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## God's Self-Portrait

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Free media and discipleship resources for pastors, leaders, and growing disciples.

## God's Self-Portrait

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As we begin our attempts to know God better, we should admit one fact: God is beyond our ability to fully comprehend Him. “‘My thoughts are completely different from yours,’ says the Lord. ‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine’” (Isaiah 55:8). In the end, God remains a marvelous mystery.

Yet at the same time this God is a God who wants to be known. He reveals to us everything about Himself that we really need to know. And He bids us to come looking for Him. An honest search for Him is one that He readily rewards with a disclosure of Himself. He promises, “If you look for me in earnest, you will find me when you seek me” (Jeremiah 29:13).

The apostle Paul, in establishing the guilt of sinful people who did not have the advantages of being a part of the Jewish community, explained that God has placed clues about Himself both inside each person and all around us.

God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves. For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. (Romans 1:18-20)

Instinctive knowledge of God placed in our hearts: that is the witness of our conscience. God's invisible qualities displayed in the earth and sky and all He has made: that is the witness of nature.

But conscience and nature can only tell us so much about God. They reveal generalities and not specifics. To live life in a fully God-pleasing manner, we need more detailed information about who God is and what He wants of us.

The Bible is our most comprehensive guide to the nature of God. It was “inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16), and so it preserves God's own witness to who He is. It is His self-portrait. Above any other source, then, we need to find out what God says about Himself in the Bible. If we will take the time to study what Scripture says, we can arrive at a picture of God that certainly is not complete but that is more than adequate for our needs.

Moreover, we can trust that the God who appears in the pages of Scripture is the same God we are seeking to know better today. “I am the Lord, and I do not change,” He testifies (Malachi 3:6). What He says specifically about Himself in Scripture, and what He demonstrates about Himself through His actions recorded in Bible stories, reveals the real God.

We need to be willing to open up our minds to the biblical picture of God. If we ask the Holy Spirit to reveal truth to us from the Bible, He will do so. And as we study Scripture, its picture of God will crowd out our old, mistaken view of God and establish a truer picture in its place.

## **The Purification Process**

The ways in which people have gone wrong in their opinions about their Creator are almost as numerous as the human race itself. The diversity of religious beliefs in the world bears witness to how we can be misled about God.

First of all, of course, it is important to believe that God exists. “Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that there is a God” (Hebrews 11:6). Certainly atheism has been responsible for some of the most dreadful abuses in history, as people have gone astray through the rejection of God. The psalmist was right:

Only fools say in their hearts,

“There is no God.” (Psalm 14:1)

But of course, most people in our land do believe in God. In fact, only 8 percent of Americans describe themselves as atheists or agnostics.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, though, this does not mean that 92 percent of us have an accurate or adequate view of who God is. Misunderstanding about God’s nature, even when it comes to the basics, is widespread, despite the prevalent belief in the existence of God.

One key reason why so many misunderstand God today is the current do-it-yourself approach to religion. At one time, Christianity was the starting point for the theology of most Americans (whether or not they actually had a saving faith in Christ). Today, though, many put together pieces of Christianity, New Age spirituality, and whatever else appeals to them, then endorse the resulting hodgepodge as their theological doctrine. Consequently, while they may be enthusiastic about “God,” the God they have in mind bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible.

Having flawed convictions about God is not necessarily a sin in itself—your education in this area may have been at fault. But do not let yourself become comfortable with unexamined convictions. Get to know God better in His self-portrait, the Bible, and start erasing those parts of your image of Him that do not fit what He says about Himself. Then fill in the picture with true ideas about God’s nature. You will benefit from knowing more about both who God is and how He acts toward you.

## Who God Is

Some years ago I (Bill Bright) wrote a book about the attributes of God, called *God: Discover His Character*. I got the idea for the book as a result of being interviewed by Dr. James Montgomery Boice on the *Bible Hour* radio program. One of the first questions Dr. Boice asked was “What is the most important truth to teach any follower of Christ?”

No one had ever asked that question of me before, so for a moment I was speechless. Finally I answered, “The attributes of God.” Later I thought about my answer (prompted, I believe, by the Holy Spirit) and realized that it really was true. Human problems are commonly due, at least in part, to a faulty or inadequate understanding about God.

This is why I would urge you to learn more about the attributes of God. These attributes are primary qualities or characteristics belonging to God.

## How God Acts Toward Us

Learning about the nature and attributes of God, as revealed by the Bible, is far from being a mere academic exercise. We discover in the process a God who cares about us, who is intimately involved in our lives, and who wants to help us heal from our sin problems.

Let’s consider the twelve attributes of God listed above in terms of how they relate to our problems with habitual sin. Each attribute should be an encouragement to us.

1. Because **God is all-powerful**, He is stronger than the hold that sin has over us.
2. Because **God is ever-present**, He is always with us in our struggles against temptation.

3. Because **God all-knowing**, we can go to Him with all our questions and concerns about becoming holy.
4. Because **God is sovereign**, we can submit to His will for our ethical actions.
5. Because **God is holy**, He offers the model of morality we strive to copy.
6. Because **God is truthful**, we can believe what He says about sin and holiness and live accordingly.
7. Because **God is righteous**, He provides the standards we seek to live up to.
8. Because **God is just**, He always treats us fairly, even when we disappoint Him.
9. Because **God is loving**, He is unconditionally committed to our spiritual well-being.
0. Because **God is merciful**, He forgives us of our sins when we sincerely confess them.
1. Because **God is faithful**, we can trust Him to always keep His promises to help and to forgive.
2. Because **God is unchanging**, His commitment to our spiritual health is fixed and dependable.

What a God we serve! His every quality is suited to drawing us nearer to Him and to helping us become the kind of people He wants us to be.

Furthermore, the fact that God is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together—teaches us that God values fellowship. God enjoys fellowship among the three Persons that make up the unity of the Godhead, and He enjoys fellowship with us, His most beloved creatures. And so the three divine Persons work together to solve our sin problem: The Father established the standards of justice. The Son sacrificed Himself to earn our forgiveness. And the Spirit comes alongside us to aid us in our attempts at living holy lives.

Isn't this a God you want to know better? We promise that as you get to know Him more fully, He will begin to change your thoughts and feelings in ways that will transform your life.

How good it is to know God as He really is!

[This article is by Dr. Bill Bright and Dr. Henry Brandt from *Soul Prescription*, chapter 3]

## **Footnote**

1. Bill Bright, *God: Discover His Character* (Orlando, FL: New Life, 1999). See also the related website at <http://www.discovergod.org>.