Understanding the Character of God

Have you ever tried bartering with God? Share stories.
"God, if you'll do this for me, I'll do this for you."
"God, I'll never do this wrong thing again if you'll just do this one thing for me"

Pagans believed their gods needed something from them.
As long as your god needed something from you, you had something to barter with.
Giving your god what he needed was your way of getting what you needed.

Spiritual economics:
You gave: Food, Prayers, Worship, Money, Sex...
The god supposedly gave: Rain, Answered Prayers, Healing, Abundant crops....

What is wrong with this thinking with regard to God?

The names of God reveal to us that God is not one with whom we can barter. Read the following passages and discuss how each name defeats the idea of bartering with God.

Exodus 3:13-15 (NIV)
13 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob--has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.

What is the significance of the name I AM?
I AM self-existent
I AM self-sufficient
I AM the source of all there is
There is no power greater than me
There is no need I cannot meet
There is nothing lacking in who I AM

How does this name correct the spiritual bartering concept?
The name “I Am” communicates that God does not need anything from us, but we need everything from him. It is as if God is saying, “I don’t need you, but you need me and I am more than enough for whatever circumstances you may face.”
How might this name have communicated courage and comfort to the Israelites?

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt with no possible way to deliver themselves. Were they even to escape they would surely die in the vast desert. God was communicating to them that he was everything they needed to be both delivered from the power of the Egyptians and to provide for them through the wilderness.

*Revelation 22:13 (NIV)*

*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*

What was going on in the world when John writes these words of Jesus?

Christians were experiencing extreme persecution at the hands of the Roman government and Jewish authorities. John received and recorded the revelation from Jesus while imprisoned for his faith on the Isle of Patmos.

How might the names “Alpha and Omega”, “the First and the Last” and the “the Beginning and the End” have given comfort to the early church believers?

Jesus was stating that he is over all things and in control despite how the present circumstances seem to appear. He was in the beginning and he is at the end. Everything is already worked out and he is providing a future for his people regardless of the persecution they were experiencing. God exercises his rule in this world by serving his creation.

In both the names “I AM” and “Alpha and Omega” God is conveying that he is complete in every way, perfect. God is not lacking anything and he is the source of everything we need.

If God is complete in every way, then what can we do “for” God that will benefit him?

There is nothing we can do “for” God that will make his life better or more complete.

If this is true, then in what way can we “serve” God?

*Acts 17:24-25 (NIV)*

24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

If God is complete in every way then he does not to be served, as if we can make his job easier or lighter. Any manner in which we would attempt to “serve” God, he could do merely at a thought or a word.
Consider and discuss the following statement:

“If God is complete in every way, then by nature, all God can do is serve others.”

Do you agree or disagree?
If God needs nothing for himself, then whatever he does is not for his “benefit” but is an expression of love to those he created.

Psalms 50:7-15 (NIV)
7 "Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am God, your God. 8 I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. 9 I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, 10 for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. 12 If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. 13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? 14 Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, 15 and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”

Context: Though Israel continued to offer sacrifices, their hearts were far from God and they lived contrary to his word.

If God did not need sacrifices and offerings, why did he command Israel to offer them?
Sacrifices were always a symbolic way of appreciating the grace of God. An animal sacrifice reminded the Israelites that God was providing a substitute death payment for their sins and made forgiveness possible. Other offerings were to be an expression of thanks and praise reminding them that God was their provider in every way. If they kept offering these gifts the hope was that they would maintain a proper perspective of their relationship with God.

Why did the Israelites continue to offer sacrifices if their hearts were far from him?
Instead of viewing the sacrifices as an expression of praise for who God was and their relationship with him, the sacrifices became an onerous burden to “appease” God. The sense of wonder and awe that sacrifices and offerings were to invoke gave way to a sense of obligation and resentment. There was a perspective that God had better be happy now that they surrendered that which had significant monetary value.

Have you ever found that over time, tithing or serving in ministry became an onerous thing?

At these times, what perspective do you feel was lost?
Have you ever felt that for all the time you have “served” God in ministry, that he should be doing more for you? Have you ever felt like the Psalmist when he says, “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.” (Psalms 73:13 (NIV))

If everything God calls us to is for “our” benefit, in what ways is that true for the following?

Worship: By praising God we maintain a proper perspective of who he is and our relationship to him. When we stop worshipping God, our lives veer off into a self-centred direction robbing us of peace, joy and purpose.

Tithe: By tithing we acknowledge that he is the one who meets all our needs. As we trust God to meet our needs, we open the doors to receive God’s provision.

Ministry: Through ministry we are invited to partner with God in his mission to bring people back to relationship with him. In so doing we draw near to Christ and experience the joy of working at his side and experiencing fruit in our lives. When we walk away from what Christ is doing, we discover our lives become ineffective and unfruitful.

Deuteronomy 10:20 (NIV)
Fear the LORD your God and serve him.

Revelation 5:10 (NIV)
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

If we cannot “serve” God because he needs nothing, then how are we to understand scriptures that call us to serve God?
We “serve” God by obeying his purposes for us in this world, but we need to remember that everything God calls us to do is ultimately to fulfill his desire to serve us. In the end, all that God calls us to do is for our benefit.

Instead of doing our service “for” God, it is perhaps better to understand God is inviting us to serve “with” him as he serves others. He is inviting us to partner with him in the wonderful task of caring for creation. He could have done it all on his own, but he has included us to share the adventure with him.

Example: A father who allows his young son to work at his side. This is not for the Father’s benefit in getting the task done; it is to give the son joy in working along side his dad.
The principles to understand are:

1) When all your needs are met, there is nothing left for you to do other than to serve.

2) God invites us to serve “with” him as he serves his creation.

What is it that hinders us from serving others?
Perceived unmet needs hinder us from serving others. As we chase after meeting our own needs we are not free to focus on meeting the needs of others.

What are some examples of personal “needs” we may chase after that prevents us from focusing on serving others?

Chasing after needs was not how it was meant to be at the beginning creation.

*Genesis 1:28 (NIV)*

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

What did it mean for mankind to “subdue” and “rule” the earth?
This was God’s way of telling us to serve creation, to care for it on God’s behalf. We were able to make this our life focus because we were created perfectly and all our needs were met by God. There was nothing else for us to do other than serve.

*Genesis 3:16-19 (NIV)*

16 To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, "You must not eat of it," "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."
How did the fall affect men and women’s freedom to serve?

**Women:** Women would experience loss in terms of safety in relationship. As a result, women would spend much of their energy guarding themselves relationally or trying to control the relationships around them. This God-sized void in their lives would cause them to become self-focused, only free to invest in the lives of others once they felt their relational needs were met. The problem was there would never be guaranteed relational safety or fulfillment as long as God’s Spirit was absent.

**Men:** Men would now experience significant inadequacy in caring for this earth and even personal survival. This God-sized void would cause them to strive after performance and significance above everything else. Instead of caring for others, men would be compelled to compete with one another and come out on top. This is easily evidenced by observing a group of men watching a hockey game.

FEAR and CONTROL become the operative words that control our lives.

In what ways do fear and the need for control reveal a broken relationship with God?
Fear and the need for control reveal a deep, innate distrust of God’s love and provision. If we trusted God’s love, all fear would fade away (1 John 4:18). If we trusted God’s provision, we would not need to control or chase after anything ever again. (Philippians 4:19)

What are some examples of how fear or unmet needs may hinder us from serving others?

What do you think God wants to say to you about this?

Would you like to partner with God more and bear more fruit?
What are the barriers you face and how do you think God would like to deal with those barriers?

Are there certain types of people do you find it difficult to serve? Why?
What is it you need from these people, that you are not receiving, that it causes you to stand back from serving them and guard yourself?

What personal fears are you able to identify that you can confront this week to free you to serve others along with God?

Go out of your way to serve someone this week, on God’s behalf, and share your experience next week.