

*Disciples' Questions: What Is God Like?*

**John 14:7-11**

John Breon

Jesus has told Thomas and the other disciples, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Because Jesus is the way to God, to know Jesus is to know God. This leads to Philip's interruption: "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Give us some kind of vision of God, show us God and we'll be satisfied. I'd guess! That's not asking a lot!

Philip is basically asking, *What is God like?* That's a good question. What do you think God is like? Where'd you get that idea?

We put together our ideas, our mental picture, of God from a number of sources. We have various experiences that influence how we think about God. We hear from parents or friends or preachers or a wide variety of people ideas that help form our picture of God. We may pull together random Bible verses, or things we think are in the Bible, to shape our view of God.

And people come up with some strange ideas about God. These self-made pictures of God are inadequate. They come short of who God really is. What are some of these inaccurate, inadequate ideas about God?

Nearly sixty years ago, J. B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God Is too Small*. In the first half of the book, Phillips deals with ideas and thoughts about God that he says are destructive. These are some of the inadequate and inaccurate pictures of God that people sometimes have.

There's the "resident policeman," where God is just this sort of nagging inner voice telling us what we're doing wrong. There's the "grand old man." In this one, people tend to think that because God is ancient that he's just old and old-fashioned. Phillips tells about a group of teenagers who were asked, "Does God understand radar?" Today we might ask if God understands computers or quantum physics or any number of complex theories or devices. Nearly every teenager answered, "No," and then laughed as they realized that of course God understands modern inventions. But somewhere in their thinking was the idea that God is old

and out of date. Altogether, Phillips addresses about twenty inadequate and destructive ideas about God. I'm sure there are many more.

More recently, James Bryan Smith has written about the stories we hear and that we tell about God and life and ourselves (*The Good and Beautiful God* and *The Magnificent Story*). He exposes some of the false stories, or narratives, we believe about God. Here are a couple of examples of what Jim Smith calls "shrunk stories."

One he calls the "do-good-works gospel." As a young Christian, Jim went to church with one of his friends. A "seekers' meeting" was advertised. These new believers wanted to learn more about God and faith and the church. At the meeting, the pastor shared what he and the church believed. He talked about how Jesus was no more the Son of God than anyone. He was just a great teacher like Socrates or Gandhi. When Jim said that the Bible says Jesus rose from the dead, the pastor claimed that the Bible is mythology from an ancient time and that in our day science has replaced the superstitious view of the biblical writers. Someone else asked, "What's the point of Christianity then?" The pastor said that it's to try to be a good person and do good things. Afterward, Jim and his friend agreed that what that pastor said seemed like a waste of time. In this narrative, God is distant and uninvolved, so it's up to us to make the world better. It's a shriveled, shrunk version of the real gospel story.

Another shrunk story is one Smith calls "the shaming and scary gospel." Jim had come to know Jesus through reading the Bible and some contemporary Christian writings with a friend. He had prayed, "Jesus, if you are really the risen Christ, then do something so I know it's true." Things started happening. The Bible made more sense. His prayers were answered. He decided that he was a Christian.

Later, in college, he met a Christian leader who told him he wasn't a Christian because he hadn't prayed just the right prayer in just the right way. The false narrative, the untrue story this man told is summed up this way: "you are bad, God is mad, but Jesus took your beating. So try harder and you might make it to heaven" (*The Magnificent Story* 19-26).

Both of those narratives have a little truth in them, but they fall short of the true good news. They offer distorted pictures of God.

It's hard to shake the false stories we've been told or that we've made up. It's tough to lose the distorted pictures of God we've developed. I sometimes think God is distant or uninterested. Or, I get the idea that God is only mad or disappointed with me. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture, the magnificent vision of who God really is.

If we just make up our own ideas about God from hearsay and various experiences and such, we wind up with an inadequate or inaccurate picture of God. But we can really know God as God makes himself known. Only God can reveal God.

"Show us the Father," Philip says.

"Don't you know me even after I've been among you such a long time?" Jesus replies.

Do we know Jesus? He's been with us a long time—all our lives. Do we recognize him? Do we know him?

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." The words of Jesus are the Father's words. The work Jesus does is the Father's work.

Jesus tells the true story about God, about life, about us. Jesus gives us the real picture of God. God makes himself known most fully in Jesus.

This is prominent in the Gospel of John and it's all over the New Testament. Let's do a quick survey of some passages that talk about Jesus revealing God, then let's look at what Jesus shows us about God.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ...No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:1, 14, 18)

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:27).

I believe Jesus offers this revelation to everybody, but we have to be willing to receive it and respond to it.

The apostle Paul writes about

...the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ...For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6)

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ...For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.... (Colossians 1:15, 19)

And the author of Hebrews tells us this:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:3)

The answer to the question, "What is God like?" is that God is like Jesus. Jesus gives the true picture of God and tells the true story of God because he's the embodiment of God. He is God in the flesh, God with us.

What do we see about God when we look at Jesus? How does he make God known? What does he reveal about God?

Let's go back through John's Gospel and look at the other Gospels to see some of who Jesus is and what he shows us about God.

Jesus shows that God is the creator who is living and who gives life. God is the source of light, that is, truth. John, or someone in John's community, writes, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). God is all light, all truth and no deception.

Jesus is filled with grace and truth and he gives grace and truth. We've said before that this reflects the Old Testament's emphasis on God's love and faithfulness. When Philip asks Jesus, "Show us the Father," it echoes Moses' saying to the LORD, "Show me your glory." The LORD replies,

"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence." He tells Moses that no one can see God's face and live. When the LORD does pass in front of Moses, who is hiding in a cleft in the mountain, the LORD proclaims:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness [this is the grace and truth John's Gospel mentions]... (Exodus 33:18-23; 34:6)

Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. God is willing to bear our sin, to take upon himself our separation from God so we can be restored to him.

In Jesus we see a teacher who invites students to follow him and learn from him. God wants to teach and lead us.

Jesus does miraculous signs that point to the new life God offers. He shows the abundance of God, of God's life and mercy. He teaches religious leaders and talks with outcasts. God associates with all kinds of people. Jesus heals and so he shows God's compassion and power to give life and wholeness. Jesus shows kindness, mercy, grace to a woman caught in adultery. God doesn't condemn us and he doesn't condone our sin. Jesus serves as a slave, washing the disciples' feet, showing that God is willing to humble himself to be with us and serve us. Jesus lays down his life as he is lifted up on the cross, showing God's great love for all of us and how far he's willing to go to forgive us and restore us. Jesus is raised from the dead, demonstrating God's power, God's gift of life, God's victory over sin and all evil and death.

Let's pick out a thought or two from the other Gospels to see how Jesus makes God known. Matthew tells us that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus teaches, preaches the good news of the kingdom, and heals every disease and sickness among the people. He shows that God rules, that God has compassion on people who suffer and is able to deliver them. Jesus says, "I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29)—that's what God is like. There's a great description of Jesus taken from the prophet Isaiah:

Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope. (Mt 12:18-21; Isa 42:1-4)

God deals gently with the weak. He's not out to break us or snuff us out, but to strengthen us and set us ablaze with his powerful love.

Mark tells about Jesus entering the conflict between God's kingdom and the devil's kingdom. God does rule and extends his influence into the world. We also see Jesus' compassion and power to heal and do other miracles in Mark. God cares for our need and suffering and is able to do something about them.

In Luke, we see Jesus depending on the power of the Holy Spirit, praying, and caring for the weak and those on the margins. God wants us all to be in relation to him, to have life with him through his Spirit. He wants to engage us through prayer. Again, God cares about the weak and poor and downtrodden as well as the strong and rich and influential.

There's so much more. Jesus does talk about justice and judgment and accountability. We see Jesus encountering all kinds of people in a variety of ways. But the big picture we see in the Gospels, in the life of Jesus, is of God who's involved, who cares, who's active in the world, in the lives of people.

If you want to know God, get to know Jesus. The Gospels are our primary source for knowing about Jesus—and for knowing him. God wants to be known. He wants more for us than just information about who he is and what his character is. He wants us to know him personally, intimately, in a growing relationship. Jesus gives us that kind of relationship with the Lord God, the living God, the creating and redeeming God.

E. Stanley Jones said that apart from Jesus we know little or nothing about God—and what we think we know is probably wrong. "If you don't see God in the face of Jesus, you see something other than God—and different. ...God is a Jesus-like God." If we lose Jesus, we lose God. Jones

told about a Unitarian asking him to come to their conference and help them get God back in Unitarianism. This group goes by Unitarian instead of Trinitarian. They don't believe that Jesus is God incarnate. I'm not sure what they believe about the Holy Spirit. This man said to Stanley Jones, "We are losing God and becoming a humanism." Jones replied, "This is interesting. You, who have specialized on God, have lost him. I, who specialize on Jesus, have found him" (*A Song of Ascents* 354-55).

There may be a little overstatement there, but we can't get around the fact that God has come to us in Jesus the Messiah, revealing himself, making himself known, and making it possible for us to know him.

Greg Boyd summarizes what Jesus shows us of God:

*God looks like Jesus.* Jesus spent his ministry freeing people from evil and misery. *This is what God seeks to do.* Jesus wars against spiritual forces that oppress people and resist God's good purposes. *This is what God does.* Jesus loved people others rejected—even people who rejected him. *This is how God loves.* Jesus had nothing but compassion for people who were afflicted by sin, disease and tragedy. *This is how God feels.* And Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, suffering in the place of sinful humanity, defeating sin and the devil, because he passionately loves people and wants to reconcile them to God. *This is how God saves.* (*Is God to Blame?* 16)

Can you believe that Jesus on the cross is the clearest revelation of God? When we become convinced that Jesus is the picture of God, that God is like Jesus, we start loving God in a way we didn't before. We find power to live for God that we never imagined. Whatever we've experienced, whatever we've heard or been told, we can know God as God makes himself known. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus says (14:9). "From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:7). "From now on" refers to when Jesus is glorified on the cross and through resurrection. The presence and action of the Holy Spirit make real for us what Jesus did. The Spirit shows us the Father in the face, in the life of Jesus.

