

Do We Have An Accurate Fixed Perception of God?

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Albert Einstein believed in God. He knew there was a creator God. There was no question about that. If you read his writings that is very clear. He believed God created the universe, but he drew the analogy of God creating a clock; God wound up the clock. In other words, put energy into the clock, put the clock on a shelf and then walked away. Then with a hands-off approach He just watched the clock run just to see what would happen. That was Albert Einstein's view of God.

At the other extreme, the Unitarian Church, if you look at their doctrines, (I did a quick check) they believe that God exists in everything. God is present throughout all of creation. God is in humans; God is in animals; God is in plants; God is in the sun, moon and stars. God is in the earth itself.

Then, of course, in the United States there are those who believe that God is a God of fire and brimstone. Some of you may have come out of that notion that God is this fire-breathing God that is just waiting to punish, waiting to throw lightning bolts. We talked about that in the sermon, Nothing For Our Harm a few weeks ago, but there are people who view God in that manner. My guess is six or seven years ago, and I was doing a young adult bible study. We had teens as well as young adults, and we were talking about the nature of God. It was an interactive study and I gave them a chance to talk, because you find out pretty easily what's on their minds and what their perceptions are. One young teenager, he's now in his twenties, said, "I'm confused. My dad talks about a God that is fire breathing and just can't wait to smash us when we step out of line and you're talking about this cool old guy." When he said that, of course, everybody broke out laughing, but he said, "This cool old guy that loves us and cares about us." So even within the Church we have confusion, certainly on the part of this teenager, about what God is like.

The reality is our perception of God is in many ways influenced by our parents, particularly our fathers, because parents are god to their children. Parents provide food, clothing, shelter, guidance, examples, correction, inspiration and education to young kids, and therefore, young kids look to their parents with almost god-like reverence. The fact is that if our parents, say our dad was harsh, overbearing, then as we come into the Church we would naturally look to God in that same way. Perhaps we grew up in an environment that would lead us to do that. If our parents, particularly our father, took out his frustrations or his anger on his children, then we would then begin to look at God as a God of anger or a God that would strike out in anger.

On the other hand, if we had a dad that was distant, uninvolved, uncaring, then we could perceive God that way, just like Einstein, put it on a shelf and walk away and not all that concerned. If our dad never kept his promises, "Oh, we'll go to the ball game or

we'll go fishing or we'll do this or that", but never kept his promises, then people who had that experience could begin to look at God with a degree of suspicion, lack of faith and not all that sure God will keep His promises. For those who never had a father and we have several in the Church who never had a father, then their concept of God is nebulous, confused and fuzzy because they have never experienced a father. They've never experienced a father figure in their life. So they have an unclear picture of God.

On the other hand, if we've had a loving, kind, gentle, affectionate father yet he established rules and boundaries, then it's much easier for those who had that background to have a true and accurate picture of God.

So our environment and our parents actively have affected our perception of God. Then you take everything that's happened in the Church since the breakup of the Worldwide Church of God, the death of Mr. Armstrong, all the subsequent splits, divisions and gossip and fighting and all of that, all of this has influenced our perception of God. Then we look at the many personal trials that people have; health problems, terminal illnesses, job problems, interpersonal relationship problems. All of these have influenced our perception of God to the point that some people say, "Where is God? I don't see God in all of this." Whether it's a personal issue or something in the Church or maybe in their past, or people have said, "Well, how can this be God's Church?" When Worldwide began to break up, we heard that many times. Even occasionally we hear it today; "Where is God? How can this be God's Church?"

When all of these trials and troubles happen to us, some people say, "How can God let this happen to me?" In that sense, they're judging God. "How dare He do this to me." Many today don't see God in all these events, in their personal lives, in the life of the Church or in the nation, as Dale was talking about. Too many people have had their faith damaged as a result of what I just described. As a result of that, too many people are not as close to God as they should be. This is important because we're getting closer and closer to the end. What has happened is their image of God has changed because of circumstances in their lives and their environment and their upbringing. Their image of God has changed or they never had a correct image of God to begin with. They had an erroneous image of God.

So let's ask the question: Is my image of God real? In other words, would God recognize my image of Him? Has our image of God over the years been unshakable and fixed? Or, do we allow our image of God to change depending upon what is happening to us at any given moment? In other words, if we're having a good day, God is wonderful! Oh, He's so good. He blesses us and everything is wonderful. But if we're having a bad day, do we have the thought that God is out to get me? He's waiting to smash me.

Let's ask another question: If next week let's say each one of us found out that we had terminal cancer; would that change our image of God when we found that out? Would that somehow alter our view of God if all of a sudden we found out that we had some terminal illness?

So the real question is: Does God recognize my image of Him, my perception of Him? We want to have an accurate image of God and once we get an accurate image, we don't want that to change. This subject is of profound importance because as Dale pointed out in the sermonette, things are bad out there and they're only getting worse and this whole house of cards could collapse around our heads very quickly. So we need to have (and this is the title of the sermon) An Accurate Fixed Perception of God. We must have that. Otherwise we will not be able to stand up to the trials and problems that are facing each one of us.

So what we're going to do is establish a couple of background points first.

So the first point we need to establish about having a fixed accurate image of God is: The true image of God, not what people think about God, but the true image of God and Jesus Christ is spiritually revealed.

We've all read the Bible. We've all looked into the Bible and we all know how confusing it was before God began to call us. Though the words are on the paper, unless God's spirit is involved, we cannot have an accurate perception of God.

Let's go to Luke, Chapter 10 and we're going to read verses 21 and 22. I'll read it out of the New King James. It's more understandable. Christ is addressing the disciples and notice what He says.

***Luke 10:21.** In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said ...*

He is talking to God but in front of the disciples.

21b) "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from [the] wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight." (It's part of Your plan and purpose.)

He said, "I thank you Father that you have revealed them to babes." God revealed the truth to these babes, His disciples and by extension, to all of us today.

22) "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son ...

They know each other intimately is what He is saying. Notice this last phrase.

22b) ... and [the one] to whom the Son wills to reveal [Him]." (NKJV)

One of the reasons Christ came was to reveal the Father, and Christ chooses whom He will reveal the Father to. But the only way we can have an accurate picture of the Father is to have that revelation occur through the spirit of God.

Now let's go to 1 Corinthians, chapter 2. Paul is carrying this thought further. We'll read verses 11 and 14. Paul is trying to straighten out a very dysfunctional Church that was off track in many ways and he's trying to tell them something.

1 Corinthians 2:11. *For what man knows the things of a man (separate from the animal kingdom), save the spirit of man which is in him?*

We know the spirit of man is what separates us from the animals.

11b) ... Even so (In a similar manner, he's saying) the things of God knows no man, but the Spirit of God. (KJV)

We cannot know God unless we have the spirit of God which reveals it. Now jumping to verse 14:

14) But the natural man (the human man apart from God's Spirit) receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him (which is true in the society in which all of us live): neither can he know [them], because they (the things of God) are spiritually discerned. (KJV)

They are spiritually revealed. So the only way we can have an accurate picture of God and Christ is to have God and Christ reveal them to us through His Holy Spirit.

Now let's go back to an Old Testament scripture, Psalm 73 and notice what David says. Now in the introduction to this Psalm it says "A Psalm of Asaph" but the margin in the King James correctly reads that as a Psalm for Asaph. It is my opinion that David wrote this Psalm for Asaph.

Psalms 73:1. *Truly God [is] good to Israel, [even] to such as are of a clean heart.*

2) But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.

That happened several times in David's life. He numbered Israel, the situation with Bathsheba; he got on some pretty slippery slopes in his life.

3) For I was envious at the foolish, [when] I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

He looked at how his enemies were seemingly prospered and how people who did not obey God were seemingly blessed.

4) For [there are] no bands ...

This is the King James. The Hebrew means that there's no pain in their death.

4b) ... in their death ...

You know they go to their death and it's not a violent death. They're not in a lot of pain. They die peacefully, and that disturbed him.

4c) ... *but their strength is firm.*

5) *They [are] not in trouble [as other] men; neither are they plagued like [other] men.*

6) *Therefore pride compasses them about as a chain; violence covers them [as] a garment.* (these wicked people)

7) *Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.*
(KJV)

They're just blessed all over the place, these wicked people, David is saying.

8) *They are corrupt and speak wickedly [concerning] oppression: they speak loftily.* (they have pride and vanity)

9) *They set their mouth against the heavens* (they even curse God, curse Jesus Christ, we would say today) *and their tongue walks through the earth.* (gossiping, lying, etc.)

10) *Therefore his people return there; and waters of a full [cup] are wrung out to them.* (They just have everything they need, everything they want.)

11) And they say, "How does God know? and is there knowledge in the most High?" (Is God really the source of all knowledge?)

12) *Behold, these [are] the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase [in] riches.* (He is not happy about this.)

13) *Truly I have cleansed my heart [in] vain, and washed my hands in innocence.* (KJV)

It sounds like us sometimes. "Why am I doing this? I'm being cursed! I try to obey God and I am cursed for it. I try to set a good example and no good deed goes unpunished." As they say in the world today. So David had his tail in a knot about this. I think if we're honest, sometimes we've had that happen to us.

14) *For all the day long have I been plagued and chastened every morning.*

15) *If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend [against] the generation of your children.*

16) *When I thought to know this, it [was] too painful for me;* (KJV)

He was just confused and maybe he had a wrong picture of God, a bad attitude toward God because he saw the wicked being blessed and himself being cursed. But notice verse 17. Here everything changes.

17) *Until I went into the sanctuary of God; [then] I understood their end.* (KJV)

Everything was unclear and fuzzy and confusing, bad fruit until he went into the house of God, meaning we went to God and appealed to God and then a revelation occurred

from God. He said, "When I sought God's revelation, then I understood their end." Verse 18, this is what he understood.

18) Surely you did set them in slippery places: you cast them down into destruction.

19) How are they [brought] into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors.

20) As a dream when [one] awakes; [so] Oh Lord, when you awaken, You shall despise their image.

21) Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. (KJV)

Looking back on his attitude he said,

22) So foolish [was] I, and ignorant. (to have that attitude toward God) I was [as] a beast before You. (KJV)

He's repenting and apologizing for his attitude.

23) Nevertheless I [am] continually with You ...

He learned a lesson. Don't get separated from God. Go to God and have spiritual understanding and revelation.

23b) ... You have held [me] by my right hand.

24) You shall guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me [to] glory.

Notice the conclusion of this. He says,

25) Whom have I in heaven [but You?] ...

And this last sentence is where we all should be.

25b) ...and [there is] none upon earth [that] I desire beside You. (KJV)

Because he knew that revelation and truth and understanding only comes from God and Jesus Christ revealed through the Holy Spirit. This should be our constant desire. And our understanding of God and His ways has to be spiritually revealed, not just reading words on a page. It has to be spiritually revealed and I think we all know that when we look back on our conversion.

So a true and fixed image of God is something revealed to us by Him through prayer (us talking to God and having God put thoughts in our head) through study (us reading of His mind and His words and His ways) through meditation (of thinking things through in our mind; of taking this course or that course) and then finally through experience because the longer we are in the Church, the more we understand that we are nothing without God, we are nothing without His Holy Spirit and we of ourselves will fail unless

we follow God and have an accurate fixed perception of God which is spiritually revealed. That's the first point.

That leads us to the second point. We have to realize that if we are going to have a fixed accurate image of God, we have to realize that God and Christ do not change. They are the only constant in the universe.

We used to think that the speed of light was the constant in the universe, but scientists have found out in the last few years that there are sub-atomic particles that actually go faster than the speed of light. That has blown that one constant out of the water, and the fact is that unlike the speed of light, God and Christ are the only constant in the universe.

Let's understand that more by going to Malachi, chapter 3 and verse 6. We will look at two scriptures under this point, one in the old and one in the new. We know this one by heart. Christ, the God of the Old Testament, is talking really about Himself, but what He says applies to God, the Father obviously also.

Malachi 3:6. For I [am] the Lord, I change not; ...

Then He relates that to the sons of Jacob and He says...

6b) ... therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed. (KJV)

He says, "It's a good thing I change not because when I make promises, I keep My promises." Based on their behavior, it would be easy for a human not to keep promises. But God keeps His promises even though sometimes we don't deserve those promises.

Now let's go into the New Testament to Hebrews 13 and we'll see the fact that Christ does not change. Both He and the Father do not change. We can be so thankful for this. Paul tells us ...

Hebrews 13:8. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today and forever.

No change in the Father and no change in the Son. We can be so thankful for that because it means His plan doesn't change. Think what it would be like to have a God that would change His mind. We wake up one morning and God says, "Oh, ten commandments, no. We're going to have something else. We're going to do it a different way. "The salvation I promised you; no, I changed My mind. We're going to do this." We can be so thankful that God and Christ do not change.

So what has happened to us in our lives, what is happening in our lives, what's happened in the Church, what is happening in the Church over the past several years is part of God's plan. God knows. He either allows it or causes it and it is for our benefit and not for our harm, as we talked about last time. So the fact is in the second point is

that God and Christ do not change. That means we can have a fixed accurate image of God and once we have that, that image should not change.

Now that leads us to the third point which is a logical step from the second. Because God doesn't change, our image of Him should not change.

Let me clarify what I mean. Because God doesn't change, our image should not change. But, let's understand that our image of God evolves over time. As we get closer to God, we understand His word better, we have more experience with God and yes, our picture of God evolves and hopefully it gets closer and closer to the real image of God. That I think we all understand. But our image of God at any moment in time should not change because our circumstances change. If we have an image of God and all of a sudden because something happens in our life or our circumstances change and then suddenly our image of God changes, that should not be.

So what we're going to do under this third point is cover three examples where people's image of God changed because their circumstances changed. This is a warning to us that we cannot allow that to happen.

First, let's look at the nation of Israel. Go to Exodus 15. We're looking at the nation and how the nation viewed God. We're breaking into the story here in Exodus. Israel has seen the miracles, they have left Egypt and they just have come through the Red Sea. They are praising God to the high heavens. What they say reflects an accurate image of God at this moment in time.

Exodus 15:1. Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spoke, saying ...

So this was all put to music.

1b) ... I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously ...

Not us, but God.

1c) ... The horse and his rider has he thrown into the sea.

2) The Lord [is] my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he [is] my God, and I will prepare him an habitation: my father's God, and I will exalt him.

3) The Lord [is] a man of war: the Lord [is] his name.

4) Pharaoh's chariots and his host has he cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea.

5) The depths have covered them; they sank into the bottom as a stone. (KJV)

The remnants of that are there today for archeologists who want to look. Some have found those remnants in a certain part of the Red Sea.

6) *Thy right hand, Oh Lord, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, Oh Lord has dashed in pieces the enemy.*

7) *And in the greatness of your excellence you have overthrown them that rose up against you. You sent forth your wrath, [which] consumed them as stubble.*

8) *And with the blast of your nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as a heap [and] the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea.*

9) *The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them ... (KJV)*

The lust to kill and destroy.

9b) *... I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.*

10) *You (God) did blow with your wind, the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters.*

11) *Who [is] like unto you, Oh Lord, among the gods? Who [is] like you, glorious in holiness, fearful [in] praises, doing wonders? (KJV)*

Who is like unto you, God?

12) *You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them.*

13) *You in your mercy have led forth the people [which] you have redeemed: you have guided [them] in your strength unto your holy habitation. (KJV)*

What an understanding of who and what God is. At this moment in time, Israel had an accurate picture of God, but look what happened just a few weeks later. Go to Exodus 16:1. Notice how their attitude changed because their circumstances had changed.

Exodus 16:1. *And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which [is] between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt. (KJV)*

Not very long after singing all these praises.

2) *And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:*

3) *And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, [and] when we did eat bread to the full; for you have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (KJV)*

Their condition changed. How did it change? Because their bellies are empty. Now all of a sudden their image of God is changed completely. Notice verse 8.

8) *And Moses said, [This shall be,] when the Lord shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the Eternal hears your murmurings which you murmur against Him: and what [are] we?*

Meaning Moses and Aaron. Who on earth are we? You're murmuring against God.

8b) *Your murmurings [are] not against us, but against the Eternal. (KJV)*

So what Israel allowed to happen was that their image of God changed because their circumstances changed. All of a sudden now God is out to get them rather than to rescue them. The fact is during Exodus 15 and Exodus 16, God didn't change. God was the same. They changed because their circumstances changed.

Now let's look at Joshua, a second example. Joshua had an accurate picture of God, but then because his circumstances changed his image of God changed. This is an example for all of us. We are breaking into the account here where Israel is coming up to the Promised Land, and as we know, Moses commanded that they send men into the Promised Land to spy out the land.

Numbers 13:1. *And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,
2) Send you men that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give to the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall you send a man, everyone a ruler among them. (KJV)*

Now let's jump to verse 25.

25) *And they returned from searching the land after forty days.
26) And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land. (KJV)*

They actually brought back produce from this wonderful land that God was ready to give them.

27) *And they told him, and said, We came unto the land whither you sent us and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this [is] the fruit of it.*

They showed it to everybody. Now,

28) *Nevertheless (Oh, oh, here's a problem) the people [be] strong that dwell in the land, and the cities [are] walled [and] very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there. (KJV)*

I'll explain that in a second.

29) *The Amalekites dwell in the land of the south: and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains: and the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and by the coast of Jordan.*

So Caleb could sense that this conversation was going in a wrong direction and in verse 30, he stilled the people before Moses...

30) *And Caleb stilled the people before Moses and said, Let us go up at once and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. (KJV)*

Why? Because God was behind them.

31) *But the men that went up with him said, We are not able to go up against the people; for they [are] stronger than we are.*

32) *And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it [is] a land that eats up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it [are] men of a great stature.*

33) *And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, [which come] of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. (KJV)*

Whiners and complainers and ready to turn tail and run.

Numbers 14:1. *And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. (KJV)*

“Oh, woe is us! Everything is lost. We don’t have a God who can take care of us.”

2) *And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would God we had died in this wilderness!*

Once more Israel has a wrong perception of God and their circumstances caused that perception of God to change.

Notice in verse 6 Joshua’s image of God.

6) *And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, [which were] of them that searched the land, rent their clothes ...*

7) *And they spoke unto all the company of the children of Israel saying, The land which we passed through to search it [is] an exceeding good land. (KJV)*

God wants to give it to us.

8) *If the Lord delight in us, then He will bring us into this land ...*

We don't have to worry. God will do it.

8b) ... and give it to us; a land which flows with milk and honey.

Then they cautioned the people,

9) Only rebel not against the Eternal, neither fear you the people of the land, for they [are] bread for us ...

We will eat them alive. We don't have to worry.

9b) ... their defense is departed from them, and the Lord [is] with us: fear them not. (KJV)

Look at the image that Joshua had when all of those around him were weeping and crying and wringing their hands and moaning with knots in their stomachs. Notice Joshua's attitude. What a clear picture of God.

But, guess what happened? Something happened in Joshua's life. Circumstances changed and he allowed that to change his image of God. Let's go to Joshua, chapter 7. This is after forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Moses is dead, Israel went in across the Jordan to the promised land under Joshua's leadership and they destroyed Jericho by a miracle with the walls falling out flat. All of that has occurred. Now we come to Joshua 7:1.

Joshua 7:1. *But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing:*

The word "accursed" can also mean dedicated and God told them that these things in Jericho are dedicated to destruction. "I want them destroyed, all the idols and all the stuff that they had, just destroy it, burn it and get rid of it completely." But we see here,

1b) ... for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing ...

He took something of the spoils of Jericho that should have been destroyed, that God commanded to be destroyed.

1c) ... and the anger of the Eternal was kindled against the children of Israel. (KJV)

Not just against Achan, but all the children of Israel. Now in verse 2, Joshua doesn't know what happened. Joshua doesn't know what Achan has done.

2) And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai ...

Ai, comparatively speaking, is a tiny little town.

- 2b) *...which [is] beside Bethaven, on the east side of Bethel, and spoke unto them saying, Go Up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai.*
- 3) *And they returned to Joshua and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; [and] make not all the people to labor thither; for they [are] few.*
- 4) *And there (referring to the Israelites) went up of the people about three thousand men and they fled before the men of Ai.*
- 5) *And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them [from] before the gate [even] unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water. (KJV)*

Here this small town put Israel to flight. Notice how Joshua's attitude toward God all of a sudden changed.

- 6) *And Joshua rent his clothes and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. (as was common then)*
- 7) *And Joshua said, Alas, Oh Lord God, wherefore have you at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would to God we had been content and dwelt on the other side of Jordan. (KJV)*

Just like the Israelites; same attitude as the Israelites. He allowed circumstances to change his image of God just as the Israelites allowed their circumstances to change their image of God.

As an aside, why do you think God had ancient Israel remove all of those idols and dedicate all of those things to destruction? It's very simple. One reason is that God wants us to remove any false image we have of Him. How can something carved out of rock or wood portray the Almighty God? Something you could hold in your hand; how could that be? That's one reason why He wanted all of that destroyed, because He doesn't want us to put anything in our minds or in our hands that would change our image of Him. We cannot allow anything to alter our true perception of God. Joshua, a human being, failed in this case and allowed his circumstances to alter how he viewed God. Of course, the message for us is, we cannot do that. We just can't do that.

The third example we want to look at is Peter. We've seen two Old Testament examples. Let's go to Matthew, chapter 16 and see where Peter had the perfect image of Jesus Christ. We're going to see that it was spiritually revealed. It was not revealed by man; it was revealed by God's spirit.

Matthew 16:13. *When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?"*

We would say today, he was asking, "What's the buzz? What are people saying about me?"

14) And they said, Some [say that you are] John the Baptist: some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

15) He said unto them, But whom say you that I am? (KJV)

"I want to know what's in your head. Who do you say that I am?" And Peter in just a sentence nailed it.

16) And Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (KJV)

You know sometimes the simplest answers can just say everything, and Peter said that. But notice what Christ said.

17) And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood has not revealed [it] to you, but my Father which is in heaven. (KJV)

Peter had a true and perfect image of Christ and that gets back to our very first point, it is spiritually revealed and it was revealed to Peter and he nailed it.

Now, guess what happened? When Peter's circumstances changed; they weren't with Christ in a safe environment and when circumstances changed, guess what? Peter's attitude changed. Let's turn to Mark 14. Peter's image of Christ changed because Christ was taken as a criminal and we break into the account where Peter is in the courtyard as Christ is being interrogated by the high priest. Christ has been dragged away from His disciples, treated as a common criminal and under interrogation.

Mark 14:66. *And as Peter was beneath in the palace, there came one of the maidens of the high priest:*

67) And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him and said, And you also were with Jesus of Nazareth. (KJV)

Now what did Peter say? "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God?" He denied it and said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't understand what you're saying."

68) But he denied, saying, I know not, neither understand I what you say. And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew. (KJV)

So then he quickly left that area of the courtyard and went to the porch and the rooster crowed once.

69) *And a maid saw him again, and began to say to them that stood by, This is [one] of them. (KJV)*

70) *And he denied it again. And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely you are [one] of them: for you are a Galilean and your speech agrees [thereto].*

They said, "Even your accent betrays you. We know you're a Galilean."

71) *But he began to curse and to swear, [saying] I know not this man of whom you speak. (KJV)*

From having an accurate picture of Jesus Christ to saying, "I don't even know Him."

72) *And the second time the rooster crowed. And Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times. And when he thought thereon, he wept. (KJV)*

So we see here that the Apostle Peter because of the change in circumstances he allowed that to change his image of God. All these three, Israel, Joshua and Peter changed their image when they were under pressure. They changed their image when they were in dire circumstances.

Well, with that in mind, let's go to James, chapter 1 and we'll read verses 5 through 8. This is a caution to all of us, because we don't want to be in that same situation and have our image and our picture of God change.

James 1:5. *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God (meaning you go to God and you ask) that gives to all [men] liberally, and upbraideth not (the Greek means to express disapproval); and it shall be given him.*

When you ask for wisdom, He gives it and He doesn't beat you over the head and express disapproval because you want the wisdom of God.

6) *But let him ask in faith, (notice this) nothing wavering. ...*

Especially our image of God. We cannot have a variable image of God. That image should not waver.

6b) *... For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.*

7) *For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord. (KJV)*

If our image is not fixed, is not accurate, we're being told here that if we're bouncing back and forth from pillar to post in our image of God, He's not going to answer us.

8) *A double minded man [is] unstable in all his ways. (KJV)*

God wants to look down on us and see that we know who He is and we do not allow our image of God to change based on our circumstances. We are loyal and faithful to Him, we have our mind fixed on Him, we know who He is and that is not going to change because our circumstances change.

Over the years, several brethren (I've had personal experience) have allowed their image of God to change. I talked about that one family back in Boston, Dorothy and I knew, and he counseled with a minister and got some bad advice. The minister said, "Don't worry about your household insurance, fire insurance. God's going to take care of you. He wouldn't allow something like that to happen to one of His people." We talked about that in previous sermons. Sure enough, within a few months, their house burned to the ground. They lost everything and within ninety days after that, they left the Church, and they were bitter. Mom and dad were bitter against God because they went from totally trusting God in their view, with bad advice as I said, and then because a house burned down (a physical thing) all of a sudden there's a different God up in heaven now. There's this mean, horrible God that's out to get us and doesn't like us. That's one example.

Another example I can remember again back in Boston in the '70s. When I moved there I was a deacon and back in those days we had "super deacons". So when I arrived, there were four. I was the fourth deacon and there was one guy that was a super deacon. For those of you who were around in those days, there was the arm band and he basically ran the deacons and basically ran the Church on a physical level. He wasn't shy about exercising authority. I was there a year or two and the minister came (I don't think this was a good idea in hindsight) and said to all the deacons at a meeting, he said, "We're going to make one of you guys an elder." I thought, "Oh, my!" What that did, you see, was set up a spirit of competition. Maybe he did it on purpose to see what our reaction would be. I don't know. I'll have to ask him one day. He's a fine minister in God's Church to this day. After a period of time (six months, nine months or a year) they had made a decision, and the super deacon was not ordained an elder. Someone else was. This guy had been there for years. He was an older man, too. His attitude changed totally; his attitude toward God, his attitude toward the Church, his attitude toward the ministry and his attitude toward everybody in the Church. You could tell, as the Bible says, his countenance fell. Indeed it fell, and he was not the same person. Within ninety days, they moved from Boston to Florida, and a few months after that, left the Church.

Obviously, he and his wife did not have an accurate picture of God and they were in the Church for the wrong reasons. But the fact is they allowed circumstances to change their image of God and look at what happened.

And a third example is of people I know here in the northwest. A number of years ago, there was a lady in her seventies and she thought for sure she was going to live long enough to go to the place of safety and then be trained and resurrected and be in the Kingdom of God. She came down with cancer. She had an operation and apparently

the cancer went into remission, but at some point in time, it came back and as usual when those things happen, it came back with a vengeance. Sure enough that happened. I talked with her several times and talked with her a week or ten days before she died and she was mad. She was mad at God. I picked up the phone and said, "Hi, how are you?" She said, "I'm dying!" She was really angry and throughout the conversation, it became clear that she was mad at God for letting her die, because in her mind God was going to keep her alive until it was time to leave for the place of safety. So, therefore, because God didn't meet her expectations, she was mad at God and somehow God had changed and this is a different God and, "I'm just mad at Him!" She went to her grave a bitter woman because her circumstances changed and God didn't do what she wanted God to do, therefore there's something wrong with God.

You see, we cannot let what other people do change our image of God, like in the case of the super deacon. We cannot let our circumstances dictate our image of God, like in the case whose house burned down or the woman with cancer. We just cannot do that. We've seen three examples where that happened in the Bible and then three other examples and I'm sure you can think of some yourself.

Okay, let's go to the fourth point. This is the last point. The bottom line is we must have a fixed, true image of God and Christ.

What we're going to do in this fourth point is give you three examples; two in the Bible and a personal example of those who had, regardless of their circumstances, did not allow their image of God to change when their circumstances changed or when God allowed them to get in a very high pressure situation.

Let's go to Isaiah 36, and the first example is the king of Judah, Hezekiah. We're actually going to start in chapter 37, but I'll just summarize chapter 36. Sennacherib, king of Assyria came up against Judah. He conquered the outlying cities of Judah. He took them. So the outlying cities were defeated. Then he sent his number one aide, Rabshakeh from Lachis which they just conquered which is twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. They conquered Lachis and then Sennacherib sent Rabshakeh to go to Jerusalem to lay out a deal for King Hezekiah. So what he did was proceed to Jerusalem with a gigantic army, pulled up at the bottom of the wall. Rabshakeh knew Hebrew, so he stood at the wall and spoke in Hebrew and said as loud as he could, "Don't let Hezekiah deceive you all into thinking that he can deliver you." He also said, "Don't let Hezekiah tell you that somehow your God is going to deliver you because he can't do that." Rabshakeh said, "Look at the nations we've already conquered. Their gods didn't deliver them, and in a like manner, your God can't deliver you, so what I'm telling you is you'd better surrender now. We will treat you well. We will move you into a different land, but we won't destroy you, we won't torture you. We will treat you well, so surrender. Don't listen to Hezekiah and don't listen to your God."

Okay, with that in mind, let's go to chapter 37 and verse 1.

Isaiah 37:1. *And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah (heard what I just said) heard [it], he rent his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord. (KJV)*

The first thing he did was to seek God. Then go to verse 15. Notice what he prayed to God; a very short and powerful prayer. Notice his image of God.

15) *And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying,*
16) *Oh, Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwells [between] the cherubim, you [art] the God, [even] you alone of all the kingdoms of the earth: you have made heaven and earth.*

What a picture of God, an accurate picture of God. Then in verse 17 he makes a brief appeal.

17) *Incline your ear, Oh Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Oh Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which has sent to reproach the living God.*

“You; he’s reproaching You.”

18) *Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries,*
19) *And have cast their gods into the fire: for they [were] no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them.*
20) *Now therefore, Oh Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You [are] the Lord, you only. (KJV)*

End of prayer. Done. An accurate image of God; an appeal very quickly to God and notice what happened.

21) *Then ...*

And the implication that it was almost immediate. We don’t know where Isaiah was. Was he in the temple area or somewhere else? We don’t know.

21) *Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah (as fast as a messenger could run), saying, Thus says the Lord God of Israel, (This is the answer. God answered almost immediately) Whereas you have prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria:*
22) *This [is] the word which the Lord has spoken concerning him (this king);*

Notice; talking about Judah.

22b) *... The virgin, the daughter of Zion, has despised you, [and] laughed you to scorn (this powerful king); the daughter of Jerusalem has shaken her head at you.*

23) *Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? And against whom have you exalted [your] voice, and lifted up your eyes on high? [even] against the Holy One of Israel.*

28) *But I know your abode, ...*

He's talking to this king. He says, "I know where you live."

28b) *... and your going out and your coming in and your rage against me.*

29) *Because your rage against me, and your tumult, is come up into my ears, therefore will I put my hook in your nose and my bridle in your lips and I will turn you back by the way by which you came. (KJV)*

"You powerful king. I'm going to deal with you" God says.

33) *Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city (I just love this account) nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. (KJV)*

They would build a bank up against the wall in order to breach the wall. God said, "I won't allow that to happen."

34) *By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, says the Lord.*

35) *For I will defend this city to save it for my own sake and for my servant David's sake.*

36) *Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and eighty-five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they [were] all dead corpses. (KJV)*

So Sennacherib got the message.

37) *So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went and returned and dwelt at Nineveh.*

38) *And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons, smote him with the sword...(KJV)*

Now the historical fact is that if you look at the Assyrian chronicles of that time, they say (because they don't want to admit defeat), that Sennacherib came back to Nineveh on his own accord. But if you look at the chronicles of the nations around at that time, those nations and those chronicles say that a great plague struck his army and he had to come back. These chronicles corroborate the narrative of the Bible.

So despite these dire circumstances that Hezekiah found himself in, his image of God did not change. If you were surrounded by the world's most powerful army and they were telling you to surrender or they're just going to wipe you out, but his image of God

did not change. What encouragement to all of us. We're going to need to hold onto that as we move into the future.

A second example is Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. We talked about that a while back. Let's turn to Daniel, chapter 3. We'll read a few verses. Remember Nebuchadnezzar made an image ninety feet high. He had music composed and he ordered the nation that when they heard the music playing, you must stop what you're doing and bow down and worship this image, of course, of him. These three boys refused. Now we break into the context where they're now standing before this very hot furnace and they're facing the king and the king is ready to toss them into the furnace. I'll read this out the NIV. The boys are saying ...

Daniel 3:17. *If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it (He's got the power), and he will rescue us from your hand, Oh king. (NIV)*

He could do that, but they allowed that it might not be God's will.

18) But even if he does not, we want you to know, Oh king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

Now here they are on the brink of death by burning alive, and they have this fixed and accurate image of God that He can save us. But if He doesn't want to; if it's not His will, we're still not going to bow down and worship this image, because we know it's not true.

In verse 28, after they were spared from the fire, then Nebuchadnezzar said ...

28) Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!" They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. (NIV)

Their situation changed; God did not. As a result, their image of God did not change and they obeyed God knowing that their lives were on the line and yet their image of God did not change.

Now let's talk about a third person. This is a lady I knew. I've talked about her before, but in this context it is a perfect example. She was a deaconess in the Midland, Michigan Church back in the late 50s and early 60s. Her name was Betty Tomich. When I came into the Church, I was on the Canadian border and the nearest Church was 240 miles south, so I drove every Sabbath and got there after sundown on Friday and Betty and her husband, Nick, opened their house to me. For about a year I stayed at their home probably two Sabbaths a month. Other people took up the slack too, thankfully. I couldn't afford motels and all of that plus the gas expense. But I got to know them very well. She was almost like a second mom. She was not quite old enough to be my mother, but I never heard that woman utter a negative word. She was

always happy, she was eager to serve and she took great delight in being with God's people. Talk about an image of God, Betty Tomich had a perfect image of God.

Then in the early 70s, I was living in Boston at the time. My brother was in Michigan, who was an elder in God's Church and let me know that Betty had a brain tumor. I was traveling as soon as I could get out there on a schedule and met up with my brother and then we went to visit her. I was very familiar with the house because I had spent so much time in that house. She was in the back bedroom with all the curtains drawn, blinds closed. It was dark because the tumor made her eyes very sensitive to light and she couldn't stand loud noises and all of that. So we went in and the first thing that hit me was the smell, because the tumor had penetrated her skull and the cancer was actually growing outside of her skull. You know, cancer cells are corrupted and polluted and it was not a pretty picture. If you looked at one half of her face it was Betty Tomich, and if you looked at the other half of her face it began to distort her face with the tumor hanging out and it was not a pretty picture. Not at all.

But the fact is, she didn't change. We tried to talk about her, and she wouldn't let us. "How are you doing? What's happening here? What's happening there? What about these people? What about these other people?" She talked about God. She was very weak, but she would not allow herself to be moaning, whining and groaning. She talked about God. She said, "I'm not afraid to die. I'll be in the resurrection. God is going to take care of me. He isn't going to give me anything I can't handle. So you boys don't worry about me. I am fine." We were just sitting there marveling. We stayed a couple of hours and she started getting tired, so we left and never saw her again.

The fact is that her image of God did not waiver even though this thing was growing inside her head. What a testament and what an example to all of us that this wonderful woman set. Her image of God did not waiver despite that, and our image of God should not either.

So we've seen three examples where individuals have had a fixed stable image of God, a true image of God and it got them through some very difficult circumstances.

So, in closing let's ask the question: Have we allowed our perception of God to change because circumstances in our life have changed? As we have seen, when trials occur our image of God can change if we let it. Because our circumstances have changed, we can let our image of God change if we allow it.

We can also (and this is the sad part) allow our image of God change because of what men do. Now think about that. We allow our image of God to change because of what some human does, in the Church or out of the Church. People have allowed what men do in the Church to degrade their image of God or change their image of God. But you see, during all of this; in Church, out of Church, personal trials, national trials, whatever it might be, God does not change. We cannot allow our vision, our picture of God to change because of our circumstances.

Let's go to a final scripture in James 1 and verse 17. We'll read it out of the NIV. God gives us everything. Every good thing we have comes from Him. This is a very familiar scripture and one we are going to need to focus on more and more as we get closer to the end of time.

James 1:17. *Every good and perfect gift is from above ...*

From God and from Christ.

17b) ... coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (NIV)

We are in the dead of winter and you can go outside and it doesn't make any difference really whether it's morning, evening or afternoon and the shadows are really long. The sun is so low on the horizon. In the middle of summer, of course, if there's a flag pole or something, in the beginning of the morning the shadow is really long. When the sun passes overhead, there is hardly any shadow at all. Then as it goes toward evening again, the shadow gets longer in the opposite direction. That is what this is saying. Shadows shift, but God doesn't shift. The flag pole hasn't done a thing. The flag pole is just there. It hasn't changed, but the shadows are changing all around it, all the time, by the minute.

James is saying to us that God doesn't change like a shadow. God is fixed. God is stable. God is who He is and we can't allow our perception to be determined by what is happening to us at any moment in time. We cannot allow that to happen. Therefore, our eyes should be firmly fixed on God and Christ who do not change. They are real. They are true. They are unchangeable, God and Christ. We cannot allow our image of them to change based on our circumstances. So let's make sure that we have a true, fixed image of God.