

LIE 1

God Is Whatever We Want Him to Be

ART LINKLETTER SAW A SMALL BOY scrawling wildly on a sheet of paper. “What are you drawing?” Linkletter asked.

“I’m drawing a picture of God.”

“You can’t do that, because nobody knows what God looks like.”

“They will when I’m finished,” the boy confidently replied.

What *does* God look like? Can we draw our own portrait of Him?

Whether we want to admit it or not, we are born to seek meaning, made to hunger for the spiritual; and behind those cravings is our search for God. The protagonist in a Carly Simon song traced his own spiritual journey from the halls of Cambridge to life in the country only to conclude:

Now you run a bookstore
And you have taken on a wife
And wear patches on your elbows
And you live an easy life.
But are you finally satisfied?
Is it what you were lookin’ for?
Or does it sneak up on you
That there might be something more?¹

Yes, we all hope for “something more.” And throughout the ages, some of the greatest minds have believed that humankind could experience

“something more” only by finding God: “The soul of man . . . hath in it a raging and inextinguishable thirst,” wrote Henry Scougal in the seventeenth century. “Never doth a soul know what solid joy and substantial pleasure is till, once being weary of itself, it renounces all property [and] gives itself up to the Author of its being.”² *A raging, inextinguishable thirst!*

Blaise Pascal, a philosopher of the same century, added his voice to those who knew that only God can satisfy the human heart. He said that man tries ineffectually to fill the empty void of his soul by his surroundings: “So he vainly searches, but finds nothing to help him, other than to see an infinite abyss that can only be filled by One who is Infinite and Immutable. In other words, it can only be filled by God himself.”³

Centuries earlier, Augustine had said to God, “The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”⁴ He wrote from experience. As a result of the prayers of his mother and the reading of Scripture, Augustine, an immoral, hardened sinner, was soundly converted. And he discovered in God the answer for the restlessness within.

Perhaps the Psalms give us the most eloquent description of this “raging thirst”: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1); “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1).

Mankind has always sought God, but in our pluralistic age, we must ask, *which God shall we seek?* Where shall we find Him? And how shall we know that we have found Him?

FROM GOD TO IDOLS

“I believe in God” is perhaps one of the most meaningless statements we can make today. The word *God* has become a canvas on which each is

free to paint his own portrait of the divine; like the boy scribbling at his desk, we can draw God according to whatever specifications we please. For some He is “psychic energy”; for others He is “whatever is stronger than I am” or “an inner power to lead us to deeper consciousness.” To say “I believe in God” might simply mean that we are seeing ourselves in a full-length mirror.

So how shall we begin our journey to find God?

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth was right when he said there are only two ways to attain a knowledge of God: one is to begin with man and reason upward; the other is to begin with God and accept His revelation to us.

For the moment, we are going to begin with man and reason upward. We will uncover some concepts of God that are unworthy of Him: ideas constructed from within the heart of man, idolatrous images manufactured from the raw desires of the human mind. Writes Donald McCullough: “When the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century has been the trivialization of God. . . . We prefer the illusion of a safer deity, and so we have pared God down to more manageable proportions.”⁵

The “trivialization of God”! A “safer deity”! A “God of more manageable proportions”! What shocking accusations. But read on.

Whenever we begin with man and reason upward, we manufacture an idol. Our temptation is to invite ideas of God into our minds that are either just wrong or are notions that diminish Him. Idolatry is more than dancing around a statue of silver or gold; it is constructing a mental idea of a deity that bears little resemblance to the God who actually exists. Idolatry is giving respectability to our own opinions of God, formed after our likeness. Idolatry is fashioning an idea of God according to our inclinations and preferences. It is to pare God down to “more manageable proportions.”

In the Old Testament, the psalm-writer contrasted idols with the

God he had come to know through personal revelation. Notice the difference:

Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But their idols are silver and gold,
made by the hands of men.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but they cannot see;
they have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but they cannot smell;
they have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but they cannot walk;
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.

(Ps. 115:3–8)

There are reasons why we prefer our own ideas about God. The Israelites made the golden calf because they became impatient when Moses lingered on the mountain. The delay made them nervous and they wondered whether he would ever return: “As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him” (Exod. 32:1). God seemed distant and uninvolved; therefore they sought a more present, more realistic god. They fashioned a calf they could see, touch, and carry—a god of “manageable proportions.”

This is the first reason why we have so many idolatrous ideas of God today: we are impatient with His silence in this confused age. Donald McCullough quotes newspaper columnist Russell Baxter, who lost his father to an early death, as saying, “After this I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone’s God except indifference.”⁶ We think that if God is all-powerful, He would put an end to the

suffering of this world, so we construct a god who puts up with evil for the same reasons we do: he can do very little about it. Or else we turn away from reality and say that evil does not exist.

Let's honestly admit that a growing number of Americans think that the church is irrelevant. Well, that means that the Christian God is seen as irrelevant. What is more, the God of the Bible is exclusive; He appears so demanding that the moment you become acquainted with Him, He begins to raise "sin issues." And because we resent such intrusion, we prefer a God we can manage, not an omnipotent God, but an accepting deity committed to helping us fulfill our human potential.

So a second motivation for idolatry is that we want a God who is more tolerant of us, less demanding, less "judgmental." When a friend of mine left his wife to live with another woman, he withdrew from his friends at the church and formed new friendships in bars and sports complexes. He felt better associating with people who could accept his choices without judging; he wanted to be affirmed, rather than rebuked, for the "courage" to leave his wife. Just so, we want a God who will not mess with the core of our lives.

A commitment to individualism fuels our idolatrous nature. Americans, nurtured on consumerism, go "god shopping" at a spiritual smorgasbord, trying to find a deity that is best suited to their tastes. This cafeteria image is very important: when I select the entrées to suit my tastes, I remain in charge. I might choose something that my mother would want me to have, but then again I might not. Most important, this is my *personal* combination of delicacies, and no choice is better than another. I do not judge the person ahead of me who has chosen an entirely different menu. So I make my selections, forming a conception of God that is "just right for me." And given the wide number of choices on the smorgasbord, any belief system is possible. Millions of Americans say with Thomas Paine, "My mind is my church."

Of course this form of mental idolatry is not a new phenomenon.

Centuries ago Asaph recorded these words from God: “These things you have done and kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face” (Ps. 50:21). Yes, even today, we think that God is *like unto us*.

So, the essence of idolatry is to entertain wrong thoughts about God. When we construct an idea of God from our imaginations, this idolatry of the heart is just as bad as idolatry of the hand. The prophet Ezekiel had a penetrating message for this kind of idolaters: “Then the word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, these men have *set up idols in their hearts* and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces” (Ezek. 14:2–3, emphasis mine). “Idols in their hearts”! “Stumbling blocks before their faces”! No wonder Calvin said that the human mind is an idol factory!

Join me as I explore how our ideas of God affect the way we think, the way we worship, and the way we live. I’m convinced that if our minds are open, our investigation will change the way we see God; and of necessity, it will change the way we see ourselves. And we will be led to seek the true God with all of our hearts.

Let’s take a quick tour of some of the idols of modern culture. Let’s try to grasp how tempting it is to construct an idea of God based on our own desires and interests.

IDOLS FOR DESTRUCTION

Of course, some modern conceptions of God are not entirely wrong, just skewed; others are as far from reality as one can travel. Once we assume that we can construct an idea of God beginning with man, that is, “from the bottom up,” anything is possible. We are capable of doing this even with our Bible in one hand and a personal agenda in the other.

In *The Trivialization of God*, Donald W. McCullough gives several examples of how we humans redefine our concept of God according to our preferences. I shall choose three of his descriptions and then add some of my own. Though some of these images may be loosely associ-

ated with Scripture, others are almost entirely drawn from the fabric of human desires and inclinations.

The God of My Health and Wealth

Given our preoccupation with success, money, and leisure, we should not be surprised that a special Western god has emerged in the last decades. This concept of God is purported to have been drawn from the Bible, but it reflects American capitalism more than a serious consideration of biblical texts. This God becomes our financial adviser, our ATM, our consultant. Gloria Copeland, wife of minister Kenneth Copeland, has written, “The Word of God simply reveals that lack and poverty are not in line with God’s will for the obedient. . . . Allow the Holy Spirit to minister the truth to your spirit until you know beyond a doubt that God’s will is Prosperity.”⁷ She is talking about diamonds, BMWs, and a new house—not spiritual riches.

This gospel could not have been preached in early Rome, nor today can it be preached in Haiti, Belarus, or Angola. It would be difficult indeed to convince the martyrs of the church that it was actually their God-given right to be healthy and prosperous; they would have been content with poverty, if only they had been delivered from the lion’s mouth or the assassin’s sword.

No, the “God of my health and wealth” is the God of the West, the God of capitalism, the God of consumerism. Correctly interpreted, the Bible can be proclaimed in all cultures; what we say about God must ring true in war as well as peace, in poverty as well as health, in life as well as in death. The “God of my health and wealth” might purport to be based on the Bible, but it is a skewed interpretation that has left thousands of disillusioned people in its wake.

How can we believe in such a God when Jesus said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20)? And Paul, writing from prison, said, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil. 4:11).

The God of My Emotional Need

In our therapeutic culture, where all of us are allegedly either in recovery or denial, we have exchanged the language of Scripture for the language of *Psychology Today*.⁸ *Sin* is redefined as a lack of self-esteem. Gone is the idea that the knowledge of God is our greatest goal; a knowledge of ourselves and of our need for self-respect should be the first item on our theological agenda. Back in the eighties Reverend Robert Schuller wrote, “What we need is a theology of salvation that begins and ends with a recognition of every person’s hunger for glory.” According to this conceptualization, God is not a judge who has been offended, but a servant waiting for opportunities to affirm our dignity. Schuller adds, “The Gospel message is not only faulty, but potentially dangerous if it has to put a person down before it attempts to lift him up.”⁹ Sad to say, these ideas are now a part of our culture and are surviving nicely within the church.

The wider culture suggests that if I can be on a talk show and expose my innermost secrets to the world, I will be helped and healed. I will have my fifteen minutes of fame and “set the record straight.” God, if He is worthy of my attention, exists to give me the unconditional acceptance I deserve. In fact, His job is to affirm who I am. My great need is not to repent, but to be comfortable with my true and unique personality. A noted historian Joseph Haroutunian remarks, “Before, religion was God-centered. Before, whatever was not conducive to the glory of God was infinitely evil; now that which is not conducive to the happiness of man is evil, unjust and impossible to attribute to the deity. . . . Before, man lived to glorify God; now God lives to serve man.”¹⁰

In America, sociologist Robert Wuthnow points out, spirituality “no longer is good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness, but because it helps me get along in the world. I am the judge of its worth.”¹¹ In other words, God *serves me* as my great cosmic therapist.

There is some truth to all of this. Christ does promise peace, but it is not peace apart from suffering; it is not a peace that is exempt from con-

flict. Even today, many of Christ's followers are being persecuted and even martyred. His promise is that He will be with us, not that our lives will be free from distress. He came to carry our griefs and sorrows; but when my emotional need for acceptance is more important than my spiritual need for justification, when God owes me fulfillment, when I seek personal gratification more than the humble worship of my Creator—I have forgotten that I exist for His glory and not my own.

How can we reduce God to a recipe for emotional tranquility in light of Jesus' words:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”

(Matt. 10:34–36)

The God of My Gender

Radical feminists seek to refashion God according to their desires and inclinations. Here is the argument: God is represented in the Bible as male; males oppress females; thus the biblical model is to blame for this oppression. As long as God is male and seen as our “Father,” we give tacit approval to male dominance. To put it simply: if God is male, males are God.

In order to eradicate this image, we must redefine God as female so that we have a deity in step with the feminist cause. Thus Rosemary Radford Ruether, perhaps the leading feminist writer, defines her goddess as “the Primal Matrix, the great womb within which all things, gods and humans, sky, earth, human and nonhuman beings are generated.”¹² Some religious denominations now use lectionaries, hymnals, and

Bibles that have “inclusive” language that eliminates all male references to God. Where the title “King” is applied to God, they add the word *Queen*; God as Father is translated “father and mother,” or just “mother.” Thus the Scriptures are rewritten to serve the feminist agenda.

Let’s agree that many men have abused women; males have misused their authority and have put their own needs first. Women have often been unfairly discriminated against in our churches and in the workplace. But do we give God a makeover to address these concerns?

Obviously the God of the Bible has no sexuality; sexuality is confined to the creature, not the Creator. But like it or not, God has chosen to reveal Himself with masculine language. There are reasons for this: for one thing, the Scriptures preserve a clear distinction between creature and Creator. All attempts to remake God as female have resulted in pantheistic ideas about God being one with the creation “she nurtures.” Think back to the “Re-imagining” conference held in Minneapolis several years ago. Conference attendees honored the goddess Sophia, not Jesus Christ, as an example of how we can redefine God “from the bottom up.” In a follow-up conference, attendees learned that the goddess would emerge when women reveal their inner selves. “Now Sophia, dream the vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within,” they prayed.¹³ This is a god created *by* women, *for* women.

Second, in marriage God designated male headship to demonstrate the relationship of Christ and the church. Husbands are to be Christ to their wives, exercising servant-leadership; wives, in turn, are to play the role of the church, living under the authority of their husbands. Given this model, God is represented in the Scripture as male.

In short, society must find ways to address the abuse of women other than rewriting the Scriptures. How can we believe in the “God of my gender” when Jesus affirmed that God created male and female (Matt. 19:4) and that God was Father? “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him” (John 5:22–23).

A related version is the “God of my sexual preference” theology. This is the view that God approves of my sexual lifestyle, no matter what it might be. There is growing literature on “gay theology,” where gay persons have reinterpreted the Scriptures to justify homosexual relationships; they worship God, confident that their sexual preference is of no consequence to Him. For example, Paul Sherry of the United Methodist Church urged his constituents to give full participation to gays and lesbians in the ministry of the church and said that those who opposed this should “read the Bible again with new eyes and listen to the Holy Spirit with new ears.”¹⁴ The reason for this new reading is obvious: it is to interpret the Bible in ways compatible with the homosexual lifestyle.

Again we confess that homosexuals have been deeply wounded by the belligerence of the church; they have been singled out for condemnation, almost as if other sins do not matter. Out of their hurt, some reinterpret the Scriptures to make God approve of their sexual preference. But is this the best way to address their concerns? Might it not be more helpful to study not only the biblical condemnation of homosexuality, but also its remarkable teaching about God’s grace, mercy, and power?

How can we accept the “God of my sexual preference” when Jesus upheld the strict Old Testament Law? “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

The God of My Personal Self-Authentication

Lying at the heart of these and other misconceptions is the deeper belief in the “God of my personal self-authentication” theology. An example comes from the book *Conversations with God* in which Neale Donald Walsch supposedly has his questions answered by God Himself. In fact, Walsch claims that in creating this book he was not so much writing as taking dictation.

What does God “say”? We are to reject all authoritative sources, for truth comes to us through our feelings. Walsch’s God derides the idea that he/she/it is some omnipotent being that answers some prayers and not others. To quote “God” directly, “Your will for you is God’s will for you. You are living your life the way you are living your life, and I have no preference in the matter. This is the grand illusion in which you are engaged; that God cares one way or the other what you do. I do not care what you do, and that is hard for you to hear.”¹⁵

According to Walsch, God says we are not to look to authoritative sources for “the truth about God.” Instead, God says, “Listen to your feelings. Listen to your highest thoughts. Listen to your experience. Whenever any one of these differs from what you’ve been told by your teachers, or read in your book, forget the words. Words are the least purveyor of Truth.” Walsch, however, is not clear about how we can distinguish our highest thoughts from our lower ones. And since his God repeatedly says that there is “no such thing as right or wrong, good or bad, better or worse,” the matter is even more complicated. Perhaps we find the answer when God says, “There is only what serves you, and what does not.” Thus, our highest thoughts turn out to be those that serve *us* the best. Make no mistake; we are our own best authority.¹⁶

Leaving aside the contradiction that God does not speak in words but feelings (apparently God gives the author a wordy revelation that covers hundreds of pages!), we must ask: why is this God so approving of all of our lifestyles, beliefs, and values? To no one’s surprise, this God is exactly everything we want him/her/it to be. This God defines no sin, offers no reproof, tenders no judgment. In fact, there is no right or wrong! After all, in a world without a transcendent God, the word *evil* is emptied of all meaning. Walsch’s God has been thoroughly domesticated; as someone has said, we keep cows for milk, sheep for wool, and God to give us continual affirmation and acceptance.

How can we accept the “God of my personal self-authentication” in light of Isaiah’s warning: “Woe to those who call evil good and good

evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight” (Isa. 5:20–21). We might add, woe to those who see themselves in a mirror and proclaim that they have seen God!

The God of My Near-Death Experience

Betty Eadie represents that group of individuals who claim to have learned what God is like through a near-death experience. In her book *Embraced by the Light*, she tells about meeting Christ in the twilight zone between life and death; she even dedicates her book to Him. Now, she says, she knows there will be no judgment at death, just glad admission to the realm that can be best described as a place where everyone is nice. She appeals to the desires of all of us to enter Beulah Land, no questions asked.¹⁷ We also learn that the world is not filled with tragedy as most of us suppose, for humans are not sinful creatures after all.

But how can we believe in the nonjudgmental God of near-death experiences when Jesus predicted that all the dead would be raised and “those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29)?

Ideas similar to Eadie’s are found in other popular books, such as *The Celestine Prophecy* and *A Return to Love*. They have common themes: when I encounter God, I am encountering an undefined being who is loving and affirming of who I am. I am a cocreator with God, I participate in the divine; evil is illusionary, and we are all on our way in evolutionary transformation. Such pantheistic ideas, the argument goes, connect us with the ancient masters, and at the end of the day, God is whatever helps me achieve my potential. Such books reduce religion to therapy, and the study of God to little more than a study of myself.

Alan Jacobs, professor of English at Wheaton College, points out

that we gravitate to such beliefs because by nature we seek “God’s resounding endorsement of our every craving.”¹⁸ Thus, as we shout across the chasm to God, His revelation turns out to be the echo of our own voice.

Listen to Jeremiah’s cryptic description of such idolatry: “Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good” (Jer. 10:5). In this passage, a couple of characteristics of idols are evident. First, they must be carried—an idol allows me to remain at the center of my life, and my loyalties are always under my control. Second, I can make my idol any shape I desire, and yours can differ from mine; it becomes whatever I make it to be. I can credit it with mystery, with magic, and with meanings derived from my own mind. In the end, since I manufacture reality, I am my own god.

When we construct an idea of God “from man upward” we must, of course, disregard any claims for truth. After all, the God you construct might be entirely different from mine. Hitler had his God and you have yours. Adherents of these new kinds of “faith” can go on triumphantly, fabricating as many conceptions of God as there are cravings in the world. Twenty years ago we heard, “If it feels good, do it.” Today, it is “If it feels good, *believe* it.”

C. S. Lewis said it more accurately than anyone: “The Pantheist’s God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you.”¹⁹ The Bible teaches that God created man in His own image; man now attempts to return the favor. No wonder we read of idolaters, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18).

THE GOD WHO HIDES AND SEEKS

When God spoke to Moses He said, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14). We could paraphrase, “I am who I am and not who you want Me to be.” If

we stop trying to construct an image of God “from the bottom up” and accept His self-revelation, we encounter a God who is majestic and mysterious, holy and merciful. We find the One who is able to quench our “raging thirst,” and we are not afraid to say we have found the truth.

A serious study of the biblical God is countercultural: He stands in sharp contrast to all options on today’s spiritual smorgasbord. To be thoroughly biblical is to be controversial; it is to challenge cultural myths that have developed over generations. It is also to be confronted with a God who will not leave us as He finds us.

Regardless of how much we have studied the Scriptures, our knowledge of God is always partial—not false, but *partial*. The more I study the Bible and read what others have written, I am convinced that there is much more about God that we do not know than what we do know.

Take a moment to meditate on this: If His presence fills the universe, is all of His knowledge also spread throughout the universe? Are all of the thoughts *in* His mind always *on* His mind? Since He is both angered and pleased at what is happening in His universe, how does He “cope” with diverse emotions? And do His feelings also pervade the universe simultaneously? You can add your own questions to the list. Our challenge is, as best we can, to “think His thoughts after Him.”

We are created in the image of God, but not in His *exact* image. “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). We have but a glimpse of the “vast unknown.” John Wesley was right when he said, “Bring me a worm who can understand a man and I will bring you a man who can understand the triune God.”

Zophar, speaking to Job in his distress, asked:

Can you fathom the mysteries of God?

Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?

They are higher than the heavens—what can you do?

They are deeper than the depths of the grave—what can you know?

Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.

(Job 11:7–9)

To fathom the mysteries of God is life's most rewarding quest.

The God Who Hides

Isaiah wrote, “Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel” (Isa. 45:15). Luther was right when he said that even when God reveals Himself, He still hides. But thankfully, He is also a God who is nearby.

For this is what the high and lofty One says—

he who lives forever, whose name is holy:

“I live in a high and holy place,

but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit,

to revive the spirit of the lowly

and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

(Isa. 57:15)

In this passage Isaiah describes God's transcendence (greatness in the heavens) and His immanence (His nearness to us). Another prophet recorded God's asking: “Am I only a God nearby, . . . and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him? . . . Do not I fill heaven and earth?” (Jer. 23:23–24). An idol is nearby and fills merely the space it takes up; only God is nearby and yet fills the heavens.

It is difficult for us to grasp the transcendence of God. Think of this: Light travels at 186,000 miles a second. Because the sun is 93 million miles away from the earth, the light of the sun takes eight minutes to

arrive on our planet. But, in comparison, light from the star Betelgeuse in the constellation Orion takes 520 years to reach us!²⁰

Think back to the time when Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. The light that left Orion on that day has not yet reached us, but it is on its way, hustling at 186,000 miles a second! Keep in mind that the diameter of Orion is twice that of the earth's orbit around the sun; in fact, the diameter is estimated to be *about* 400 million miles (it is in constant flux). Yet, this is only one constellation among millions of others; the universe is thought to be 10 billion light-years in diameter!²¹ "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps. 104:24).

God is not only the omnipotent Creator, but His essence is holiness, that is, purity and separateness. He is entirely beyond us. We have flashes of revelation, but in the end we simply can't grasp what Isaiah saw when he had a glimmer of God (Isa. 6:1). Wetness is intrinsic to water, light is intrinsic to the sun, and holiness is intrinsic to God. No matter how we try to imagine God, we always fall short.

The pagan world was always haunted by the unknowability of God. Plato said that if God were to be found, it would be impossible to express Him in terms we could understand. Aristotle spoke of God as the supreme cause that all men dreamed of, but no man could know. The philosophers were right about this: without a revelation, God is indeed unknowable. But thankfully, because of His initiative we can move beyond speculation to personal knowledge. For this God has spoken, and He has not stuttered.

The God Who Seeks

This hidden God also condescends to where we are. "[I also dwell] with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isa. 57:15). In fact, Scripture pictures God as being on a search mission. "For the eyes of the LORD

range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chron. 16:9). He seeks those who desire Him; He dwells with those who are “contrite of heart.” “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

To be contrite means to be broken in spirit by a sense of guilt or a sense of sorrow for one’s sins. Our knowledge of God leads necessarily to an overwhelming sense of our own sinfulness. Calvin wrote, “Without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self. . . . It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”²²

As children we receive our sense of self-worth from parents who either reject or love us. We gauge our value from them and the other people around us. As we develop a sense of God-consciousness, we revise our estimate of who we are in relation to our Creator. Unfortunately, New Age theology gives us no reference point; it offers no basis upon which we can properly understand or judge ourselves. This is why a book such as *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up* by Iyanla Vanzant can portray such an optimistic picture of humanity. Modern spirituality goes to great lengths to show that we are all perfect and beautiful. As long as I use my soul to judge my soul, I think myself to be quite fine.

Recently I sat next to a woman on a plane who took modern spirituality seriously. She insisted that sin and evil did not exist. Even Hitler wasn’t all bad; he made some mistakes and “unwise choices” but committed no sins, no crimes, no evil. No wonder she felt no need for a redeeming God; her god was no more righteous than she was. I couldn’t help but think, however, that if she herself were on the receiving end of a violent crime, she would revise her belief in the nonexistence of evil; and someday, I believe, she will also revise her opinion of her own goodness. But that day, she was like the factory that set the time of its siren by the town clock; later it was discovered that the town clock was checking its time by the siren of the factory!

What has gone wrong in our world? With the loss of the biblical God has come the loss of sin; with the loss of sin comes the loss of a yardstick for behavior. With this loss comes the breakdown of society. A few years ago there was an editorial in the *New York Times* that reflected on the moral confusion of our world:

Sin isn't something that many people, including most churches, have spent much time talking about or worrying about through the years of the [cultural and sexual] revolution. But we will say this for sin; it at least offered a frame of reference for personal behavior. When the frame was dismantled, guilt wasn't the only thing that fell away; we also lost the guidewire of personal responsibility. . . . Everyone was left on his or her own. It now appears that many wrecked people could have used a roadmap.²³

Job, you will recall, struggled with the problem of why God took his children and health from him even though he had committed no discernible wrongdoing. He longed to hear from God directly, and near the end of his monologue he got his wish. The Almighty spoke to him from the whirlwind. In those moments of spectacular revelation, Job forgot his arguments and cried, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5–6).

Job finally knew who he was and who God was. He had an "identity crisis" that brought healing to his aching heart. When we begin to understand who God is, we know that His intrusion into our lives cannot be ignored. His presence reveals our tainted souls for what they are, but in Him we also find forgiveness and mercy. The majesty of God should not discourage us but invite us to draw near in contrition and humility. Only a God who judges us can save us. *Idols do not judge us, but neither can they redeem us.*

If we are put off by God's holiness, we probably will also be put off by His grace. Before Ted Bundy, who killed twenty-three young women, was

put to death for his crimes, the report was that he had accepted Christ as his Savior. If he did (who can know for sure?), he will be in heaven. If Bundy had brutally killed one of my daughters, I would want him to burn in hell. But God thinks differently than we do. He says I can even accept a Ted Bundy if he repents and takes advantage of the sacrifice of Christ. This is grace.

BEGINNING OUR JOURNEY

We must embark on our journey to know the real God with these promises: “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6); “Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:8).

Humbly we realize that only what God has revealed is important to us; we do not have to know all of His reasons for His opinions. I do not know why God sometimes does not deliver His people when they cry to Him. I am mystified by the doctrine of an eternal hell. I do not know all the reasons why God chose this world, this plan, though other options surely were open to Him. The scriptural portrait of God will not always fit neatly with our own predispositions. Since it is hopeless to “begin with man and reason upward,” the wisest course is to begin with God and accept His revelation to us.

In the fourteenth century an unknown Christian wrote a book titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This author, unlike others, stresses what we don't know about God rather than what we do. The gist of his reflection is that in this life, there will always be a “cloud of unknowing” between us and God, and that should not dishearten us but rather assure us in our pursuit of Him. Yes, we see through a glass darkly, but thank God we do see. He wrote:

Do not hang back then, but labor in it until you experience the desire.
For when you first begin to undertake it, all that you find is a dark-

ness, a sort of cloud of unknowing; you cannot tell what it is, except that you experience in your will a simple reaching out to God. This darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in your affection. So set yourself to resist this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him whom you love. For if you are to experience him or to see him at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and this darkness. So if you labor at it with all your attention as I bid you, I trust, in his mercy, that you will reach this point.²⁴

How do we undertake this journey? By forgetting all else, separating ourselves from other creatures, and giving ourselves wholly to God. The author emphasizes that we come to know God through contemplation, through the manifest desire of the heart to fix its thoughts on God.

We must, he says, have a love for God that drives us to seek Him in “the darkness of incomprehensibility, leaving behind other attractions and desires.”²⁵ God and God alone can fully satisfy the hunger and longing of our spirit. If we seek Him, God will give us an experience of Himself. Behind the cloud of unknowing is the *divine Presence*.

A man told me about his friend, a Bible college professor who was finally experiencing what he had taught for so many years. When he shared his growing intimacy with God with his colleagues, they appeared distracted and bored. What he said was not new to them; they had learned it all in seminary. As this “God-lover” pondered their response, it was as if the Almighty Himself spoke to him, saying, “Only people who see Me at a distance think they know everything about Me.” Yes, the closer we get to God, the more we are amazed at our ignorance.

There is a story about a farmer who repeatedly invited a friend into his apple orchard to taste the fruit and make fresh cider. “To tell you the truth,” his friend said, “I have tasted some of your apples and they are sour.”

“Which apples?” the farmer asked.

“The ones that fell along the road over your fence,” the neighbor replied.

“Ah, yes,” said the farmer, “they are sour. I planted them to fool the boys who live around here. But if you will come into the middle of my orchard, you will find a different taste.”

On the edges of Christianity are some sour apples—conviction of sin, self-denial, and purity—that keep off the hypocrites and mere religionists. But in the middle of the orchard are delicious fruits. The nearer to God we draw, the sweeter the joy. Our raging thirst for God can be satisfied.

In his excellent book *Desiring God*, John Piper writes, “God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied with Him.”²⁶ C. S. Lewis described God as “the all-satisfying object.” Bernard of Clairvaux drank from a fountain that quenched the thirst of his soul and wrote:

Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts,
Thou fount of life, Thou light of men
From the best bliss that earth imparts
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

(Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts)

The pursuit of God is always most satisfying.

A PERSONAL RESPONSE

Let us resolve to meditate on the self-revelation of God given in His Word. We’ve learned that God is hidden and far off, but also near, willing to meet the deepest needs of the human soul. If He stands apart from us because of His holiness, He also stands apart because of His mercy.

I’ve often reflected on Psalm 42, and I encourage you to read it as a personal response to God’s invitation to “seek the LORD while he may be

found” (Isa. 55:6). Here are a few verses from the psalm, though I hope you read the entire passage in your Bible:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God? . . .
Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

(Ps. 42:1–2, 5)

Before us lies a challenge. We want to know God, but how do we approach Him? What do we bring that we might be accepted? Let’s continue the journey.