

Seeing God in New Ways: Recovery from Distorted Images of God



by Juanita R. Ryan

God is waiting around the next corner with a club to punish me.

God has a mean face, I don't like to think of him looking at me.

These descriptions of God come from deeply committed Christians. Neither person would have signed a doctrinal statement which described God as someone who carries a large club, or as a someone with a mean face. They both would have affirmed that God is a loving and grace-full God. But their private images of God were in direct – and painful – conflict with their intellectual convictions about God.

I have observed in myself and in others that this kind of internal conflict about God is fairly common. It seems that people who believe in a God of love and compassion sometimes experience private images of God which are disturbing.

Why 'Images' Are Important

Our images of God are not the same as our ideas about God. Images are not abstract ideas. They are pictures. That is, they are a powerful combination of thoughts and feelings.

Long before we were old enough to think in words, we thought in pictures or images. These images are loaded with emotion. From the first days of life we began storing memories of our emotional experiences. Images of our mother's face when she was distressed and when she was pleased, or of our father's face when he was angry or when he was laughing – all are stored in our memory. These images became linked with the soothing we felt or with the increased fear we felt in interacting with these important faces and voices. All of our experiences, from our earliest days, have been stored in our minds, some of them as emotionally laden images.

These emotionally laden images of parents or of other early caretakers form the basic foundation of our expectations in relationships with all other people, including God.

Our images of God, therefore, may not be the same as our doctrinal affirmations about God. We may affirm that we believe in a God of love and grace, but our images of God may be of an abusive bully. And the image of God as an abusive bully is likely to have a more powerful impact on our emotions and behaviors than our doctrinal statements about God because our images of God are rooted in early formative experiences.

When we examine our private images of God and discover significant distortions, we may feel horrified at the thought that we could harbor such negative images of God. Viewing God in negative ways may seem unacceptable and frightening. In spite of our fears, however, I believe it is critical that we explore our private images of God. I believe this is important for several reasons.

First, our private images of God can have a powerful impact on our behaviors, even without our conscious awareness. The woman who described God as a bully with a club was paralyzed by this image. Her private images of God kept her from leaving a violently abusive relationship. She was afraid that if she left, she would be punished by God. We need to explore our images of God because they can keep us locked in self destructive behaviors.

A second reason for giving attention to our private images of God is that they profoundly impact our spiritual well-being. When our images of God are distorted, our whole relationship with God can become distorted. We may secretly spend our lives cringing, hiding and running from God – or anxiously performing to earn God's approval. If we have highly negative images of God we will most likely experience a great deal of spiritual distress.

A third reason to pay attention to our images of God is that they are related to our images of ourselves. It has been my observation that for every distortion a person has of God there is usually a corresponding self-distortion. If we see God as a vengeful, punishing God, we are likely to see ourselves as bad and as deserving of punishment. If we see God as a person with impossible expectations, then we will likely see ourselves as a failure or as not good enough.

When I present this material in workshop settings I often ask participants to provide details of the image of God as a bully. Groups of pastors, missionaries and mental health professionals have all been able to quickly fill in this image, because it is such a personally familiar image . The description I have heard goes something like this: God is big; he is angry for some unknown reason; he is demanding and sadistic; you can never be sure if you've pleased him; he carries a club or a two-by-four that he intends to use; he is scowling so that his face is red and contorted; he is unapproachable.

Fortunately, the Bible is rich in powerful and helpful imagery about God. God is pictured in Scripture as King, Shepherd, Comforter, Counselor, Healer, Helper, to name a few. These images from Scripture can provide a dramatic contrast to our disturbing images. Contrast, for example, the image of God as a bully with this description of God as both a powerful ruler and as a tender, gentle shepherd:

You who bring good tidings to Zion
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
See the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and his arm rules for him.
See, his reward is with him
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd;
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.
Isaiah 40:9-11

It is clear that these contrasting images of God (as a terrorizing bully or as a strong, tender shepherd) would have very different effects on a person's feelings and behaviors. The first image, of a bully God would contribute to shame, paralyzing fear, a negative view of self and of the world, withdrawal from God and a sense of hopelessness. The second image, of a shepherd God, however, would create a sense of being known and loved, a freedom to act, a positive view of self and the world, a desire to approach God, and a sense of hopefulness. After working with these contrasting images of God in workshops, I have had people say with tears in their eyes "the difference is you would want to run from the bully God, but the God whom Isaiah describes is a God you would want to be close to, a God you could trust and love."

Common Distortions

It has been my experience that people's images of God are uniquely personal. I think it is crucial that we pay attention to the unique portraits that each of us paint of God, because these descriptions tell a part of our story. There seem, however, to be some general categories of distortions into which many of our unique images fall.

For example, some people imagine God as a person with impossibly demanding expectations. David Semands described this image of God in his book *Healing for Damaged Emotions*:

God is seen as a figure on top of a tall ladder. The person says to himself, "I'm going to climb up to God now. I'm his child, and I want to please him, more than I want anything else." So he starts climbing, rung by rung, working hard, until his knuckles are bleeding and his shins are bruised. Finally, he reaches the top, only to find that his God has moved up three rungs; so he puts on his Avis button and determines to try a little harder. He climbs and struggles, but when he gets up there, his God has gone up another three rungs. God is that inner voice that always says, "That's not quite good enough."

For other people, God may be seen as unsympathetic, emotionally distant, cold, and interested only in facts or performance. People who see God in this way may ask: "How could God understand my problem? Why would God care about what I feel?"

Others of us see God as too busy with important things to care about or to listen. As a missionary kid, I have often struggled with this image of God. I have always been acutely aware of the needs of the rest of the world. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, but one of my recurring images of God involves a long line of people – all the people of the world – who are waiting to be attended to by God. In the image, I am at the end of the line .

Other people see God as abusive, as a bully. This is the God who carries a big stick and enjoys using it to control, threaten and punish people. This God will punish us if we misbehave. It is a distortion many abuse survivors experience.

Still other people see God as unreliable. This God, for one reason or another, cannot be counted on. God may be loving one day and unaccountably angry the next. God may make promises, but they won't be kept. Or, God may be weak, passive or unable to provide the help and protection we need.

A final image of God which is fairly common is of a God who abandons. Those who fear abandonment by God may try hard to please God, hoping that God will not leave. Shortly after I started therapy for myself I had an image come to mind of God holding my hand. We were in a crowd of people. Suddenly, God pulled his hand away from mine and disappeared. I was alone in the crowd.

Each of these distorted images create spiritual distress. After all, who could feel comfortable in the presence of any of these Gods? Who would feel safe? Who would feel loved? None of us.

For healing to take place it is very helpful to ask some questions about how these distortions arise. Where do they come from? How do they develop? The process is probably very complex. Let's look at three important factors:

The Church and Distorted Images of God

Unfortunately, some distortions of God grow out of teaching and preaching in the Christian community that inadvertently perpetuates disturbing, sub-Christian images of God. In Sunday School classes, pulpits and Christian media the good news is sometimes turned into bad news. The gospel of grace sometimes becomes the gospel of shame. And the faith intended to free us from bondage sometimes becomes a heavy burden of performance.

My husband and I co-authored a Bible study series that includes a book entitled Recovery from Distorted Images of God. When this book was being field tested before publication, it was sent to several people, including a pastor who responded with a long letter in which he angrily accused us of perpetuating a distortion of God as a loving God. He insisted that God was in fact abusive, and that in order to avoid this painful truth about God, we were misrepresenting God in these studies. The image of a loving God, found over and over again in Scripture, deeply upset this pastor. I grieved for this man and for his congregation. It is painful to live in relationship with a God whose love can be 'overemphasized'. The Apostle Paul had no such concern when he prayed for all of us that we would have the ability to grasp "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ"(Eph 3:18).

In addition to experiencing some grief for this man and his congregation, I also had another response. While I could see that this was an angry man who imagined God to be an abusive God, his letter threw me emotionally. Because of my own distortions of God, I found myself thinking, "maybe he is right, maybe a loving God is just too much to hope for." I was clearly impacted by his letter.

Distorted teaching from Christian leaders can have a significant impact on our images of God. When people in positions of authority, who claim to be speaking for God, tell us, or in some way imply, that God is mean or impossible to please it carries a great deal of weight. I believe that such teaching is especially impactful on people at vulnerable points in life. People new to faith in Christ seem to be at risk because they may be open to take in as absolute truth the first formal teachings or representations they hear from authority figures about God. In the midst of a crisis we are all also at risk because we are making major psychological changes, are flooded by feelings, and are searching for spiritual direction. And, if we already suffer from distorted images of God, we are also at risk. This is especially true when the distortions being perpetuated match, even vaguely, the distortions we already experience. This is what happened to me when I received the angry letter from the pastor. I was already struggling with distorted images of God as excessively angry and demanding and the letter reinforced these images.

The Family and Distorted Images of God

Another potential contributor to distorted images of God may be the religious dynamics in our families. If parents use God as a 'club' to control their children, telling them, for example, that God

will not love them or that God will punish them if they do not comply with the parents commands, this will have an impact on a child's images of God. If parents are cut off from the emotional or relational realities of life and hide behind some form of rigid religious practice, this will have an impact on a child's images of God. If Mom or Dad are rarely available because they are too busy at church or in ministry, this will have an impact on the child's images of God. And, of course, when a child is emotionally, physically or sexually abused by a religious parent – or one who perhaps actually invokes God in justifying the abuse – this will have a powerful effect on how the child experiences God. In these families God is assigned highly negative roles. God is put in the role of abuser, punisher, controller, or shamer. When God is assigned painfully negative roles in a family system, this is bound to have a major impact on the children's developing images of God.

Our Inner Experience and Distorted Images of God

From the first day of life we each construct internal images of ourselves and others. These images of others which come from experiences in relationship to early caretakers become a part of us that we will likely project onto all other people, especially authority figures, such as God.

Human infants come into the world as vulnerable creatures, completely dependent on their parents for their survival. Infants are social creatures from the start. Infants are not only vulnerably dependent on their parents to meet their physical needs, they are also vulnerably dependent on them to meet their social, emotional and spiritual needs. The vulnerable, dependent infant must be in relation to survive. His physical and psychic life depend on some degree of mutual attachment with his parents. Attachment is the human's first fundamental need. The capacity to trust grows out of the experience of emotional attachment with a nurturing person who provides a non-demanding, non-intrusive presence.

The attachment a child experiences with parents is central to the development of his concept of self and his concept of others, including God. Attachments can be nurturing, holding, mirroring experiences in which the child feels himself to be known and loved and feels that other people are attentive and loving. Attachments can also be intrusive, punitive, easily threatened, rejecting or controlling. In such cases the child experiences that he is not known or loved or and that other people are not available in a nurturing, loving way.

When a child is not greeted with nurturing and empathic responses to his physical, emotional and social needs, his need for attachment will be threatened and the child will make adaptations in order to survive. The child must 'do' something to protect himself. Whatever adaptations a young child makes are valuable because they help him survive. But over time these 'adaptations' can become internal defensive structures which can limit the person's capacity for intimate relating with God and with others.

Most children who have negative attachment experiences will defend against a conscious awareness that they are not loved, and will decide that the problem is with themselves – that they are not lovable. However, unconsciously they will "see" others as not loving, including God. As a result, they will unconsciously avoid true intimacy with others and with God.

When this person grows into adulthood and is told to "trust God" he may find himself wondering what these words mean, because he may in fact have learned to not trust anyone, including God. Fears of being abandoned or hurt will cause him to keep God at a distance. This will help him feel safe, but will leave him isolated and alone, wondering why he cannot trust God, wondering why God is so far away.

Healing Distorted Images of God

Distorted images are wounds that need time and attention in order to heal. Because distortions are often deeply rooted in early life experiences, healing deeply may mean healing slowly.

It is important to remind ourselves that God is on our side in this process. According to Scripture, God is Love and wants us to experience this love in practical ways. God has gone to great lengths to reveal himself and his love to us. In addition, according to Scripture, God is a healing God who is personally invested in replacing our distorted images with images rooted in truth and grace. We cannot fix our distorted images of God by some single act of courage or dedication. Some of us have tried this approach but we are soon forced to recognize our powerlessness over deeply rooted images. What we can do is to risk asking God to personally reveal his grace to us, to heal our distorted images and to give us the capacity to take in divine love.

An important starting point for this healing journey is to explore our private images of God. We might, for example, ask ourselves: What are my worst fears about God? When I find myself avoiding God what thoughts and feelings about God are causing me to pull away? How do I think God sees me? What do I think God expects of me? What pictures come to mind when I think about God? What do my behaviors and feelings tell me about how I see God? This kind of exploration can be painful but it is the kind of truth-telling which leads to healing.

Another important aspect of healing is to begin to talk about our private images of God. This may feel like a risky thing to do. We may need permission and support to express our more disturbing images of God. A trusted friend, a pastor, a support group, or a therapist can be helpful in providing both the permission and the safe place that is needed for exploring these painful images. Telling the truth, even to just one other person, is an important step in breaking the power of distorted images.

It's also true that, because our distorted images of God were formed in relationships, it will be in the context of relationships that the distortions will heal. We cannot do this alone. We need to experience God's love from other people. Investing in relationships which allow us to experience

grace over and over again will make it possible for us to learn to trust, to attach, and to begin to form images of God as nurturing and compassionate. This growing capacity to trust and to attach to other humans will impact our level of trust and attachment with God. New nurturing images will at least be able to compete with our earlier images. Support groups, counseling and friendships can all help provide such healing experiences. These relationships will have limits. People will never be perfect. But "good enough" experiences of love and grace from others, over a long enough period of time, can at least partially repair the damage done by early losses.

A third resource for healing distorted images is to explore possible origins of these images. It might be helpful, for example, to examine the role God was assigned in your family of origin and to look at any similarities between your descriptions of God and your descriptions of your parents and other important people in your life. This process of separating one from the other is, for many of us, a grief process. It involves acknowledging early life experiences for what they were, feeling the loss of what should have been, protesting the unfairness of these experiences and awakening unfulfilled longings. Our distorted images of God may tell us something about the losses and traumas we experienced early in life. Identifying these experiences and grieving them are an important part of the healing process. Seeing the connection between our experiences with early caretakers and our images of God sets in motion a process of separating one from the other. This is how we begin to realize that God is not the same as the humans who have, in one way or another, failed us or hurt us.

The same is true if the source of your distorted images of God lies not within your family of origin but within the Christian community. If you attended a shame-based church during your formative years, it is very likely that this reinforced any dysfunction from your family of origin. Again, the goal of exploring the origins of distorted images is not to assign blame. The goal is to start sorting out who is God and who is not God. That sounds easy enough. But it's not nearly as easy as it sounds. As we explore the origins of our distorted images of God we are in the process of letting go of idolatrous attachments to people (parents, religious leaders and other important people) who are not-God in order to establish a deep, lasting and intimate attachment to the Living and True God.

A fourth powerful resource for healing our distorted images of God is to allow competing imagery from Scripture to have an effect on us. We tend to seek out biblical texts that correspond to our distortions of God and concentrate on them. But we may have a great deal of difficulty taking in the vast, rich, diverse texts that speak of God's love and grace and compassion. I have found it helpful to spend focused time with biblical images of God and to write my personal thoughts and feelings in response. Images which provide a clear contrast to distressing images can be especially meaningful. Examples of images of God in Scripture include God as Comforter, Counselor, Deliverer, Father of Compassion, Father to the Fatherless, Fortress, Helper, King, Light, Mighty One, Mother Eagle, Refuge, Rock, Savior, Shepherd. In order to heal distorted images, we may need to allow our imaginations to engage with the images of Scripture. The text from Isaiah which was quoted earlier is one example of a text which is rich in opportunities for this kind of meditation. We can engage our

imaginings with the text in such a way that we allow ourselves to see God as a powerful King who comes to us; and to see God as a tender Shepherd who gently tends to us and carries us. I have found it particularly helpful to journal my thoughts and feelings in response to such texts and to share them with a friend or with my support group.

The real healer of our distortions is God. God is with us as God-the-Spirit, sent to teach, comfort, counsel and heal. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." (Romans 8:26). It is God's desire that we come to know him as he is. It is God's desire to heal the distortions that cause us to hide from him. God invites us to come into his presence and to rest in his love.

May "the glorious Father, give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Ephesians 1:17). May you come to know the God who has revealed himself to be "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8).

Juanita Ryan is a mental health nurse specialist with a private practice in Brea, California. She is the co-author of many Bible study guides published by InterVarsity Press and of *Rooted in God's Love*, a book of meditations on biblical texts.

<http://www.nacr.org/wordpress/142/recovery-from-distorted-images-of-god-seeing-god-in-new-ways-recovery-from-distorted-images-of-god>