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What Is God Like?

“What is God like?” How we answer that question is a matter of life and death, so we dare not get it wrong.

How can we comprehend a person who is invisible, transcendent, and infinite? If I can’t even explain a solar eclipse to a three-year-old child, how can I, a finite creature, understand or comprehend God?

The short answer is, I can’t.

Unless . . . *God reveals Himself to me*. Failing that, we are left to create God in any image we please. And that is precisely the problem. Someone once noted that God made us in His image, and ever since we have tried to do God a favor by making Him in *our* image. Sounds crazy? You bet, but that is what those who worship idols have done.

Psalm 50 portrays an angry God summoning Israel, His covenant people, into the courtroom. Fed up with their hypocrisy and injustice, He tells them: “These things you have done, and I have been silent; *you thought that I was one like yourself*” (Ps. 50:21, emphasis mine).

Timothy Keller describes modern thinking with these words: “Instead of trying to shape our desires to fit reality, we now seek to control and shape reality to fit our desires.”¹ When we try to make God in our image, he (or she, or it, or they—you decide) becomes malevolent and capricious like us. To be malevolent is to be harsh, unkind, mean-spirited, or downright

cruel. Capricious means fickle or unpredictable. A capricious person changes with the circumstances. Perhaps they had a bad night or got up on the wrong side of the bed, so everyone in the house or the office walks on eggshells to keep from “setting them off.”

I regret the times my wife and sons had to deal with my capricious nature. I still wince when I think back to the day when Mary had to literally evacuate our sons from the house to spare them from my verbal anger. One of the older widows in our church had held me hostage on the phone for nearly half an hour trying to convince (compel, force, badger) me into changing our baptism service from Sunday evening to Sunday morning. Mrs. B (someday I hope to apologize to her in heaven) was absolutely relentless—the irresistible force. I tried to remain calm and strove to be reasonable, but my emotions began to rise within me like a volcano. If she was the irresistible force, then I was becoming the immovable object.

Sensing an impending eruption, Mary thought it prudent to take the boys shopping at a nearby department store. Truthfully, I pride myself for respecting widows and have done so through the years. But on that night, acting capriciously, I finally slammed the receiver down while Mrs. Bachar was still midsentence.

Hanging up on an elderly widow concerned about a baptism service. It wasn't my finest hour.

The God Who Does Not Grow Weary

One of the most painful memories of my youth occurred when I had just turned sixteen and had my shiny new driver's license. We were leaving for a vacation on the Poudre River

in Colorado. I was driving and concentrating on keeping the car in the right lane on narrow old US Route 30. An oncoming semitruck was trying to pass another truck but failing to make progress. Frankly, I didn't see it because I was concentrating on staying in my lane.

Our God works the night shift and the day shift, too, but He doesn't respond like that. He isn't capricious.

My sister warned me of the approaching problem so I could make necessary corrections, but my father suddenly lurched forward from the backseat and slugged me on the side of the head. A pastor by day and a police officer by night, he had just worked the night shift as a cop and was severely sleep deprived. At the church where he pastored, the sheep were being especially nasty, and Dad had been taking the brunt. As a result, I took the brunt of his frustration and weariness.

Our God works the night shift and the day shift, too, but He doesn't respond like that. He isn't capricious. He doesn't lash out in frustration, and He is never weary. Isaiah 40:28 described God this way, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable."

How about an example from the older testament? Elijah was a prophet during a very dark time in Israel's history. King Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon and a worshiper of the pagan god Baal. Soon King Ahab began to worship Baal and even set up an image of Baal in Samaria. Suddenly Elijah appears on the scene to confront Ahab with a warning of severe drought. In the depths of the drought Elijah again confronts King Ahab and challenges him to a "throw down" on Mount Carmel. This was not an unknown chef challenging Bobby Flay on the Food Network but a challenge

to see who could charbroil an entire beef carcass without a match—Yahweh or Baal?

Perhaps you remember how Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18? Perhaps Baal is sleeping! Perhaps he's using the toilet! In response to Elijah's taunting and Baal's silence, the false prophets became more zealous—even cutting themselves—as they attempted to rouse their wayward god. Still no one answered. All those frantic calls to Baal went to voicemail. He was nowhere to be found.

Compare Elijah's simple appeal to Yahweh, asking Him to send down fire from heaven to prove He is the one, true God. Fire from heaven ought to have been a simple task for Baal, the god of the storm.

In 1 Samuel 4, the Bible highlights a foolish attempt to manipulate God. Israel was still smarting from a shocking defeat at the hands of their perpetual nemesis, the powerful Philistine army. Incredulous that they, God's chosen, could have been defeated by a bunch of pagans, the Israelites decided to carry the ark of the covenant into battle the next day. With the ark present Israel was certain God would be compelled to fight for them.

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp [where it did not belong], all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. (1 Sam. 4:4–5)

This may have been the first example of the “wave,” popular at large sporting events a few years ago. With the ark of God leading the way, the Israelites had convinced themselves they

couldn't lose.

But they did.

They were severely defeated once again, and the ark was captured by the Philistines. Hophni and Phineas, the evil sons of Israel's high priest, finally received the penalty they had deserved all along. At the news of their deaths, Eli collapsed and died on the spot. Phineas's pregnant wife died in childbirth, and the name she gave to her baby, Ichabod, says it all: "The glory of the LORD has departed." (How would you like *that* on your nametag?)

God simply cannot and will not be manipulated by our feeble, self-serving efforts. He is not capricious. He acts according to His true character. And on that dreadful day, His severity was on full display.

I witnessed the deep, elemental fear of offending pagan gods when I was teaching at a small Bible college in Uganda. Professing Christians make up the majority of the population, along with a sizable number of Muslims. But many Christians and Muslims who profess to be monotheistic continue to practice their traditional religions—including a form of ancestor worship.

God simply cannot and will not be manipulated by our feeble, self-serving efforts. He is not capricious.

The control these non-gods have over many Ugandans was evident in a small way on the campus of a small Bible college in Western Uganda where I taught. The wife of the college director died from complications in childbirth. The director eventually remarried a wonderful Christian woman. But when his wife began to experience significant physical symptoms, employees of the college became concerned that some people, perhaps even other Christians, would claim that an ancestor

might be “paying the new wife back.” Perhaps for marrying a man whose previous wife had died in childbirth. Who knows the reason? If it were true that an ancestor or some minor god was responsible for this good woman’s physical symptoms, that would certainly be capricious.

As followers of Jesus, we know that God was not punishing the man or his wife, because our God is neither malevolent nor capricious. He is good. He is absolutely faithful in every situation.

The God Who Cannot Be Manipulated

While Mary, my wife, and I were on a combined pleasure and ministry trip to Ireland, I witnessed another example of how some people believe they can manipulate God. One afternoon we visited a site considered sacred to Roman Catholics. It was a small chapel perched on the top of an impressive mountain—with a fairly steep trail to the summit. Pilgrims from around the world climb this mountain in hope of receiving spiritual benefit. Below are the instructions printed on a large sign at the base of the mountain:

Croagh Patrick Pilgrimage

Every pilgrim who ascends the mountain on St. Patrick’s Day or within the octave, or any time during the months of June, July, August & September & PRAYS IN OR NEAR THE CHAPEL for the intentions of our Holy Father the Pope, may gain a plenary indulgence on condition of going to Confession and Holy Communion on the Summit or within the week.

The sign explained three traditional stations on the summit

with instructions to fulfill all the requirements of each station. Note the instructions for the first station:

“The pilgrim walks seven times around the mountain saying seven Our Fathers, seven Hail Marys, and one Creed.”

It might be easy for us to shake our heads and say, “How foolish. How useless.” But maybe we who call ourselves Protestants need to evaluate our own practical faith system. Do we think similar thoughts?

How about the TV evangelist promising God will double any amount of money you donate to his/her television ministry? Or the pastor who assures us that the tithe offers God’s guarantee to financial freedom?

Seems to me, the only difference is our motivation.

It is easy to slip into the mindset of expecting rewards from God when we do something good. I know because I’ve been there.

Several years ago, Open Doors Mission chose me to minister to the persecuted church in India. Accepting the invitation meant canceling a trip I had already scheduled to revisit our sister church in Latvia. Because I believed God had caused my name to be chosen, I accepted the call. Our church encouraged me to go and upheld me in prayer.

Boarding my flight in San Francisco to meet up with the rest of our team in Paris, I was disappointed when the man in the seat next to me suddenly began vomiting profusely as soon as we were in the air.

The rest of the red-eye flight was less than comfortable. I prayed not to catch whatever my seatmate had. After all, I was being faithful, so God should keep me safe. He owed me one, or so I thought. It didn’t happen. I wasn’t able to enjoy the wonderful Parisian café with my new teammates or the ride up the Eiffel Tower. My response, “God, after all I am doing for

You, why did You place me next to the one man on the plane who was ill?”

My Irish Catholic friends are seeking to receive mercy and escape pain in purgatory after they die, while my Protestant friends try to manipulate God so they can enjoy material prosperity and paradise here and now.

I'm reminded of the lyrics from the song “Something Good” in the musical *The Sound of Music*. Julie Andrews, in the role of Maria, was dancing with Captain von Trapp. Amazed the captain had fallen in love with her, Maria assumes somewhere in her past she must have done something very good to deserve his love.²

I love the song, but the thought certainly isn't biblical. It resembles the Buddhist concept of karma. Even so, we all fall into this sort of thinking from time to time. We assume if we do something really good—like sharing the gospel with a stranger or taking care of a sick neighbor—that we'll gain points with God, and some extra blessing. *Christianity Today* includes the following statistics from a Lifeway Research survey of Evangelicals who attend a Protestant church monthly or more: 75% agree that “God wants me to prosper financially”; 41% agree their church “teaches that if I give more money to my church and charities God will bless me in return”; 26% agree that “to receive material blessings from God, I have to do something for God.”³

Again, it isn't true. God can't be manipulated. He isn't Santa Claus, and He doesn't have angels keeping track of who is naughty and who is nice. Well then, if He's not like these caricatures, what *is* He like?

Here's where we get some really good news. Our wonderful, awesome, holy, and incomprehensible God has chosen to *reveal* Himself to you and me!

Psalm 19 declares God has shown Himself through the

natural world and through Scripture. (Pause for a minute or two and read Psalm 19.) The first six verses invite us to look up and listen as “The heavens declare the glory of God.” David describes God’s revelation in nature by using terms related to audible sounds such as voice, proclaim, speech, and words. It is as if God is speaking to us through His Creation wherever we are, anytime, day or night.

I recently taught a class on the Psalms and used Psalm 19 to demonstrate that God speaks through creation and His written Word. I suggested a title for a sermon from Psalm 19: “Can you hear me now?” Perhaps you recall a TV commercial from a cellular phone company using that question several years ago.⁴ God continues to speak to us through His Word and His creation. The question remains, are we listening?

We have yet to discover the borders of this expansive universe that is like an artist’s canvas displaying God’s handiwork 24/7. His limitless creativity and love for beauty is on display in every sunrise and sunset.

Have you ever visited the Hubble Telescope website? Whenever I visit the site, I am amazed at the pictures taken from the Hubble Telescope while it is exploring outer space and sending back pictures of galaxies and supernovas. On a recent visit to Hubblesite.org, I was in awe of the multiwavelength pictures of the Crab Nebula and Spiral Galaxy Pair NGC4302. My response was to wonder why God created a universe so expansive and filled with such indescribable beauty. The answer? He is displaying His glory and His power. The universe is His art gallery, and I am invited to stroll breathlessly through it. Hubble brings many of the works of God’s mouth-gaping art up close.

The universe is so unbelievably intricate that astronomers could predict the precise time, 10:19 a.m., when the total solar

eclipse would arrive near our hometown of Bend, Oregon, on August 21, 2017. To the second, they predicted how long “totality” would last at any given point along the journey of the solar eclipse from the west coast to the eastern seaboard.

Psalm 19 also declares this universe of ours didn’t happen by chance in some random and incomprehensible “big bang.” In fact, it is the personal handiwork of God. The computer I am using at this very moment didn’t just happen when chemical particles bumped into each other. It is the product of intelligent and skilled people. Paul concluded the same of creation in Romans 1:18–20 and boldly declared that nobody can say “I had no idea God exists” because the evidence is all around us.

The God Who Wrote Us a Love Letter

We can only learn so much about God from studying creation. We see His infinite power and His glory displayed everywhere we look. We see His love for beauty. But how could we learn about His character? How could we know for certain God is love? Or that He is holy, patient, or even severe? I need a clearer disclosure. God has provided that in His Word, the Bible.

In Psalm 19:7, David turns his attention to the Scriptures, God’s written revelation of Himself. In the days before Scripture was complete, God also revealed Himself to people through visions, dreams, and theophanies—appearances of God in visible form. Sometimes the second person of the Trinity appeared in human form to Abraham and other people in Genesis 12, 15, 22 and other passages.

In Joshua 5:13–15, Joshua prepared to lead the army of Israel against Jericho. He was near Jericho when he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with drawn sword in his hand. The moment was filled with emotions of fear and

uncertainty. Wouldn't you feel a tad bit of fear? Joshua challenged the apparent intruder, saying in effect, "Are you friend or foe?"

The warrior's reply was startling. "No, but I am the commander of the army of the LORD." This was the pre-incarnate Christ claiming He was the "five-star" general who would lead the army to victory.

What was Joshua's response when he met God on the shores of the Jordan River? He "fell on his face to the earth and worshiped."

The Lord of the Army continued, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." Joshua made haste to obey. Doesn't this remind us of the burning bush experience of Moses when he first met the living God?

Joshua learned that God is holy and will not be trivialized. I wonder, are we in danger of forgetting that fact? Has the pendulum swung so far in favor of God's kindness and grace that we have diminished or ignored His holiness and severity?

God has revealed Himself up close and personal through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the perfect reflection of God.

Finally, God has also revealed Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ as recorded in Hebrews 1:1-4.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down

GOD IN HIS OWN IMAGE

at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

God has revealed Himself up close and personal through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the perfect reflection of God. Consider Jesus' own words: "If you knew me, you would know my Father also. . . I and the Father are one" (John 8:19; 10:30).

So let us praise our Creator God who chose not to remain shrouded in mystery but reveals Himself to us as a kind, loving, merciful, and forgiving God. But let's not forget God is also holy and severe, as demonstrated in the death of Christ on the cross.

Here is what I like to think about: when I really want to know what my God and Creator is truly like, all I have to do is stop and consider Jesus of Nazareth. Was there ever a more loving person? Was there ever a more powerful person, One who could calm the storm and heal the leper? Was there ever a kinder person, someone who took time in His demanding schedule to cuddle little children? Was there ever a more giving person, One who gave the ultimate gift—His own life? And was there ever a more severe person than the Galilean driving moneychangers out of the temple and calling religious leaders snakes and whitewashed tombs?

No other person has ever lived this life with kindness and severity or grace and truth in perfect balance.

And no one ever will.

Personally, I want to know Him and to experience His presence and His power in my life. How about you? If that desire also describes you, let's continue the journey together.