

9. GOD IS NOT WHAT MAN IMAGINED

Man's speculation and God's revelation

Man is man. God is God. Although human beings can experience God's presence, our experiences are limited. We speculate about God and try to know Him but often, we get Him wrong.

Projection of Human Experiences onto God

Ancient people thought that gods were like humans, who ate, drank, slept, and had fun. The deities were ranked. Every deity in heaven was thought to hold different status and have allocated duties. Like man, these deities had their weaknesses such as jealousy, greed, and lust. On the other hand, they had moral excellence such as knowledge, courage, and justice. Ancient people also thought they could comprehend gods' likes and dislikes and appeal to their inclinations. They could try to win favours of health, wealth, and honour by appeasing them. They imagined gods to behave like man.

Modern people are no different in projecting their human ways onto gods. They observe that in human society if a person is nice to them, they will be nice to him. In contrast, if that person offends them, they seek revenge. Therefore, if they are nice to gods, the deities will be nice to them. They perceive the relationship as a barter trade. They offer gods prayers and sacrifices, and gods will grant them the favours asked.

People recognise their limitations and they hope that the gods would supply their lack. When they get into trouble, they hope that gods will resolve their problems. If the problem is interpersonal, such as a family feud, they will put gods in a situation of dilemma when both sides pray to the same god. If they pray to different gods, then the hope is that “their god” will be more powerful than the other god.

People want gods to side with them and let them have their way. To show their reverence, they offer gifts of money, fruits, candles, and incense. When their request is granted, they repay with gifts of thanksgiving. When their request is not answered, some will explain with “perhaps I have not prayed well” while others may feel disappointed and move to another church or temple in search of a more effective god.

The Punishing and Rewarding God

Human authorities use reward and punishment to discipline their subjects. Some people project such understanding of authority onto God, and see Him as a strict ruler and judge, who rewards the good and punishes the evil. People with this mindset assume that when bad things happen to them, it must be God’s punishment for their wrong doings.

The problem is, if he has not committed any serious wrongs, why should he suffer hardships and misfortune as punishment? So, some people explain by asserting that the wrongs were committed in his past life and it is

payback time now. This explanation presumes the belief of reincarnation.

Could it be that a sin has been committed unknowingly? This person who suffers now either is denying it or is unaware of it. Take Andrew for example – he is a devout Catholic. Although he has his shortcomings, he is basically law-abiding, responsible, and caring towards his family. When his only son met with a serious accident, he began to wonder if he had unknowingly done something wrong to incur what he perceives as God's punishing judgment.

Old Testament writings show that ancient Israelites feared God. They viewed God as a diligent judge who was quick to uncover the merits and faults of His people, and He provided rewards or punishments. Material wealth and physical longevity were said to be the main rewards whereas diseases and physical hardships were the punishments. Some people today still think the same way. When they are unable to explain why bad things such as sickness, broken relationships, and business failures happen to them, they attribute these sufferings to "losing favour with God". To appease God and regain His favour, they find ways such as saying more prayers and increasing their offerings.

Is God what these people imagined Him to be?

Old Testament Inconsistent Portrayal of God

The Old Testament writings present many conflicting images of God – a legislator and judge, a mighty warrior, a protector and savior, and even as a nurturing mother.

In their struggles against the neighboring tribes, Israelites firmly believed that God accompanied them in the battles against their enemies. For example, in Exodus 15, there is a poem that praises God for leading the Israelites in their struggle against the Egyptians. It describes God saving them from Pharaoh's army and leading them to freedom.

The Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy paint God as a lawgiver. Though the laws were promulgated by Moses, they were expressed in a way that presents God as the legislator of their laws. When we read these laws, we know instinctively that they could not have come from God. Take the norms concerning the treatment of slaves and of women for example. We know they were clearly man-made. The writings also regard God as a judge who sentences: He rewards those who obey and keep the laws and punishes those who break them.

When man has the impression of God as a legislator and judge, he can hardly relate to Him as a personal confidant.

God is Heavenly Father; God is Love

When Jesus came among man, he clearly taught that God is our Heavenly Father, and when we pray, we should call Him "Father" (Matt 6:9). The thought of God as a loving father and the thought of God as a mighty creator are seemingly incompatible. From a utilitarian

point of view, we cannot understand why God who is the source of all riches would want to be close to man. What benefit would He gain from treating man so precious? However, if we accept the assurance of Jesus that God so loved the world, then we can easily understand why he teaches us that God is our Heavenly Father.

God is loving and compassionate to His creatures. He creates the universe out of love, and He desires man to share His life. Many have experienced God's love through Jesus. St. Paul said that while we are still sinners, Jesus died for us. This shows how much God loves us unconditionally.

God's unconditional love means that we need not do anything to deserve His love. The Gospel of Matthew says that God shines the sun on both good and evil people. He also rains down on both the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). God loves us as we are despite our unworthiness.

We hope that our earthly parents may love us unconditionally, but they do not always love this way because of their own needs and self-preoccupation. Thankfully, God our Father's love is certain. "Even if a mother forgets the baby in her womb, I will not forget you" (Is 49:15-16).

The lack in experiencing unconditional love may cause someone to feel insecure, and he may try to make it up by behaving in ways that get attention and win love. When others seem to have what he has not, his jealousy may cause him to sabotage others. What he needs is to realise that God is with him, and God loves him unconditionally.

Once he experiences the love of God, he will be set free from jealousy and competition. He can truly be himself and gain the ability to love others.