

# GOD

Take a moment to get comfortable and focus..

If I say to you: **God is**....how would you finish that sentence?.(great, everywhere, love, unseeable , spirit, truth, all powerful, all knowing....)

And if I said God **looks like**....how would you complete that sentence? (fierce old man in the sky, out of touch grandma rocking in a rocking chair, old guy on throne, Hercules hurling thunderbolts, a genie to grant your every wish, mother hen covering chicks, loving father or mother?...)( strict parent, magician, social worker, bible thumping preacher, angel on your shoulder)

Does God look anything like this to you?



Father      Son      Holy Spirit





We have all kinds of ideas about God. Perhaps from childhood we have this idea that God is like the stern eagle eyed school principal I had who was always watching to make sure no one stepped out of line, or goofed off. Perhaps we had a wonderful childhood and God to us is like our doting parent who wants only the best for us and will step in and make it so. Or maybe you didn't have such a good childhood, and the idea of praying to 'our father' is not at all helpful.

A long time ago, back when I was a very little kid, JB Phillips, the guy who put out the JB Phillips new testament in modern English, wrote a little book called Your God is too

Small. It was popular, the last reprint was in the late 90s. In it he suggested all kind of ways we look at God- like a resident police man, a parental hangover, grand old man, Meek and mild Jesus, God in a box, managing director etc etc. In the end he says all these images are too small, too limiting. Then he goes on to suggest positive ways to view God, (and to find out what he said, you can read it- online for free even, just ask me.) It's a helpful read once you get past the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal language.

Phillips raised some good issues. He pointed out that our view of God can influence how we live our life. Too often we get stuck in a rut, or maybe in our childhood, in how we envision God. So today I want to shake that up just a bit and see if I can help you expand your idea of God even just a little bit.

A few months ago- or maybe longer- Joe dropped a book in my lap that he thought I might appreciate. It was this book: 'What we talk about When we talk about God' by

Rob Bell. I had been thinking about and struggling with understanding my relationship to God and this book looked like it would attack my concerns head on. While it wasn't quite what I expected, it did become quite influential in my thinking and so some of what I want to share with you today comes from this book. Specifically, any scientific type stuff I talk about following definitely comes from this book. And for those of you who know all this stuff and catch me making a mistake, sorry, come to me later and we can sort out if I got it wrong or Bell did!

I want to set the stage in our thinking about God. To do that let's consider the world we live in. Perhaps the world we live in says something about God. It's a strange place! Way stranger than you might think! You already know this from school, but now let's let it sink in to our adult minds. One word I want you to remember is *space*.

We live on a ball of matter called earth. This ball is turning on an imaginary axis at a speed of 1000 mph at the equator- say 500-600 mph here. (for kilometres per hour, multiply mph by roughly 1.6) There is no up or down, only in to the centre, or out-away from the earth's centre. When you are standing outside here, looking *up* into the sky, you are looking in the exact opposite direction your sister would be looking if she were in Australia looking *up* at the sky. And remember the earth is spinning. And we're not falling off, spinning out into space, because of a thing called gravity. Somehow, the fact that the earth weighs 6 billion trillion tons keeps us sticking to it!

Then there is the moon, another ball circling the earth roughly one orbit a month, at about 2288 mph

Meanwhile, the earth, with it's moon, is rotating around the Sun, travelling at 66,000 mph, taking one year to do one time around. Its distance is such that if it was any closer to the sun, we'd all cook and if it was any farther from the sun we'd all freeze. Rather convenient for us, right? Travelling with (is it 7 or 8 other planets?)- apparently, we've lost Pluto as a planet in the 90's, but in 2016 they found something they are calling the true 9<sup>th</sup> planet. In any case, this whole business, we could call our solar system, is moving at 558,000mph and is part of the Milky Way galaxy. It takes 200+million years for our solar system to orbit the milky way once. The Milky way contains a bunch of small galaxies and is itself part of a group of 54 larger galaxies called the local group, which is part of an even larger group. And so it goes. The known universe is expanding!

But only 4 % of the universe is knowable! 96% of the universe is made up of black holes, dark matter, dark energy- stuff that is hard to see and even harder to understand.

Then there's time. As Einstein pointed out and I struggled with in grade 12, time is relative, not absolute! We measure time as a portion of the day-a 24 hour spin, or the year-one trip around the sun. If you had a tall tower, and a clock at the base and a clock at the top, the hands of the clock will turn faster at the top than at the bottom. (due to more gravity) And this is even weirder; if you were in a train travelling at the speed of light, there would be no ahead, beside of behind. Everything would be seen all at once! No sense of past present and future, everything would collapse into one big now! (Does this have any connection to God saying I AM in the OT?)

But wait, there's more!

Let's talk about matter and energy. The sun is a star that we orbit, and it is the primary source of our energy. It's made of matter and energy at the same time. Again, it was Einstein who in his famous  $E=mc^2$  formula pointed out that matter is locked up energy and energy is liberated matter. When you get to the small stuff, the connection between energy and matter becomes even more interesting.

Take atoms, the name for what they thought would be the smallest building block of all stuff. Atoms are small-1,000,000 atoms side by side are as thick as a human hair! To put this another way, *an atom is to a golf ball, as the golf ball is to the size of the earth!* An atom is made up of protons, neutrons and electrons, with protons and neutrons forming

the nucleus of the atom, and electrons bouncing around, disappearing here and appearing somewhere else without travelling the distance in between! **97% of a given atom is empty space** (remember that word space?) AND SO **if all the space in all the atoms in the universe were removed, the universe would fit in a sugar cube!** So if your body is made up of atoms, what are you mainly made of? And if your chair is 97% empty space, what are you sitting on?

So if matter and energy are exchangeable, and matter is mainly space, you can see the **distinction between the material and immaterial world may not be so great after all.** So maybe the line between matter and spirit may not be a line at all.

Weird enough yet? One more thing: the atoms that make you up? They don't stay with you- at one moment they are part of your hierarchy-your make-up, the next they flit off and become part of someone else or something else! (what does this say about our interconnectedness with the people and the world around us?). Yet somehow, with all this flitting, you stay you! There is more. Lots more, that boggles the mind, but let's stop there. You can read the book if you want!

Let's stop for a visual: <https://youtu.be/jfSNxVqprvM>

Just a couple more interesting factoids I had to include: did you know that if you take the average human size-say 1 meter (ave size of all adults and children) you are roughly half way between the largest thing we can comprehend-the known universe, and the very smallest thing discovered thus far in our universe! And here's one more thing: your body renews its skin every 28 days, and every 9 years your complete body is renewed. Yet through all of that your body remembers how to be you!

What, you might ask has this all to do with God?

Well here are a few suggestions:

1- In the midst of all this amazing, weird, complicated, intricate business that is our world, **why would we even think we could understand God?** Remember, we, that is the scientists, only know maybe 4% of what's out there or in here (bodies, things), so much is unknown. And in the world of subatomic particles, things act in ways that don't make any sense to us, so much is strange and unknown. So if God created all this and is beyond it all, may I suggest that we are out of our league here? (Reminds me of our cat, sitting on a puzzle, all proud of herself, but she **doesn't begin** to get the picture!) also

reminds me of the OT writers who wouldn't even put a name or face to God because God was *so other*. *So this reminds us that God is so much more, so much greater than we can imagine*

2-The increasingly fuzzy line between matter and energy that I alluded to- both being parts of the same thing- leads to wondering about the dualistic attitude we have had between matter and spirit. It appears science is showing the line between matter and spirit is more artificial than we thought. What does this do to our ideas about miracles Jesus did in the NT, like making water into wine? Or walking on water? Or even raising Lazarus from the dead? What about thinking about God as Spirit, like wind or energy! The line between theology and science seems to be blurring too.

3-If time and space are bendy, and time itself a kind of artificial concept, conundrums like how God could be everywhere at once and God having no beginning and end become slightly more understandable -I mean it makes a wee bit more potential sense, not that we know how it can be, only that it might not be as impossible as we thought. Remember in the OT when Moses asks God what name he can use, God tells him to say I AM has sent me to you. It can and often is translated in the present tense. And if you could travel at the speed of light, and time becomes irrelevant, what happens to a concept like eternity?

4-The interconnectedness of all things, the idea that atoms can be a part of me one moment and a part of the chair or whatever the next and maybe a part of you after that, is to me mind boggling! What does that say about our relationship to each other? Our relationship to nature? To God?

5-This amazing complex world we live in shows us that just because we don't see it doesn't mean it doesn't exist! So when people object to God who is beyond tangible provable observations, they forget that science sees stuff beyond tangible provable observations all the time. It's all very humbling!

So have I come any closer to being clear on who God is?

Rob Bell would say that like art, music, even food, the product is more than the sum of it's parts. There is always more going on than meets the eye. Take a beautiful song for example, something moves you that goes beyond the singer's singing abilities, something speaks to your soul. We know things, using ways of knowing that aren't precisely measurable. Like your soul, your spirit, your essence- we know you exist, but

how do you see or measure or find a soul? So we say God is real, but beyond conventional means of analysis and description. We may know, feel, experience something about God but we cannot really nail this down in a tangible way. So there is Mystery. Richard Rohr says, 'if God is mystery, then God is always on some level the unfamiliar, beyond our comfort zone.' And St Augustine would add: 'If you can comprehend it, it is not God'. One thing I can add with certainty: Just because I believe something about God, doesn't make it so!

The Bible has lots to say about God. There are many names for God given in the Bible such as YHWH, (or I AM) or Adonai which means Lord or my Lord. Bell points out most of the names are descriptive. He says: 'When God is described as father or mother or judge or potter or rock or fortress or warrior or refuge or strength or friend or lawgiver, those writers are taking something they've seen, something they've experienced, and they're essentially saying, '*God is like that.*' He goes on to say, "An image of God doesn't contain God, in the same way a word about God or a doctrine or a dogma about God isn't God; it only points to God."

So maybe by now, it is almost unnecessary to point out that calling God *he or she* is almost meaningless. The problem of course is in the lack of appropriate pronouns to refer to one such as God. Many languages use one word for both he and she, that would solve that problem.

It seems to me the OT portrays God as a God of power and might. Yes, there are hints and suggestions here and there, of a God of love and mercy, but it seems to me the overarching understanding people in the OT have is a God who wants their loyalty and submission; God is the most high, creator of everything, and demanding of absolute devotion, and in return God will bless them and protect them. Even in places like the Psalms, where there is reference to God as a shepherd, for example in Ps23, in another breath the writer can ask God to vindicate him and put down his enemies.

So I think the best understanding we can have of God comes from Jesus. Ryan Dyck in a recent Rejoice devotional put it this way: '*Jesus is what God had to say*'. Back when I was young, the term progressive revelation was used, with the peak of revelation about God culminating in Jesus. Doug Klassen, in an article in the Canadian Mennonite (Oct 23/17) does an excellent job of explaining this idea of the Bible being a story of how people came to realize that Jesus was indeed the word of God. He says: 'Reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus is basic to our Anabaptist faith....I could release

those violent genocidal texts in the Old Testament as writers trying their very best to understand the nature and will of God, but not quite getting there'.

It's a great article and I highly recommend it.

So what do we learn about God from Jesus? Jesus says, 'I and the Father are one'. John 10:30

And in John 14.8 Jesus says, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the father'. Jesus also says

In John 4:24 'God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. Makes sense if God is spirit.

Jesus taught a way of love and service. He reinterpreted some OT scriptures to show how things really were :(you have heard it said, but I say...) He clearly states he is teaching and living God's way and wants us to follow him and do the same. Check out John 15. In fact, he says he *is* the way. So, a careful study of Jesus words and deeds teaches us about about God and what God wants from us. To look at Jesus is to get a glimpse of God.

And finally, some other thoughts from Rob Bell.

God is with us. God is the ever present glue, energy, force, power, source of all my life. This includes the idea that God is always present, we don't have to beg and plead for God to come. God is here, it is we who are often not aware of God's presence.

God is for us. Too often we may think God is looking for us to slip up or something. Bell points out that God is on our side! God wants us to succeed in our life of discipleship. God wants to help us love God and each other.

So let me try to summarize; I think the amazing complexity we see in the world around us points to a God far greater and more 'other' than we can begin to imagine, a God more mysterious and more incomprehensible than we can grasp. And yet at the same time, according to Jesus's teachings, we can approach this God and know love and acceptance and peace. Quite the paradox!

The good *news* is that our faith in God doesn't and cannot be based on our *understanding* of God, but rather our *trust* in God. That's a relief!

Thank you, God !