

## **“When We Centre on Christ . . . We See God Differently”**

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*First in an Advent Series*

Philippians 2.6-11

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What is God like?

In Grade 9, we were taught about Greek gods: Apollo and Aphrodite, Hera and Zeus. Their stories are supernatural soap operas, reflecting the best and worst in us. It's not just them. So many of our ideas of the Divine seem to be super-powered projections of our human fantasies and fears. We fear of being weak, so we imagine God is the Almighty. We fear injustice, so we imagine God is perfectly just. We fear being rejected, so we imagine God is unconditional love. I believe God is perfectly powerful, and completely just, and absolutely loving. But how do I know? Am I just making God who I want God to be?

What is God like?

Many philosophers have pondered the nature of God. They have thought brilliantly about the “first Cause of all causes,” the “Ground of all being,” and so on. Yet, can we trust even the best of our arguments and insights to tell us what God is like? What if our minds are confused, or the knowledge of God is so far beyond us (which it probably is).

What is God like?

We can watch what God does. God makes the heavens and the earth; that tells us about God's power, generosity, creativity, and goodness. God calls people; that tells us about God's desire for relationship and willingness to work through us. God frees captives from slavery; that tells us about God's love of justice. Yet God is also mysterious, and elusive, and perplexing.

What is God like?

### II

Listen to something astonishing. It's from the letter that Paul, an early Christian leader, wrote to Jesus-followers in the Greek city of Philippi. We'll hear part of it. Paul might have written this part. Or, it might be something he picked up. Many scholars believe it is a celebration of Jesus that goes back to the earliest days of the Christian movement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this poem's origin and usage, see for example Gerald F. Hawthorne, Philippians (Dallas, TX: Word, 1983), 76-79 and Markus Bockmuehl, The Epistle to the Philippians (Peabody, MA:

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,  
did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

But he emptied himself  
by taking the form of a slave  
and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.

Therefore, God highly honored him  
and gave him a name above all names,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow  
and every tongue confess that  
Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2.6-11  
(Common English Bible, alt.)

Astounding!

Jesus says to someone, *"Your sins are forgiven."* Those who are watching, they know their theology. I can forgive you for whatever sins you commit against me, but no one has the authority to forgive anyone for all their sins. No one, except God. Jesus announces, *"Your sins are forgiven"* and the man is healed.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus and his friends are stuck in a storm at sea. He orders the winds and the waves to be silent. Those folks in the boat, they know that only the Creator of the weather can command the weather. Jesus says, *"Silence!"* and the storm ceases.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus comes to the house. The daughter inside is dead, and the crowd outside is grieving hard. He goes in and kneels beside the corpse. He says, *"Child, rise."* Someone snickers. They all know she is dead. Only the Master of life can break death's power. Jesus says, *"Child, rise!"* and she gets up.<sup>4</sup>

People experience this sort of thing, over and over. Jesus is doing what only God can do.

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Hendrickson, 1998), 116-120.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 2.1-12.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 8.23-27.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 8.41-56.

*“If he acts this way, who must he be?”*<sup>5</sup> It gets to the point that Thomas, who is a “seeing-is-believing,” “show-me-the-evidence” kind of guy, falls before Jesus and worships him. Everyone knows that only God should be worshipped. Thomas gasps, *“My Lord and my God!”* while he is looking right at Jesus. Exactly!<sup>6</sup>

What is God like? Look at Jesus. He is in the form of God. He is equal to God. Jesus’ very being is God-shaped. When we see Jesus in action, we see God in action.

### III

This Advent season, I want to delve into what happens when we find Jesus at the centre of our lives, our beliefs, our faith, of this world. When Christ is at the centre, what changes?

We see differently.

For starters, when Jesus Christ is at the centre, we see God differently.

Folks ask, *“Was Jesus God?”* That question assumes that we have a good idea of what God is like. We come to Jesus with our checklist and see if he meets the criteria. Fair enough. That’s a bit like what I’ve just been doing. But, do I really know what God is like?<sup>7</sup>

Here’s the twist. It’s not just that *Jesus Christ is Godlike*. That’s crazy-amazing enough.

It’s that *God is Christlike*. Theologian Alister McGrath says, *“These three simple words can totally alter our way of thinking about God.”*<sup>8</sup>

Imagine you are locked in a room. It is dingy dark, and there is no way for light to get in. You have an idea there is something outside, and you happen to be right. But since you have been in the room for as long as you can remember, you have no idea what that outside (if there is an outside) is like. All you can do is imagine and speculate.

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<sup>5</sup> “The New Testament writers seem to have begun their reflection concerning the identity and significance of Jesus by reflecting on what he did for man, and then gone on to ask who Jesus must be if he is able to act in this way.” Alister McGrath, Understanding Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 93.

<sup>6</sup> John 11.1-44.

<sup>7</sup> German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Of this man [Jesus], we say: ‘This is God for us.’ . . . We do not mean that we knew something before about what and who God was, apart from Jesus Christ, and then applied it to Christ. No, this is a direct statement of identity; all that we are here able to say about God, we have gained by a glance at him, or better, this man compels us.” Christ the Centre. Translated by Edwin H. Robertson (New York: HarperOne, 1978), 103.

<sup>8</sup> McGrath, 107.

Then, someone knocks a hole in the wall, and puts in a window. Now, you can see out. You see that which you have never seen before. Maybe some of those things you imagined turn out to be true. I guarantee, however, that this outside you now behold has things you never dreamed possible.

Jesus is the window.<sup>9</sup>

God comes to us in Jesus, who is God-the-Son, in eternal relationship and oneness with God-the-Father and God-the-Spirit. God comes to us in Jesus, so we can see who God actually is. Not what we imagine, or reason, or hope, or fear God is like. God, as God actually is.

#### IV

And what do we see?

A baby, resting in an animal feed bin. His mother's pregnancy had caused a stir of scandal. Soon, his father would be hiding and rushing his tiny family away, as refugees from political terror.

*He was in the form of God,  
but he did not consider being equal with God  
something to exploit.  
He emptied himself . . .*

This does not mean he stopped being God, that he somehow put his divinity on hold while he was slumming with us humans. He emptied himself, not in opposition to his God-ness, but as an expression of it. Jesus' decision was not to stop being divine. It was about what being divine really means.<sup>10</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this:

*If Jesus Christ is to be described as God, we may not speak of this divine being, nor of his [all powerfulness], nor his [all knowingness]; but we must speak of this weak man among sinners, of his manger and his cross. If we are to deal with the deity of Jesus, we must speak of his weakness.<sup>11</sup>*

What is God like? Look at Jesus.

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<sup>9</sup> I've adapted this window analogy from McGrath 110.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 102.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, 104.

*When he found himself in the form of a human,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient  
to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.*

Astonishing! Again, this is not something Jesus did despite being God. Somehow, it was God in person, giving Godself on the cross, to reconcile us to God.

God is Christlike. God is not a distant ruler, staying aloof and above the fray. God is passionately committed to us, and all God has made. God comes into the midst of it all.

When we centre on Christ, when we find ourselves before that window, now open, we see God so differently.

*He came down to earth from heaven,  
Who is God and Lord of all,  
And his shelter was a stable,  
And his cradle was a stall:  
With the poor and mean and lowly  
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.<sup>12</sup>*

That's different! Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> A verse from "Once in Royal David's City" by Cecil Frances Alexander.