

Lenses

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.” (Exodus 34:5-9 ESV)

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Close your eyes. I want you to picture the face of God. Hold that image in your mind. What are you picturing? Get as clear a picture as you can. Does God have a human looking face? Is he standing or sitting? Is he old or young? Zoom in. Is he stern, frowning, or smiling? Now, focus on your feelings. What emotions are welling up inside you? Is it fear, concern, joy, curiosity, bewilderment, worry, pain, awe, love? Once you’ve identified the picture you see, and the emotions you feel, ask yourself why you see and feel what you do. What experiences in your life have framed God in this way for you? Perhaps you can name the stories in Scripture that seem to overshadow the others, the ones that color how you see everything else. Ok. Now, open your eyes.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey introduces the idea of a “paradigm shift” by telling this personal story:

I remember a mini-paradigm shift I experienced one Sunday morning on a subway in New York. People were sitting quietly – some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene.

Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed.

The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people’s papers. It was very disturbing. And yet, the man sitting next to me did nothing.

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So finally, with what I felt like was unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more?”

The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what do think, and I guess they don’t know who to handle it either.”

Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? My paradigm shifted. Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished. I didn’t have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behavior; my heart was filled with the man’s pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely. “Your wife just died? Oh, I’m so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?” Everything changed in an instant.¹

PARADIGM SHIFT

Paradigm shift. It’s when someone or something triggers you to see the whole picture in a new light. It suddenly transports you not just into a different mood, but into another world.

Jesus does that over and over again in the gospels. Consider the parable of the good Samaritan. It was quite common to tell stories about good people doing good things and encouraging you to do the same. But this story was more like an army chaplain in Kabul just before a convoy excursion, giving one last devo. And his illustration? A

¹ Steven Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

group of American servicemen tripped on a mine, and all died but one—and he was severely wounded. And a group of Army cadets passed by but thought it might be a trap and moved on. Then a group of officers passed by but thought the same. Then, a Taliban member, moved with compassion, stopped by, helped the man, took him home and he and his wife nursed him back to health, then drove him to the edge of the army headquarters and dropped him off with extra food, money, and medicine. And then the chaplain said, “go, be like the good Taliban.” It’s a paradigm shifting story. It stays with you, it shakes you, it challenges you to your core. It’s when you go looking for an answer and come away realizing you need to rethink your own questions.

Paradigms are powerful things. You can see it in our self-talk. If a child lives with criticism, he will learn to condemn. If your father was a stern disciplinarian who could never be pleased, don’t be surprised if you see God that way. The stories we tell ourselves about who God is will inform who we think we are, and, in turn, will color how we see everything in the world.

There are several paradigms concerning God that seem to be alive and well. All of which deeply inform our view of ourselves and our view of the world. All of which can be found in books, novels, movies, sermons, bible classes, podcasts, atheist best sellers and top 10 Christian books of the year. And all of which are terribly misguided. When you hear news reports that say US church membership fell below 50% for the first time in Gallup poll history, or that the “nones” (those who check “none of the above” on the religious question on the census) is now the largest and fastest growing religious category in the country, or that the new atheists tout convert after convert to atheism as the number of Christian believers rapidly declines, I can imagine its easy to feel alarmed. But I also think it’s worth pressing pause. It’s good to consider two reflective questions before jumping to any conclusions or mounting a response. Question #1: what is it that these people don’t believe in? and Question #2: what exactly have I been trying to convert them to?

WHAT GOD IS IT THAT WE SHOULDN’T BELIEVE IN?

Tom Wright was a chaplain at the University of Oxford for several years and would give an introductory sermon to the freshman who entered those hallowed halls. As they would leave, students would shake his hand and, inevitably, someone would say, “you won’t be seeing much of me because, you see, I don’t believe in God.” Tom got so used to that kind of thing happening, that he developed a stock response. “Oh really,” he would inquire, “which God is it that you don’t believe in? Because the God the I see in Jesus Christ is all together different from the God I hear talked about far too often on both sides of the aisle.”

Modern day atheists constantly describe a God who is all power and no passion, all heat and no light. An old man in the sky who either wound up the world only to watch it spiral out of control or who capriciously interjects without rhyme or reason, helping some people heal from a splinter while infecting innocent children with cancer. A God who is simply waiting around to send people with a good temperament to his heaven and people with a bad temperament to a furnace and keeping himself removed and distant from it all.

Sadly, I think they learned that God from Christians. Michael Buckley makes the case that modern Christianity hardly has a helpful response to modern atheism because modern Christianity *produced* modern atheism. There were hardly any atheists before the rise of modernity, and that rise, says Buckley, came naturally from a Christian vision where humanity had a book—called the Bible, laws and rules given in the Bible, and a good head on their shoulders to reason, along with good hands to work. “God” was a word we used to fill in the gaps we couldn’t take care of ourselves. It simply stood to reason that as human ingenuity progressed, those gaps would be filled. So what need was there for God? Well, Christians decided to move God from direct need in the world to simply the stern judge waiting for the end of the world. And that’s where we left him.

Just take a look at the modern church. I once heard a preacher say if God turned up dead, we’d still go to church. It’s what we do on Sunday, and its where we meet our friends to go to brunch. But that’s not the only paradigm the atheists got from Christians. I’ve known believers—good, honest, sincere, hard-working believers, who when they hear the word “God” picture a fiery hailstorm and a pillar of salt just outside Gomorrah; they picture a man named Uzzah touching the holy ark and being struck dead, they picture Nadab and Abihu who displeased the Lord with their strange fire, and suffering death as a result, and they picture Ananias and Sapphira suffering the same fate. And armed with those stories, read without context, some Christians have gone out to share a vision of God with the non-believing world that could only be accepted with extreme reluctance (with an “I guess I have to”, but with absolutely no “want to”). A God who demands total allegiance while fulfilling absolutely none of our deepest desires. It makes humans an afterthought, a terrible nuisance, and it colors how we see ourselves, and everything else in the world.

When I was a kid, I learned all the church songs. I wasn’t afraid of the boogey man. I didn’t think there was a monster in my closet or hiding under my bed. Oh no. I had bigger fish to fry. For me, there was an “all seeing eye watching you!” I had no idea that that language of God’s omnipresence is not primarily meant to scare you into submission when you are behind the woodshed or on a first date. It’s meant to remind you that there is no pit too deep, no place too far, that if you get stuck there, God isn’t already there. Where can I go from your Spirit? If I ascend to the highest heavens, you

are there. If in the deepest valley, you are there. When you are on green pastures, or still waters, or even in the valley of the shadow of death, my Lord is there.

What God is it that these people don't believe in? And who exactly is it that I've been trying to convert people to?

A few moments ago, I asked you to picture God the Father. I wonder what picture comes to your mind when you hear the name “Jesus Christ”? I ask, only because for Christians, Jesus *is* God. He came to show us the Father. Its so common these days to hear people talk about the two this way: I'm not too keen on God the Father—the one pictured all through the Old Testament. Seems like he was always mad at something, always waking up on the wrong side of the cloud. Then, around the New Testament time, he sent his Son Jesus and became a Christian. But the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever was perfectly presented in the face of Jesus Christ.

A few years before the Passion of the Christ hit the big screen, an actor was chosen to star in a different movie depicting the life of Jesus. On his way out the door to film, he asked his 4-year old daughter what advice she had for him playing Jesus. “I want you to smile, Daddy,” she said; “in all these movies, Jesus never smiles.”

Is there a parent in this room who, when your children are asked to describe you, would want them to remember you for the harshest moment in their experience? Wouldn't it be even worse if the harshest moment in their experience was at least partially misremembered or misunderstood? These stories of Nadab and Abihu, of Uzzah touching the ark, of fire and hail coming from heaven, of Canaanites being warned of annihilation, of Ananias and Sapphira falling dead all have contexts. Every one of them. And if you think through your family history, you'll remember some sleepless nights, some difficult conversations, some truly awful experiences...and what if any of those were the freeze-frame story in your children's minds when they thought of you?

I think it produces a lot of atheists. And some really sad, really burdened, anxious-ridden Christians.

What are we to make of Jesus who says “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”? What are we to make of the prophet who said “a bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out?” If you being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give good gifts to those who ask. It breaks my heart to hear my good and beautiful God described as an oppressive tyrant who delights in giving chores and settling scores. And the worst of it all, is I think they heard it from people like me.

THE GOD I SEE IN JESUS CHRIST

But, what if we changed the way we see? What if we could choose healthier lenses through which we read all the stories of Scripture and through which we reframed all of our past experiences? Have you seen those videos of EnChroma glasses that allow some people with some types of colorblindness to—for the first time—see the rainbow or even the fall leaves in all of their splendor? You can feel the emotion welling up inside them, as they see the whole world anew!

Maybe you’ve seen similar videos of deaf people, after receiving a cochlear implant, who suddenly hear their child for the first time saying, “I love you, Mommy!” There is no greater thrill than to witness the paradigm shift that blows open your world and ushers you into the colors and the music of the kingdom.

Listen how the Lord describes himself as he introduces himself to his people on the Holy Mountain in Exodus 34:

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance” (Exodus 34:5-9 ESV)

There is no doubt that, like every good father, he can be serious. He can be tough. Sometimes love has to be tough. He is a God of holiness and justice, he is tough on crime and he doesn’t end his introduction without saying that he will “by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children...to the fourth generation.” There is that. We won’t end our series without talking about that.

But that’s not how he begins his introduction. It’s not even the majority of his introduction. It’s not the snapshot he leads with or wishes to leave you with. After all, what God does to those who don’t want him, those who turn their back on him, those who refuse him is hardly the message intended for a people who want him, who have turned their face toward him, and who diligently seek him. “The Lord, the Lord is a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and

faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

Which is a healthier lens for thinking about God?

Option 1: “If you mess up, if you fall down, if you make a mistake, if you start to doubt, if you don’t hang on real tight, if we disagree, if you just aren’t sure, then just think about hell cuz that’s where you might be goin!”

Option 2: “The Lord, the Lord knows we are dust. He knows what its like to face temptation. He knows we don’t always know which end is up, and we are tossed to and fro. He knows we are doing our best, and he knows our best is far less than perfection. In fact, our Lord is known for his mercy and his graciousness. He’s not mad at you. In fact, he’s slow to anger as a rule. His love is relentless. And it doesn’t stop. And when he says “I will never leave you nor forsake you” you can take that to the bank because when all else fails...our God is faithful. Faithful is He who calls you, and He will do it. In fact, he keeps his steadfast love for his struggling children all over the world, and he delights...delights...not in perfection; not in all those who measure up just right. No...he shows pictures to his angels in heaven of his kids and says “this one messed up royally....and I just loved the look on his face when I said “I know it hurts you to fall short; and I want you to know...I love you and I forgive you. I delight in forgiving you. Because I am love, and love keeps no record of wrongs. I always trust, and I always hope. And my love for you will never fail.”

If God be for us, then who can be against us. It is God who justifies. Who is it that condemns? Nothing, says God, can separate you from my love for you. Not your ungodliness. Nothing! Neither height, nor depth, principalities, powers, things going on now, or even come what may—nothing! Nothing can separate you from my love for you.

“Yes, but!” That nagging voice “Yes, but!” is not God speaking. That’s the voice we preachers put there in your conscience. “The only ‘Yes, but’ for the Christian is “yes, I was lost, astray, wayward, on the wrong road, without hope and without God in the world, but God appeared, God rescued, God redeemed, God called me out of darkness and into his marvelous light.”

Why do we have this unhealthy nagging need to be chastised and scolded and told that we might end up lost for all eternity? Why? “Well Scripture says that to us.” Oh, does it now? I see Paul saying “Since I know the terror of the Lord, I persuade men” (2 Cor 5:11), but surely that means I know what could happen to those who don’t know the Lord. Paul says “I buffet my body daily and put it in subjection lest having preached to others I myself should become a castaway.” But surely that means I stay aware of temptation that tries to draw me away from Christ. We are told many times that

Christians are to have a healthy “fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31; Eph 5:21; Col 3:22; Heb 4:1; 2 Cor 7:1). But that’s because “fear” in the Bible produces awe and faith; healthy fear helps us grow in holiness and sanctification. But “fear” means a respect for his power, an obedience to his calling, a recognition that he will allow people to reap what they sow.

But I’m not talking to people who are sowing to the wind and thus will reap the whirlwind. I’m talking to people who sow to the Spirit. I’m talking to people who want Christ! For people like that, the “I’m so scared he might hurt me” fear is no longer a driving force. As 1 John says “perfect love casts out fear; for those who fear have not been made perfect in love.” Where is the passage that says to hurting, struggling, but sincere Christians who seek the face of the Lord “you know I’ve got a hell and I’m keeping it at a good temperature for you, you know”? Think noble things of God! He’s good, I tell you. He’s good! He’s your father. And he sent his one and only Son to die for you. And in that sacrifice, we don’t see the unfortunate sad sap who happened to pick the short straw. No – we see God himself, because Jesus came to show us the Father...and in his death, God purchased you and me with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

That God. The one who walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. The God who wants to smile with and cry with his people. The God who heard his children cry out in slavery and rescued them from the hand of Pharaoh. The God who pulled Joseph out of the pit, and pulled him out of prison. The God who rescued his people from Babylon. Rescued them from Assyria. The God who forgave wicked Ninevah, whose leader didn’t even know God’s name. The God who said to Hosea “I’m gonna find my wayward wife, Israel. I’m gonna find her and bring her back to me, and shower her with love.” The God who, in the midst of pain and loss, said “my steadfast love never ceases. My mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.” The God who wouldn’t let the grieving mother in Nain go home without her boy. The God who took all my sins and griefs upon himself so that I could become heir to the throne. That God.

He delights in you. *You*. Not you when you are at your very best. You. Not you after you get all spiritually cleaned up. You. Not you only when you’ve kicked the habit, only when you’ve mastered the temptation, only when you’ve made the right choices. You. Lovely, beautiful you. You in the valleys of your life. You in the darkest moments. You when you had nothing to offer him. When you were dead in your trespasses and sins. That’s when he so loved you and me that he sent his son to die for us. And if he could love you like that then, what makes you think that now, in your struggling but sincere desire to please him, he could love you less? When you are kneeling at the edge of your bed, wondering what he thinks about you, he wraps his arms around you and whispers to you “I couldn’t love you more. You are my child, and I am proud of you.” When you struggle with the addiction that has taken over, when you go right back to that sin

that you promised to quit but keeps drawing you back in, when you made that unthinkable choice that you think will haunt you forever, picture the God you could only hope for, and know this: my God is *even better* than that!

To sincere, earnest, lovely, seekers after God who bravely gather together this morning to sing the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light, I beg you: have a paradigm shift. My God is not out to get you. He is FOR you. And to the lost and dying world out there, I have good news for you too: God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He is the pursuer, and in his relentless pursuit, he wants you. He wants you.

THE GOD WHO MEETS YOUR DEEPEST NEEDS

What is it that you need most right now? If it's lovely, if it's trustworthy, if it's deserving of praise, you'll find it in my God. Maybe it's forgiveness for John. Or Maybe it's compassion for Tony. Perhaps its peace for Joann. Or mercy for Denise. Hear the good news. God does forgive you, John. He does. The Lord is full of compassion for you, Tony. May His peace be upon you, Joann. May He shower you with his mercies, Denise. And when you go home and look in the mirror, tell yourself, “It's true. It's true.”

Picture God. There he is running after his prodigal son. There he is giving sight to the blind. There he is crying tears of joy as he finds his lost lamb. Now picture yourself in the arms of God, caught in the grip of His grace. Frame it. Because its true.

Welcome to our series on our good and beautiful God.