chapter 7), worship (chapter 8), and service (chapter 9). In this chapter, we see ways we have gone wrong in thinking about sanctification, how we *should* think about sanctification, and how God's holy-love shapes our sanctified lives.

## Key Statement

“God's character is that of holy-love, and that is what the Holy Spirit is working to restore to us through the process of sanctification” (p. 174).

## Discussion Questions

1. Wells notes how common it is for those in the evangelical church to have at one point claimed to have a relationship with Christ, but to give no evidence of this relationship. Did any aspect of George Barna's report on page 158 surprise you? How have you observed this pattern in the evangelical church?

2. Why is it true that if we do not have evidence of being transformed by Christ to live obediently as one who is in Christ, “then there are good reasons to doubt whether we have ever been received by him” (p. 160)?

3. Philippians 2:12–13 says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” What does this indicate about our role as well as God’s in our life of sanctification? (see pp. 166–167).

4. One of the great dangers among Christians is losing the distinction between justification and sanctification. There is a tendency to view justification not as an absolute declaration of righteousness and acceptance, but as one step in the process of becoming righteous—a process that we complete with our sanctification. Wells notes that one of the things we lose when we do this is a central motivation for living the Christian life—specifically, gratitude. How is gratitude a great motivator for living the Christian life, and how does confusing justification and sanctification remove this as a motivator? See page 169.

5. We see in this chapter that the love Christians are called to have is very different from what is commonly thought of as love. The primary difference is that Christian love is to be *holy*-love. What does this mean, and what does this look like on-the-ground in real life? See especially pages 174–176.

6. On pages 184–186 we are confronted with the danger of our incessant use of technology in our pursuit of deeply knowing God. The answer to this problem is clear: “we need to carve out space for ourselves in which we can daily attend to God’s Word, study it, mark it, learn it, and inwardly digest its truth” (p. 185). Create a plan (or consider modifying your current one) to be deliberate in blocking out the time you need to daily study and reflect on God’s Word—and write that plan here.

## Response of Prayer

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, pray that your daily time studying God’s Word would be used to fulfill 2 Thessalonians 3:5: “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”



3. Wells notes that churches should be very diverse places. Yet diversity can lead to divisiveness if we do not preserve and prioritize what gives us unity. According to page 200, what is it that makes us unified and what is it that makes us diverse?

4. A central theme of this chapter is that worship should be God-centered. On page 206, we read, “However we decide to do our worship, in whatever language, with whatever forms old or new, there can only be one objective in mind. It is that we bring ourselves together to focus on our triune God, on his character and his attributes. We come to rejoice in his greatness, to be encouraged in his sovereignty, to be comforted by his promises, to be instructed in his Word.” What are some of the alternative and inadequate purposes that we can tend to focus on when we think about worship?

5. On pages 213–215 Wells observes the disappearance of psalms and hymns in our singing, as well as pulpits in our preaching. What might these transitions indicate about our values and what we believe about God’s Word? Are there any particular ways that you have observed the decline of biblical literacy in evangelical churches?

6. Much of this chapter focuses on a big-picture view of worship in the local church. What is one thing that you can do in your own life to ensure that your worship with the gathered church is God-centered?

## **Response of Prayer**

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, respond to the following quotation with worshipful adoration and thanksgiving:

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God. . . . Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:1–3, 6–7)

# And, Come, Let Us Serve

## Overview

Chapter 9 continues our focus on several aspects of the church's identity and life. Just as God's holy-love is at the center of our sanctification (chapter 7) and our worship (chapter 8), we now see how it is also central to our service. Here we see that the Christian view of service runs directly against the values of our culture. It is Christ-centered as opposed to self-centered. It is also a response to God's holy-love. His love compels us to serve with love, and his holiness compels us to serve in a way that sets to right things that are wrong. In the end, our authentic service is what will give credibility to the gospel message we proclaim.

## Key Statement

“Our way into this subject [of service] . . . is to consider an antithesis that cuts through all of Christian life. It is the antithesis between being Christ-centered and being self-centered. . . . in both cases, there is a center in our lives, and in both cases from this center comes an energy, a drive, to see life from the viewpoint of our center and to do certain things as a consequence. The difference lies in these two centers: Christ or self” (p. 224).

## Discussion Questions

1. On pages 222–223 Wells notes a number of the frustrations of work as well as the important benefits of it. What aspect of work have you typically found to be most frustrating? What aspect of the benefits of work that Wells notes was new to you?

2. “For Christians the workplace is the context where many have their greatest opportunity to reflect who they are in Christ” (p. 223). What are some of the ways that Christians can reflect their new life and new identity in Christ through their work and at their workplace?

3. Before one becomes a Christian, he or she is enslaved to sin. Afterward, he or she is enslaved to Christ. But this new servitude is actually freedom. How so? See page 232.

4. The Christian idea of service is countercultural. One of the ways Wells shows us this is by directing us to a paradox Jesus spoke: “if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35) (p. 234). How does our culture value power and importance? How does the Christian faith transform the way we understand power and importance?

5. How does God’s love for us through Christ provide the motivation we need to self-sacrificially serve others (p. 235–236)? What is one specific act of service you think you are called to do, and how, specifically, will Christ’s love for you be your motivation to carry out this act of service?

6. “It is Christian service—in all of its many varieties—that provides the context that lends a human authenticity to the word of the gospel” (p. 241). This statement comes immediately after noting that many twenty-somethings view “born again” Christians as hypocrites. How can our authentic, humble, others-focused service as Christians reverse this trend and give credibility to the gospel? Have you ever seen this happen in your own life as you served someone?

## Response of Prayer

Take a few moments to reflect on what you learned in this chapter, and then turn these reflections into prayer. Additionally, in response to the following Scripture, thank God for his service to you in Christ and ask him to enable you to serve others as he has served you:

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. (Matt. 10:24)