

What are we thinking?!

How our image of God affects how we live and lead.

Neil Livingstone

"There is no way that I'm going to get this all done." I was sitting at my desk with my head in both hands, face to face with my calendar and my to-do list. It was 9 a.m. and already my day was a failure. No matter what I did, I felt that I would come up short.

Then I came to myself. Well, actually, my self came to me. We had a little conversation that went like this:

Myself. "You really should trust God, you know."

Me. "I know," I said, without conviction.

Myself. "It's too bad that you don't believe in the God you tell everyone else about..."

Me. "What? Are you calling me a hypocrite? (Sigh) I suppose I probably am...."

Myself. "Don't go confessing so fast, it's too neat a way to avoid talking through the issue."

Me. "Which is?"

Myself. "Which is: The way you're running around, I'd think that God was sick and you were trying to fill in for him while he's away."

Me. "I'm just being responsible..."

Myself. "I know. Responsible for keeping your Bible study happy and running. Responsible for managing your future by taking the right classes and making the right moves at work. Responsible for your own happiness by making sure everyone likes you. You are taking so much responsibility in your life that the casual observer might think that control was actually what you're after."

Me. "But I don't forget God! I do love God and walk with him..."

Myself. "But do you believe that *he* loves *you* and walks with *you*? Think about it."

I did think about it: When I actually live my life, what kind of God is it that I am thinking about? While I could describe for you a very good God, my actions show me living under a second-rate image of God. A lot of us do.

For example, I often worry about the future -- even dread it. I wouldn't admit it, but somehow I must be thinking: "What will happen? ... What if I need help and God doesn't show up? What if I go to work, but God stays home? What if I start talking with my classmate about Jesus, but God forgets to come along and help me say what they need to hear?" This all may sound ridiculous, but when I was staring at my calendar and to-do list, I was thinking and feeling as if I faced the day alone, as if God would not be there with me.

While I am sometimes afraid that God might not show up, sometimes I am afraid that he *will*. I think that he might truly be there, but not be there *for* me. Perhaps my overcrowded to-do list was the result of my own mistakes, or pride. I most quickly imagine a God who would stand aloof while I dealt with the mess I made, in order to punish me. It was bad enough just trying to get my life to come out right by myself, now I also have to worry about what God might do. What painful ways is he thinking up to straighten me out, "teach me a lesson", or at least get across to me how really disappointed he is about much of my life?

Do I do people a favor trying to talk them into this religion? The god they would see if they really looked at my thought and actions would not only be threatening, but also absent from most of my life. He has very little interest in my life apart from worship and prayer - and knowing the major decisions I should make in my life. And with those decisions, he either doesn't care enough to tell me what he wants, or he is talking but can't quite figure out how to get his message through.

Who would worship a god like this? Why do I? I say I believe in a loving God who is everywhere around me and only wants the best for me. But I keep turning around to catch myself trying to relate to a hard-nosed and fairly negligent deity. When I look at this in the light, I see that not only is this god-image not as good as God really is, but it is not even as good a picture as anyone could invent if they put their minds to it for a few minutes.

Our Desperate Scheming

If you are still reading this, I am assuming that you are with me enough to say that we do love God, the real one. There is something in us that stirs when real goodness is near. Whether it is the beauty of a song, the sun shining through new spring leaves, the warmth of being with people we love, or knowing the comfort of a sweet Presence even when we were by ourselves; we have all tasted a goodness that made us want to have more of the good things that God offers. Why then do we turn to gods that are not the real one, and that we could know are not as good as God really is?

We are drawn by God's goodness, yet something in us feels that the real God is going to be the death of us. The natural self, the wild self that works for self-satisfaction and self preservation above all, senses danger. One place that I get to observe human nature "in the wild" is in my young children. They are not quite tamed yet, yet they are clever and wary and know how to "survive". Here is one example: my youngest daughter Colleen, then two, was out playing in the snow with her sisters. They were having a great time, but Colleen's cheeks and fingers were turning bright red, and she was shivering. I asked Colleen, "Are you cold?" She turned and looked at me, her eyes searching mine, shivering as she stood there before me, and said "No." She was cold, but I do not count what she did as lying. For her the matter was simple. She knew that my question really amounted to "Do you want to go in now?", for if she had answered yes, I would have taken her in. Wanting to stay outside and have her fun, she simply and logically answered "No". She neither had enough sense to come in out of the cold, nor enough trust in me that I had sense, and her good at heart. So she looked at me and said what she needed to say in order to preserve what she wanted to preserve.

For Colleen at that moment, I represented a threat to what she thought was a pretty good set-up. My call was the end of fun as she knew it. We often look at God the same way. The closeness of a radically good and loving God will mean that we will have to change so drastically that it will seem like the end. He will not let us freeze in the snow, but rather he will call us into the life that we need to have. Our untamed nature does not like the look of that road to life. Words like commitment, discipline, and sacrificial love, sound costly and dangerous. The God of Jesus Christ calls us to die to that wild self, however, in order to grow up to live as the people we were truly meant to be.

That call attracts us, and it also frightens us.

So we come to God, but we find ways to justify less than total trust in him and loyal love for him. We covertly lower God, excluding him from certain spaces and thinking less of his love for us and his ability to work out that love. Because if he is around less, and doing less for me, then I have license to fill in the gaps myself. My daughter manages to forget that I have been comfort and strength and provision for her all her young life, so she can turn away for a while and go on playing. We want what God offers, but we also have our own self-preservation schemes. We want God, but we also want room to maneuver.

This is exactly what Myself caught Me doing. I was serving God, to be sure. But I was using every scrap of spare mental and emotional energy to figure out how to serve myself also. I had to go to this meeting regularly, or the church would begin to crumble and everyone would know it was my fault. I had to lead that Bible study well, so that the people would be impressed with me, and I could know that I was a good leader. I watched my checking account balance dwindle, and schemed of ways to keep it above zero. None of the actual activities that I did was wrong in itself. But there was a hidden, frantic undercurrent to my life. I was saying that I trusted God, and yet I was working hard to keep my life safe from his mismanagement.

If it is hard to find life without God, how much harder is it to hang around God, and yet keep him at bay? If it is hard to find life in our own fields, how much harder is it to enter his rich kingdom, and yet still sneak out to store up provisions, just in case? No wonder the Christian life seems so exhausting so often. To maintain some level of control, we choose to have a practical god-image that cannot quite save us. So we really get to save ourselves. But the burden is too much.

Admitting the Truth

There is another way, to really follow the real God. Jesus says that if we lose our life we will save it. If we die to that frantic wild self and its grasping for life, we will live in him, in peace. If we admit the truth and surrender to God's good love for us, if we admit that our strength is not enough and lean on his strong arms, we will find rest for our souls. From that rest, we can move out more single-mindedly and in real strength.

How can this happen for us? How can we follow the real God? As the Bible says, we need to accept him in our hearts by faith - to really let the real God in. To do this we need to turn away from "idols", those small god-images we make because they seem easier to deal with, but that lead us nowhere. The work is to keep our eyes resolutely open and on the true God as we go through our lives.

Remembering the real God is essential, for example, when a friend is in pain. Recently, I was with a friend named Amy. She was weeping because she had fallen in love with someone who was terminally ill. In her trouble and pain she asked "How can this be happening? Where is God now, anyway?" And I sat there, also wondering where in the world God was in this situation. Why couldn't he do something, explain the situation, give my friend some peace, or at least give me something soothing to say? Often I am tempted to give in to the apparent absence of God and take matters into my own hands. Many of us try to do this: We justify God's absence or actions, and try to put our friend back together as best we can. ("Maybe you should have been praying more, then God would have been with you...") This kind of "help", however, usually feels lame to both those getting it and those giving it.

For some reason in these situations we tend to believe our own senses and the world's propaganda (all this mess must somehow be God's fault) rather than what we have been taught and know from God himself. God is with the one who is suffering, and has been since the day they were conceived. He has never failed for a second to supervise their lives, more watchful than the most loving father you can imagine. His very own Spirit has never ceased whispering the truth in their ears. And in Jesus, he is not only suffering along with your friend, he has suffered for your friend and is offering them his leadership through this valley of shadow. My friend was not alone. Your friends are not alone.

You are not alone, either. Isn't God also watching over your life, too? Hasn't he promised to let you share in both Jesus' life and work? Isn't he present with you by the Spirit, so that you can participate with him in bringing wholeness to your small part of this broken

world? Think about it: Has he brought you all this way, only to leave you to you to cope on you own? Hardly.

Now, living in these truths does not make the dark valley become a sunny mountain-top, but it does show a way through the valley. If we assume that God is not there, we must either find a way to get his attention and bring him there to help, or barring that, we must act in his place. That is a hard, and truly thankless, job. But if we know that God is truly present and good, then we can ask "God, where are you?" in a new and life-giving way. We ask "Where are you?" and look to see the answer. We look for the clues to the care that God is already giving. The goal is to get with the flow, to participate in what God is already doing. Your part may or may not be big. Sometimes, you may find that it is your job to shut up and just sit with your friend, being a tangible gift and sign to them of the God who is holding them while they suffer. (This is most of what I did with my friend, Amy, who had chosen to love and so allow pain into her life.)

This kind of presence is very different from the presence of a friend who is trying hard to "bring God into a situation", and it is so much more helpful. For the reality is that God is already there. To wake up to his presence, to know his awesome yet gentle hand is guiding every situation, to respect and conform to that presence, that is the key to wisdom. We can act in a way that is truly effective and appropriate - that is, wise - when we deal with the great reality that we so often forget - the real God is near.

This view of God is uncomfortable. If he is ever-present and concerned for your friend, he is so for you, too. This nearness will be a worry for your natural self, since that self is bent on keeping a private part of the universe safe from God. But you see how you must endure that discomfort and walk through it, keeping your eyes and life open to the presence of the true God. That is your hope for "comfort" in the old sense -- encouragement and strength for life. We must let God help us, even with the problems that we wish he would ignore. ("Are you cold?") We must let our natural selves whine if they will, but we must step into relationship with the real God if we are ever to become our real selves.

We saw that what makes us shrink away from the true God was that we believe that he is hemming in our souls, wanting to make our life smaller, thinner, more boring. This was the slander on God's character that the serpent began in the garden. The serpent told the Woman that God had lied when he said that eating the fruit would lead to death. The serpent said the fruit was a good thing, that would make them like God, and that God was withholding it from them to keep them down. So they reached out and tried to grab for themselves the good that they thought God was unwilling to give them. Like parent, like child: we cannot quite bring ourselves to believe that God wants to, and is able to, do good to us.

But when we open our eyes we can see that he is not a distant tyrant, but rather the Rest for our souls. We may feel that he is taking away our natural habitat acre by acre, but we find instead that he is calling us to live in himself. And in him is the good and wide space in which we were meant to live and grow. We are tempted to think that the Christian life

is "some for me, some for God". So we try to keep as much as possible in the "me" pile. We can look, however, and find that we don't have to fear when he says, "I want all of you"; because it is the postscript to "I have given you all of Me".

That is the real God, the one that we see in Jesus. He is truly for us, giving up his whole life for us. He is truly with us, uniting God and humanity in himself forever. He is truly able, for the Spirit brings us the good news that he is risen and is here for us. Our job is just to listen, and believe.

□□□

So after thinking a while, I came back to myself.

Me. "Okay. I think I've got it: My real job is not to save my life myself, but to really believe God is on my side."

Myself. "Right. But don't get neurotic and try to work up a ton of faith and constantly check on how much you are "believing", or you'll be exhausted again soon."

Me. "I think I've been *there* before..."

Myself. "Yup. Remember -- the critical factor isn't you at all, keep your focus on the God who loves you and is strong for you."

Me. "All right. Let's go then..."