

PICTURES OF GOD
Isaiah 49:13-15

Living God's Word—A Walk Through The Bible
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What is your picture of God? How do you imagine God to be? If you would attempt to draw a picture of God, what things would you want included? I have actually seen people try to draw such a picture and as you can imagine, their ideas and impressions have widely varied. It is extremely difficult to capture the wonder of who God is.

George Gallop, in his polls, has found that more than ninety percent of all Americans say they believe there is a God. Yet the question such a poll does not ask is what exactly these people's image of God is. It is our picture/image of God which really determines how we live in relationship with him.

For example if we see God to be an angry, vindictive, harsh, violent figure, that may shape how we live and how we treat others. Lots of people today see God as unforgiving, hostile, judgmental, inflicting pain on people; as a result they tend to live that way too. Either that or they may live with a certain amount of guilt and fear in their relationship with God.

Yet on the other hand, if we tend to see God as a rather feeble old man with a long white beard sitting in a rocking chair, totally uninterested in the world, that image too will shape our approach to life. It will shape how we worship, how we pray, how much we rely on God for help and strength. What is your picture of God? What image do you have of him?

When we study the Bible, of course, we get several different pictures of God. We see pictures of how the writers themselves experienced God; pictures that reflect the situations the people were in; pictures that pieced and taken together can broaden our understanding of God. The Bible, of course is very specific that no one, except for Jesus, has ever seen God face to face.

You may remember the story in Exodus 33 about Moses receiving the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai and how he wanted to see God. God, however, said that no one would be able to see his face and live; no one could handle the radiance and glory that God reflects. Therefore it says that God hid Moses' eyes passing by and allowed him to see only the back of his robes.

Since no one has seen God's form and face, people throughout the Scriptures then have often used word pictures to try and describe him. In fact, Jesus through his words and stories was a master of painting such pictures. For example, in Luke's Gospel Jesus speaks of God's love as being like a hen gathering her brood under her wings.

Now for people familiar with raising chickens, as these people were, this image would have made a lot of sense to them. I mean, what is more loving and caring than a mother hen protecting and nurturing her chicks, as well as those chicks safely nestled under the wings of

their mother? Jesus is saying that his love, which reflects God's nature, is a caring and supportive love like a mother hen; a love that will protect us against the forces of life.

It is interesting how God is often pictured in the Bible as a mother who cares deeply for her children. In fact in our Walk through the Bible look this morning at Isaiah 49, God is pictured as a mother who has given birth to her child, Israel; has nursed this child at her breast. The question Isaiah asks is—can a mother ever forget her child or have no compassion for the child she has given birth to? The answer, of course, is no.

What a beautiful picture this is. I mean, what love is more beautiful than that of a mother carrying her child in her womb for nine months, going through the trauma of labor and birth, and then nursing that child in the warmth and security of her arms. The Bible tells us a number of times that God is like a mother—God gives us birth, life, care along with the power to be reborn and born again.

The Bible is clear that our image of God is beyond simply being that traditional male figure which the church has often made him out to be. Rather the message is that God is God, the great "I am." God incorporates the most excellent and perfect characteristics of being a female and male. God is pictured in Scripture as a loving mother and father, a loving parent, who nurtures, protects, disciplines, provides for and heals.

This image is extremely important, I believe, so women know that they too are created in the image of God; that God truly understands and cares for them. In a world where the images of fathers and mothers are often distorted by human sinfulness, it is good to know that God is a loving parent who always wants only what is best for us.

A second dominant picture of God in the Bible is the picture of God having ultimate power, of being almighty. This picture often appears in reference to God the creator where God creates and brings things into being simply by speaking the word. It is also seen in the pictures of God being a judge sitting on a throne which has often been used when people have felt threatened.

In fact in the Old Testament, as the Israelites fought many battles to survive as a nation, God is often pictured as a military king leading them into battles. God is often pictured as a human king, as a military hero dressed in full armor, destroying all the enemies standing in the way. This, of course, is one of the reasons why Jesus was not accepted as the Messiah; rather than with power and might he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey of humility.

It is true that many people throughout history have really liked this image. They like the thought of God destroying all the evil people, of God pouring out his wrath on all their enemies. Yet the message of the New Testament is that God has harnessed his power in love and mercy. In Philippians 2, Paul says Jesus emptied himself and rather took the form of a servant.

Jesus washed his disciple's feet; he reached out to the poor and neglected; he suffered and died on a cross. Through Jesus our picture of God is not one to fear. As Psalm 130 says, if God should deal with any of us according to our sins none of us could stand. The good news of Jesus is that God has harnessed his power in love and wants to bring all to faith in him.

Oh how we need to remember this picture. We so often want power, yet most problems in this world arise from this desire. Most marriage conflicts center in the struggle for power. Many of our mixed up priorities as a nation come because we want to be the most powerful. Congress is all about power rather than compromise and doing what is best for people and our country. Pretty strange then that we follow a God who gave up power; who lived by love; who went to a cross; who showed us a new way to live.

The third dominant picture of God is one of being a shepherd and friend. The picture of God leaving the ninety-nine sheep in the fold and searching diligently for the one that was lost; the image of God weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice; the picture of God as the parent of the prodigal child, grieving deeply for his wayward son, running down the road in celebration of his return.

Isaiah 40:11 says, *“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.”* Our God is definitely a loving shepherd and friend.

As we look today at our world and the mess we have made of his creation God must ache to the very center of his being. God aches for us and promises to go with us when we go through the valley of the shadow. He promises to be with those who are hurting, with those whose families are crumbling, with those who are sick or who have lost their job, with those who battle with chemicals like alcohol.

God is with those who are poor or oppressed, who face injustice, who are starving and hungry. Again in Isaiah 61 it says, *“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...”*

God cares deeply and is moved with love and compassion. He seeks to shepherd those in need and wrap his loving arms around those who weep. Jesus wept when his good friend Lazarus died. He wept over Jerusalem and how they had gone astray. In the same way our picture of God can show his eyes full of tears; his heart aching for his broken creation.

So what is your picture of God? It is true that the picture we have of God determines how we relate to him. It determines how we live, how we worship, how we think of and treat ourselves, and how we love and care for others.

My friends, as we paint our pictures of God let us remember these three dominant pictures found in Scripture. God is like a loving parent who nurtures and cares for us. He is an all powerful God filled with majesty, yet that power is centered in being a servant. And God is a caring shepherd and friend who is truly affected by what we are going through each day.

It is as we piece together these pictures that our image and understanding of God is broadened. It is then we can truly enter into a relationship with him; we can trust him as our creator, redeemer and friend.