

YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 23, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Back in 1961, J. B. Phillips, who is widely known for his translation of the New Testament into modern speech, wrote a little book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. The thesis of the book was simply this: "No one is ever really at ease in facing what we call 'life' and 'death' without a religious faith. The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by specific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static. It is obviously impossible for an adult to worship the conception of God that exists in the mind of a child of Sunday-school age ..."

It is likely true that many people continue to grow throughout their lives socially, educationally, professionally, and otherwise, while remaining almost dormant spiritually. They spend little time in the reading of the scriptures, little time in spiritual activities, and little time in thinking about God at all. Their lives are crowded with the secular to the point that the religious is almost crowded out. It is small wonder that their conception of God remains childlike. Let us notice a few of the inadequate or incomplete conceptions of God which some people carry with them through life.

Inadequate Conceptions

To many people God is a very old gentleman who lives in heaven. He is somewhat like a grandfather, whom they love and see occasionally, but who is largely out of mind and out of sight. When they think of him as "old" they really mean "old-fashioned." Their conception of God is a being who was "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." He is envisioned as an old man with a long beard, sitting on a throne, wearing a robe.

Sometime ago a group of teenagers was asked a question along this line. They were instructed to give the first answer that came to mind, rather than to think and consider the question. They were asked, "Do you think God understands radar?" Almost unanimously they said, "No." Their initial reaction was that radar is a modern development about which God would not really be informed. Unconsciously they had registered the feeling that God was ancient, and that he was inadequate for modern times. This seems to be the conception of many people.

To many people conscience is almost their conception of God. A nagging voice within that gives warnings against certain acts of behavior is almost all they know of God. Conscience is a sensitivity to moral values, a capability of knowing right from wrong, and an inner sense of warning. These set man apart from the animals, who have no such feelings of conscience. However, it is most inadequate to say that this is God. It would be better to say that this is a uniquely human quality that is a part of God's wonderful creation of man.

To many people the idea of God is hardly more than parental carry-over. As children, their decisions were largely made for them, for parents told them when to get up, when to go to bed, what to do and even what to think. When a man becomes grown, in a certain sense, God takes over these responsibilities, directing and guiding his life. However, there is a great difference in the relationship which parents have to children and that which God has to his children. God recognizes each person as a mature creature of choice, allowing him to be his own man and to make his own decisions for both time and eternity. God is willing and ready to advise and guide, but he never forces his decisions upon his children.

To many people God is a means of psychological escapism. Life has many problems and makes heavy demands upon a person. Sometimes man wants to run away from the problems and cares of the world and seeks comfort and security. We are all familiar with the great song which has the lines,

Jesus, Lover of my soul,  
Let me to Thy bosom fly,  
While the nearer waters roll,  
While the tempest still is high:  
Hide me, O my Savior hide,  
'Til the storm of life is past;  
Safe into the haven guide,  
O receive my soul at last.

This sounds like escapism, especially to the minds of non-Christians. However, real Christianity does not invite men to run away from life and to bury their heads in the sand. Rather, God provides the inner man with strength and stability, enabling him to go back and to fight life's battle. Take Paul for an example. He lived in difficult times and constantly was in rough water. He prayed to God often,

communed with God regularly, and received the inner spiritual strength that enabled him to fight like a lion in the battles of life. God provides man no escape from reality, but rather provides him strength so that he can face reality.

To many people God has been captured, tamed, and trained to their liking. He is on call to do their bidding. Their prayers are primarily asking for God to provide certain services. In a sense God is manipulated by man. This conception of God pictures him merely as someone who can be called on to get man out of trouble or to protect him in times of need.

To many people God is a second-hand God. Always he is known through the testimony of others. They have never really felt a closeness to God. They have had no personal experience with God in which they drew near to him in faith and obedience, and received from him assurance and blessings. All of these are incomplete or inadequate conceptions of God. There is some validity and some truth in some of these conceptions. Yet, as a whole, they are inadequate. Those who hold these views have a God that is too small.

Imagine that you are in a dark dungeon in which there is no light at all. You have had no experience of light. It is strange and unknown to you. What are the possibilities that lie before you? You can light a candle, but its tiny flicker of light will dispel only a little of the darkness of the dungeon. It is light, but only a weak, inadequate light. Or, you can bore a hole through the side of the dungeon and get a glimpse of sunlight. It will be only a pinpoint of light, inadequate and partial. Or, you can open the door of the dungeon and walk outside into the brilliant sunlight. It will dazzle your eyes. It will overwhelm you. But, you will have a conception of light in all its grandeur and beauty. This is what we would wish to do in connection with our conception of God. As children we see him only partially, as adults we need to see him in his fullness.

### The True and Living God

In the seventeenth chapter of Acts, in Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Athens he was endeavoring to do just what we are suggesting in the message of this hour. He was trying to reveal the true and living God to people who had only known him dimly and at a distance. The apostle began by telling his Athenian hearers that the true God created the universe and everything that was in it. Next, he conveyed the idea that he continues to sustain the universe and provides for the needs of man. He, then, pictured God as a person, and identified him as the Father of mankind. Men are his offspring. The message described him as personal, eternal, and loving. It climaxed by revealing a day of judgment and a Savior who had been raised from the dead to live eternally.

With these thoughts in mind now listen to the message itself: "Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the object of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To An Unknown God. What, therefore, ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you. The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is he served by men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself giveth to all life and breadth, and all things ... that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man. The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent; inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." (Acts 17:22-31).

When I think of the majesty of God I think of the nineteenth Psalm and its opening verses, "The heavens declare the glory of God. and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge." If we had lived a thousand years ago our conception of God would have necessarily been more limited than it is today. We would not have known of other continents beyond the ocean. We would have supposed that the stars were simply pinpoints of light surrounding our center of the universe, and we might have even debated, as some of the ancients did, over whether there were 5,026 stars or 5,022.

With our knowledge of the sun, its planets, and the billions of other stars that make up the other galaxies in an infinitude of space, we are in a position to appreciate the greatness of God better than any previous generation in history. Through the microscope we also know of the sub-microscopic world and its magnificence of form and function. In a world such as ours we are in a position to see the greatness and the genius of God as no one before us could have guessed.

### Focusing God

But all of this might leave God simply as a great force out in space. We might appreciate his power and his genius but never know his concern for us. In his infinite wisdom, therefore, he sent Christ to the earth in order that we might see what God is like close at hand. The apostle John conveys this in these words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-4, 14). Later Jesus added, "He that has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9).

We know what God is like because we have seen Christ in the flesh. We know how he lived, where he went, what he did, and even what he thought. We have descriptions of his attitudes and values. And in all of this we have the revelation of the nature of God. God made himself personal, through Christ, so that we might feel about him as a loving Father, infinitely interested in our affairs. He knows the number of the hairs on our heads. A sparrow cannot fall without his concern. Through Christ we feel his love and learn of his grace. The infinite God is focused so that we can see and understand.

#### Questions Answered

With this revelation of God, through nature and through Christ, we are enabled to find answers to some of our most pressing questions. We ask, "What sort of person is God?" And the answer is that he is a father, infinitely good, wise, and just, and that love is his essence. I John 4:8 says simply, "God is love."

We ask, "What is the purpose of life?" Our Lord answers, "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Mark 12:29-31). The purpose of man upon the earth is to love God and to love his fellowman. We ask, "What is wrong with the world?" The answer then comes back that it is man's self-centeredness that is wrong. Loving himself he lacks a love for God and a love for his fellowman.

We ask, "What sort of people does God intend men to be?" We hear the answer that God wishes men to be the kind that would advance the purpose of the universe, loving God and loving one's fellowmen. We learn that God, while concerned about outward acts, is even more concerned about the heart and the motives of men. By observing Christ we learn that God's values are often different from man's values. Often they are the very opposite of those things which men aspire to do.

#### Conclusion

The greatness and majesty of God are beyond comprehension, yet modern man has the possibility of appreciating God's greatness better than those of any previous generation, However modern man often does not feel the awesomeness of God. Hence, he lives his own willful way, uses God's name in profanity, and fails to worship God. On the other hand, there are those who live close to the Lord, read his word and study his life, and thereby come to see the enormity of God. It is when we recognize God for what he is, that we worship him and respect him as we ought. Through a study of nature, the handiwork of God's creation, and through the reading of his inspired word, let us deepen and broaden and heighten our conception of God until that day when we shall come to meet him face to face to spend eternity with him.