

Do I Have an Accurate Perception of God?

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Humans throughout the ages have different perceptions and different images of God. For example, Einstein believed in God but his perception of God was that God created the universe (he didn't have any doubt about that), but he felt that God wound up the clock, put the clock on the shelf, and then walked away, and the rest is up to us; it's going to happen the way it happens and God is not involved. The opposite of that approach is the Unitarian concept of God, that God exists in all things. He's present throughout all creation—He's in all humans, He's in all plants, He's in all animals, in the sun, in the moon, in all the stars, He's in the earth itself—that's their perception of God.

The early Worldwide Church of God tradition was, frankly, that God was a fire and brimstone God. He ruled with a rod of iron and in some cases He was presented as almost taking pleasure in causing pain to get back at people for the evil they'd done. Then there are some who are confused in their image, their perception of God. I talked to a teenager a few years ago and he said, I don't know what to believe because you've got this mean old God, in the Old Testament, that rules with a rod of iron and has got this hammer that's ready to smash us if we step out of line, and then we have this cool loving God in the New Testament who's ready to forgive anything that we do, and, he said, I'm confused—and rightly so, from where he came from. Then other people have a fuzzy image of God. In other words, it's not clear, not personal. They feel that God is really not involved in their life—He's too busy, too far away, not really involved.

The other big factor that influences our perception of God is the influence of our parents, particularly our father, because fathers are almost God-like figures to young kids. If someone had a harsh, overbearing father that took out his frustrations and his anger on his children, then it's understandable that his children would see God that way. On the other hand, some fathers were distant, uninvolved, uncaring, just weren't around and never kept promises, therefore the children of such fathers would tend to view God in a similar way—it's understandable. Then some have never had a father, sad to say. Not having a father, they would tend to have a nebulous image of God, a more fuzzy image of God, because they've never experienced a father in real life. Then you have the wonderful cases—my wife's parents were like this, and her dad, particularly, as a father figure, was loving, affectionate, kind and gentle. If you had a father like that, it's easy to see that you could picture God in your mind as being the same way. My point is that the father figures in our lives influence us in how we perceive God Almighty.

If that wasn't bad enough—all these things that cause confusion in that regard—we in the Church have another problem: Our image of God can be influenced by what is happening to us at any given moment in time. We've all been there. When things are going well, we say God is so good; He just loves me and I just love Him and everything

is wonderful. Then when things are going badly, it's easy to have the thought that God is out to get me or God doesn't like me, or He should have stepped in and stopped that, so He's off doing something and I'm not important to God—people can have that opinion. Then you add, since the breakup of Worldwide, the splits in the Church—those splits and the turmoil and the upset, and the back and forth and all of that—have influenced people's perception of God. I can remember when Worldwide was in the middle of the turmoil, people would say, where is God, where is God in all of this, why is God allowing this to happen? Or how can this be God's Church—I heard that many times. How can this be God's Church? Or how can God let this happen to His Church or to me or to my local congregation?

All of this trouble can influence our perception of God Almighty. Too many today have not seen God in the turmoil and the fact that God is there, and He's looking and He's watching to see what we do and other people do, but He has allowed it to happen and in some cases even caused it to happen—but God is there, and yet from a human perspective some people just don't see God in that. As a result of everything—the trouble and turmoil—people's perception of God has changed or diminished because of the trouble since the mid-1980's, late '80's in the Church. Their perception of God has changed or diminished, or their image of God was never accurate in the beginning, and that has created some problems for people. As a result of that, they're not as close to God as they should be. God is not as real as He should be.

So it's time to ask the question—I ask it of myself and anybody who's watching or listening down the road—is my perception of God true? The way I view God, the way I see God, the way I know God—is it true, is it real? Or does my perception of God change depending on what is happening to me at any moment in time? Is my image of God unshakeable—absolutely unshakeable, or does it change depending on circumstances?

I mentioned the lady in the announcements who found out about her stage-four cancer. What if you found out that you had terminal cancer next week? Think about that. How would that change your image of God? What would it do? One week you're this way and the next week you have terminal cancer, but should our image of God change because of that circumstance? We need to ask those questions. Beyond that, the real question is, does God recognize my perception of Him? Is my perception of Him accurate—does He recognize it? Is my perception related to reality or is just like some of the examples brought up in the sermonette? This subject is of profound importance to all of us as we go forward in these end days. The title of the sermon is:

Do I Have an Accurate, Fixed Perception of God?

Is it accurate and is it unchangeable? We have to establish the foundation and the first point I would like to make is:

1. The true image of God is spiritually revealed.

It doesn't come through the senses, it doesn't come through some human's imagination, or some sculptor figuring out what God looks like—it has nothing to do with any of that. It is spiritually revealed. Let's go to Luke 10:21. I will read this out of the New King James version.

Luke 10:21 *In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and [notice this] revealed them to babes [we are the babes]. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.*

22) All things have been delivered to Me by My Father [Christ says], and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." (NKJV)

What Christ is saying is the only one who fully knows God the Father is Jesus Christ. We're human; we see through a glass darkly. We struggle to know God and we struggle to know Christ. We're not there yet perfectly. Only Christ is the one who knows God perfectly, and is the only human being to ever walk the earth that has a totally accurate perception of God. We're trying to get there but we're not there yet. We'll only know when we become Spirit. Our job is to know God more fully as time goes on. That's what we're tasked with—that's what God wants us to do. Now let's go to 1 Corinthians 2:11. This is under the point that the image of God has to be spiritually revealed. The image of Christ has to be spiritually revealed. Unless noted otherwise I always quote out of the King James version.

1 Corinthians 2:11 *For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God [or by the Spirit of God].*

14) But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ... (KJV)

As was pointed out in the sermonette, these artists, these sculptors, these painters, they don't know—they just don't know.

14 continued) ... for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they [the things of God] are spiritually discerned. (KJV)

We need to understand that—that the revelation to us of God comes from the Holy Spirit. Now let's go to Psalm 73:1. Under the heading of that it says "A Psalm of Asaph" but the margin in the King James says a Psalm *for* Asaph indicating that David wrote it 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 [David is saying], my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. (KJV)

He was in a dangerous spiritual condition.

- 3) *For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
- 4) *For there are no bands [the King James says the Hebrew means pain] in their death [they have an easy death]: but their strength is firm.*
- 5) *They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.*
- 6) *Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment.*
- 7) *Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.*
- 8) *They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily.*
- 9) *They set their mouth against the heavens [they blaspheme God], and their tongue walketh through the earth. (KJV)*

Verse 10 through 13 I'm going to read out of the New Living Translation [the pre-1986 online version].

- 10) *And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words [all these evil people's words].*
- 11) *"Does God realize what's going on?" they ask. "Is the Most High even aware of what is happening?"*
- 12) *Behold, these are ungodly who prosper in the world—they increase in riches.*
- 13) [Notice this, this is the conclusion that David is coming to when he's thinking about all this] *Was it for nothing that I kept my heart pure and kept myself from doing wrong? (NLT)*

Sounds like us sometimes—am I doing this for nothing because I'm not being blessed? Back to verse 14 out of the King James:

- 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 thy children.*
- 16) *When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;*
- 17) [Notice the first word] *Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. (KJV)*

In other words this thing wasn't revealed, this conundrum wasn't revealed to David *until* he sought God, he went into God's sanctuary and asked for help and he had a spiritual revelation. In verse 18 (he goes on), because he sought God and God revealed it to him, notice how things change:

- 18) *Surely thou didst set them in slippery places [all these people that had been blessed before, he thought]: thou castedst 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 awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.*

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

22) *So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.*

23) *Nevertheless [because of this revelation] I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.*

24) *Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.*

25) *Whom have I in heaven but thee? [what a revelation] and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee [meaning God Almighty]. (KJV)*

This should be our constant desire: There's nothing I desire more than God—God is my total desire. To get to know Him better, to be close to Him, to behave like Him, to think like Him and obviously Jesus Christ, too. Our understanding of God and our understanding of Christ and our understanding of Their ways must be revealed to us by God and by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. That's about as simple as it gets, but we have to rely on that and understand it. Once that revelation occurs we can have a true, fixed image of God and that is spiritually revealed; it does not come from man, it comes through prayer, it comes through study, it comes through meditation and it also comes through experience. When God has intervened in our lives and then we look back and see it, and maybe it was a painful experience, but we know God is there and we know He loves us. So the first point is that spiritual revelation gives us a correct image of God.

The second point we've got to realize (again building a foundation):

2. God and Christ do not change.

They are the only constant in the universe (unlike the speed of light which we're finding out is not even a constant). God and Christ are the only constant. Let's go to Malachi 3:6 and see a scripture about God, in the last book of the Old Testament; it's very direct. God says it very plainly:

Malachi 3:6 *For I am the LORD, I change not [pretty clear]; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. (KJV)*

God is saying, it's a good thing I don't change! Because if God changed based on what Israel did, He's saying, if I changed based on what you did, I'd wipe you off the face of the earth—it's a good thing I *don't* change. Let's see a scripture about Christ, Hebrews 13:8. Both of Them are constant—they do not change.

Hebrews 13:8 *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. (KJV)*

What has happened in the Church, what is happening in the Church, or whatever is happening in your life is all part of God's plan. It didn't sneak up on Him, it didn't catch Him unawares, it didn't catch Him while He was on vacation, or some other part of the

spiritual world or the physical world, and somehow caught Him by surprise—no—it is all part of God’s plan because He knows what happens, He causes sometimes what happens or He simply allows what happens. But He is involved and He knows. We are promised that whatever He causes or allows to happen in our life, it is for our good, our benefit. Romans 8:28—all things work together for good to those that love God. We can count on that. The point, ending this second point, is that God is always there. God never changes. Same is true for Jesus Christ. The third point we want to look at is:

3. We’re going to look at three examples in the Bible where people’s image of God changed to their hurt, to their detriment.

Having said that, yes, our perception of God should change over time as we get to know Him better—that will happen: Our understanding of God evolves over time as we study more, we learn more about Him, we have more experience and as God’s Spirit works with us, but I’m not talking about that. Our perception of God should not change because of our changing circumstances. That’s the important thing—our perception of God should not change because our circumstances change. Now let’s look at the first one—if you like to outline this will be 3A:

3A. Israel’s perception of God and how it changed.

Let’s go to Exodus 15:1. The context here is that Israel has come through the Red Sea and they as a nation sing a song praising God for what He has done. Notice their image of God here in Exodus 15—notice what they say:

Exodus 15:1 Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD [God Almighty], and spake, saying [this is what they’re singing], I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously: [Dwight Armstrong put this into a song] the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

2) The LORD is my strength [Israel says] and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God [they say ... who is their father? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so that is God Almighty; you can confirm that in Acts 3:13], 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 hath 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.

6) Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy. (KJV)

Keep in mind their image of God—their perception of God—it’s true and it’s accurate.

7) And in the greatness of thine excellency thou hast overthrown them that rose up against thee: thou sentest forth thy wrath, which consumed them as stubble.

8) *And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as an 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; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.*
10) *Thou didst blow with thy wind [referring to God], the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters. (KJV)*

Notice their perception in verse 11.

11) *Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*
12) *Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them.*
13) *Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation. (KJV)*

At this moment, Israel had a correct, accurate perception of God. Now go to Exodus 16:1 and look at the change in a few weeks. After this glorious singing to God, and having an accurate perception of God, notice the change:

Exodus 16:1 *And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto 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.*
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 ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*

The people's perception of God changed—why?—because they were hungry. Think about that—you get hungry, then your vision, your perception, your understanding of God completely changes. That's not a good sign—not a good sign at all.

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 LORD heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we [who is Moses and who is Aaron]? your murmurings are not against us, but against the LORD. (KJV)*

Their perception of God changed because their circumstances changed—can't let that happen. You see, their circumstances changed but God did not change. God is the same. There's a huge lesson to learn from that. When we go through adversity, when we're hungry or when bad things happen to us we can't let that change our image, our perception, our understanding of God. That's the first one.

Now let's look at a mighty man of God and see how his perception of God changed.

3B. Joshua's perception of God changed.

Let's go to Numbers 13:1. Israel is coming up to the Promised Land. God is speaking to Moses. Notice what Joshua's attitude is in this occasion:

Numbers 13:1 *And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
2) Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them. (KJV)*

Jump to verse 25. They went out and searched the land.

*25) And they returned from searching of 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 shewed them the fruit of the land.
27) And they told him [they told Moses], and said, We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it [they brought examples].
28) Nevertheless 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 [the giants].
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.
30) And Caleb [the people were getting restless now, they were getting upset] stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.
31) But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we.*

This is after God parted the Red Sea and defeated the largest, most powerful army in the world up to that point.

*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 eateth 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)*

So here is this evil report; God promises to be with them but they don't believe it. Now let's go to Numbers 14:1.

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

2) *And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron [they were really murmuring against God]: 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! (KJV)*

Once again, Israel had a wrong perception of God and it was based on their circumstances at that moment in time—their present circumstances. Notice Joshua in verse 6.

6) *And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes: [they weren't happy]*

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

8) [Joshua is saying this] *If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. (KJV)*

Then Joshua and Caleb both said:

9) *Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not. (KJV)*

Joshua had a proper, correct image of God. He was going against the others that were giving the bad report—he stood up. With that in mind let's go to Joshua 7—this is forty years later, after Israel's entry into the Promised Land, and it's just after the destruction of Jericho. Read the first half of verse 1.

Joshua 7:1 *But the children of Israel [Jericho has been destroyed] committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan ... of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing ... (KJV)*

The Hebrew word for “cursed” means *dedicated*. We'll see that what he took was dedicated to destruction, it was dedicated to be destroyed—he didn't do that, he took it. What he did is (of the spoils of Jericho) he took an item that was dedicated to be destroyed because God told them to do so. The thing that he apparently found was a household god—a little idol. God told him to destroy it—told Israel to destroy all those things and Achan did not. The latter part of verse 1:

1 continued) ... and [because of that] the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel.

2) *And Joshua [at this time he didn't know what Achan had done] sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Bethaven, on the east of Bethel, and spake 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, [it's not necessary] 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 labour thither; for they are but few. (KJV)*

Ai was a small town compared to Jericho—not many people there.

4) *So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they [meaning the Israelites] 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 [meaning the going down of the sun]: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water. (KJV)*

This small army put Israel on the run.

6) *[Joshua didn't know why] 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. (KJV)*

Notice the change in Joshua's attitude:

7) *And Joshua said, Alas, O LORD God, wherefore hast thou 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 Jordan! (KJV)*

Look at how Joshua's attitude changed and it was just like Israel—why did you bring us out here in this wilderness to do this to us? As an aside, as pointed out in the sermonette, why do you think God had Ancient Israel remove the idols? Why did he dedicate them to destruction? One reason was to remove false images of Him. So if people had an accurate image of God, a picture of Him and people would paint or carve or whatever, people would bow down to that thing made of stone or wood or whatever. God told them, don't you touch those things. Destroy them—melt them down—cut them to pieces. The reason God didn't want false images of Him was so in their place they could have a true image of God—not something to fall down and worship but something up here in our minds.

3C. Peter's perception of God changed from a true image to one that was not true.

Peter had the correct understanding of who Christ was. Let's go to Matthew 16:13.

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?*

14) *And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.*

15) *He saith unto them, [okay] But whom say ye that I am? [notice Peter's statement]*

16) *And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. (KJV)*

Can't get any more clear than that.

17) *And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, [who revealed it?] but my Father which is in heaven. (KJV)*

This goes back to point number one, that the true understanding, image, perception of God is spiritually revealed by God Almighty.

Notice how Peter's perception of God changed after Christ was taken captive as a criminal and He was being interrogated by the High Priest. Let's go to Mark 14:66; I think you know where we're going with this.

Mark 14:66 *And as Peter was beneath in the palace, there cometh one of the maids of the high priest:*

67) *And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him, and said, And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth.*

68) *But he denied, saying, I know not [I don't know this guy], neither understand I what thou sayest. And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew.*

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

70) *And he denied it again. And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaean, and thy speech agreeth thereto [his accent].*

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

Contrast that with what he said in Matthew 16: You're the Son of the Living God.

72) *And the second time the cock crew. And Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. And when he thought thereon, he wept. (KJV)*

We see here that Israel, Joshua, Peter, let their perception of God change when pressure arose and their circumstances changed. Let's go to James 1:5. James condemns this and we've all been there, we've all allowed our image of God, our

perception of God to change based on our circumstances but the longer we are in the Church, the more we know God, the more fully we know Him, we can't let that happen and it won't happen if we know God fully.

James 1:5 *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; (KJV)*

The Greek for "upbraid" means *to express disapproval*. God gives liberally, He doesn't ride us or express His disapproval.

5 continued) ... and it shall be given him.

6) But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering [and, I might add, especially our perception of God—our perception of God should not waver]. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

7) For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.

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

Especially a double-minded person who is doubled minded about God, about who God is, what He's like, what His activities and what His titles are—if you don't understand that, if somebody doesn't understand that, you can be double minded and be influenced by what's going on around us. Let me give you some examples. Over the years in the Church (I've been in the Church well over fifty years now, it's hard to believe) I've known several brethren who've allowed their perception of God to change. There was a family in Boston who had a house fire and they lost everything. Burned it right to the ground. The husband purposely did not have homeowner's insurance because the minister counseled him that you didn't need it because God's going to protect you and take care of you so you don't need man's insurance. So the house burned down and he got mad with God for allowing it to happen and he left the Church. Just walked out. About a week after the fire, he was gone and the whole family was gone, never to return because they were mad at God for allowing it to happen.

Another instance—this goes back to the '60's and early '70's—we used to have super deacons back then; there were deacons and then there were super deacons. At the Feast you would know a super deacon because he had a black armband. He was, if you put it in military terms, the chief master sergeant—the other deacons were sergeants but he was the chief master sergeant. There was another man, he was a deacon, obviously, and there was a group of other deacons there at the Church, and time came to ordain one of them an elder, and he wasn't ordained the elder, and you know what happened about two months later? He left the Church because he was not ordained as an elder. He was mad at God for not ordaining him and he was mad at God for ordaining this other guy. You can't do that unless your perception of God is totally out of whack. You wouldn't do that if you understood who God is and what God's plan is and what God is like. It's just amazing.

Let me give you another example—this was a lady in the State of Washington. She was fixated on going to the place of safety, as were many people back then—just had to go to the place of safety. She began to feel bad so she went to the doctor, and after a number of tests she was diagnosed as having terminal cancer. She wasn't in the specific area where I was at the time but I knew her and I called her. I was trying to encourage her and commiserate with her and I was totally shocked because she was mad. She said, "God promised me that I was going to the place of safety. God promised me that I was going to live until Christ returned and I'm going to die", and when she said, "I'm going to die", she spit it out with a lot of vehemence.

I tried to reason with her about God's Plan for all of us (and you look at the long term), and the goal is to be in God's Kingdom, not go to the place of safety, and she would have none of it. She died bitter against God. Before she was diagnosed, everything was great—God was great—I'm going to the place of safety. After she was diagnosed, God was this mean, awful Being that's out to get me—wants me to suffer.

We can't let our circumstances dictate our image of God. We can't let what other people do dictate our image of God. Since God doesn't change, our perception of God cannot change, and we can't allow people or circumstances to change our perception of God.

For the fourth point, let's look at:

4. Three examples in the Bible of a true, fixed perception of God.

The first one:

4A. Hezekiah, King of Judah.

You can be turning to Isaiah 37, and let me summarize, while you're doing that, Isaiah 36. In Isaiah 36, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, assaulted (as he was coming toward Jerusalem) all the cities of Judah that were in the path between his army and Jerusalem, and defeated them—every single one.

He sent his top general, Rabshakeh, from Lachish, which is the last city they conquered, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. Rabshakeh came to Jerusalem with a great army, and he had a message for the people of Jerusalem.

He had a plan. He stood at the base of the wall of Jerusalem and he spoke in Hebrew, and he was speaking to all the Jews on the wall because he wanted the Jews to hear what he had to say. He said to them, don't let Hezekiah deceive you because he's not going to be able to deliver you—don't let him lie to you. Don't believe what he says when he tells you, your God, the LORD God, is going to deliver you because He's not going to deliver you.

Then he asked the question, from down at the base of the wall, have any of the gods of the other nations delivered their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Has anybody defeated him or any of their gods defeated him? And of course not—he was stating reality. He was saying, look, if you don't surrender, the same is going to happen to you. If you do surrender the king will treat you well, so why die? That was the message that Rabshakeh was giving to the people and secondarily to Hezekiah. Now let's go to chapter 37 and see what happened—verse 1.

Isaiah 37:1 *And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD.*

15) *And Hezekiah prayed unto the LORD, saying,*

16) [Notice his perception of God] *O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth. (KJV)*

Hezekiah had an accurate picture, perception, image of God Almighty. Now he makes an appeal.

17) *Incline thine ear, O LORD, and hear; open thine eyes, O LORD, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. (KJV)*

Now what he does is state reality.

18) *Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, (KJV)*

Up to that point Hezekiah was telling the truth: God, nobody has defeated them. By saying that, he's saying, look, Father, the image is pretty bad here, this is pretty grim.

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, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the LORD, even thou only.*

21) *Then [this happened immediately, just after he said this prayer] Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying, [God spoke to Amoz; whether it was a vision or just heard it in his mind, heard it with his ears, we don't know] Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria:*

22) *This is the word which the LORD hath spoken concerning him; [Notice what God says, talk about encouraging—how would you like to be on God's side?] The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee [referring to Sennacherib], and laughed thee to scorn; [this nation that's hiding behind the walls—they've laughed you to scorn] the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee.*

23) *Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel.*

28) [God is speaking] *But I know thy abode [...Sennacherib. I know where you live!] and thy going out, and thy coming in, and thy rage against me.*

29) *Because thy rage against me, and thy tumult, is come up into mine ears, therefore will I put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.*

33) *Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, [How would you like God to defend you this way?] He [referring to Sennacherib] shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it.*

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

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

36) [Notice what happened] *Then the angel of the LORD went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand [that is 185,000]: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.*

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

Here's a historical fact—the Assyrian chronicles say that Sennacherib went back to Nineveh of his own accord, but the chronicles of the surrounding nations say that a great plague struck his army. The Assyrians altered history to make themselves look good—it happens all the time. This should be an incredible encouragement because Hezekiah held on to his accurate, fixed image of God despite the circumstances, and look at the outcome—what a blessing.

4B. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Remember the context that Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and he commanded that whenever this certain music was played, everybody had to stop what they were doing and bow down, face this image, and bow down and worship. Now, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were boys—probably teenagers—they're standing (let's turn to Daniel 3) before a very hot furnace facing the king. Very grim situation, not a lot of hope if you look at the physical circumstances. Daniel 3:17, and I'm going to read this out of the NIV. The boys are speaking—notice what they say.

Daniel 3:17 *If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. (NIV)*

They leave open the possibility that they're going to die:

18) *But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*
23) *and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. (NIV)*

They didn't change their image of God based on their circumstances.

24) *Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."
25) He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." (NIV)*

I believe that was Jesus Christ. Who else would it be? Imagine you're these three boys, cast into this fire, and all of a sudden, you're expecting to be burned up, you're expecting to feel heat and your flesh searing but all of a sudden you're walking around and there's this being there, looking like the son of man, and I imagine Christ says, boys, I'm with you, don't worry—everything's going to be okay. That is what the true image of God is. They could have died, yes, and God could have resurrected them at the appropriate time, but God intervened. Now look at verse 28—this is after they were spared in the fire.

28) *Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel [again, I believe that was Jesus Christ] and rescued his servants! They trusted in him [despite the circumstances, despite the dire consequences] 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.*

This is Nebuchadnezzar talking and you have to have an accurate, fixed image of God down to your very foundation or they couldn't have done that. Their situation changed, God did not change. Their perception of God did not change.

Let's go to the third and last—this is not in the Bible, it's a personal example.

4C. Betty Tomich, a deaconess in the Midland, Michigan church.

When I came into the Church in the mid-'60's, I was still in the air force. I would drive from the Canadian border down to Midland, MI; it was about 240 miles one way. Betty and her husband opened up their home to me just about every Sabbath and I stayed in their home and got to know them quite well and learned a lot. When you first come into the Church people teach you a lot of things and Betty and her husband taught me a lot.

I moved to Boston in the early '70's and then I heard by the grapevine that Betty had been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. I was traveling throughout all the Midwest at the time, and my brother who is in the Church lived in Michigan, so I planned a trip and we hooked up and went to visit Betty. The side of her skull was bulged out because

of this tumor and one eye was closed because of this tumor. The side of her face was drooping because the nerves were being compromised that controlled her face, and she looked pretty bad and the smell in the room was pretty bad. But Betty was the same Betty. We walked in and asked how she was doing. She quickly changed the subject and asked how we were doing—typical of her. She was at peace, she was happy, she knew who God was, she said God can heal me or God can resurrect me, it's up to God and I will gladly accept whatever He decides. We had a wonderful visit. It was positive, there was no “why me, God's out to get me, God hates me”—none of that whatsoever. She was at peace knowing she was in God's hands. Then we left and it was two or four weeks later and we heard she died. She went peacefully—but she died.

When I look back on that, she set a perfect example of how we should face the end of our life. Her perception of God did not change despite that; she knew God was on His throne and just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (they could be destroyed in the fire or they could be rescued in the fire), she could be rescued from cancer or cancer could take her life, it didn't make any difference because the Kingdom was the Kingdom and she was going to be there—what an example. In all of these three, these brethren—they were brothers and sisters of ours—had an accurate, stable image of God and that is something we need to pursue as God's people.

We're going to close now by asking the question: Does my perception of God change because of the events in my life? Do I allow that to happen? As we've seen, as trials occur our perception of God can change if we let it, because of circumstances in our life, or what other people do—we allow our image of God, our perception of God to change. The real God, the true God, never changes. During all the trials in the Church, during all the trials in our life, God is a constant—He has never changed, He is the same. Let's go to one closing scripture: John 17:3. This is what we need to pursue, because when times are fraught with danger, Satan is after us—health problems, no matter what it is—this is what we need to keep our mind on.

John 17:3 [This is Christ Himself speaking] *And this is life eternal [pretty important stuff], that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou [God the Father] hast sent. (KJV)*

These are our marching orders, that we need to know God and Christ more fully so that when we have problems—our circumstances change, people say or do things to us or set bad examples for us—it doesn't change who God is and we know it. It doesn't change our perception of God. We know who He is. He is there in the middle of trials and He does not change. We cannot let our perception of God be determined by what is happening to us—we just can't. We've seen examples where it has changed and we've seen examples where people had a fixed, permanent image of God. In closing, our eyes should be firmly fixed on the real, true, unchangeable, Almighty, Living, Most High God and on His real, true, unchangeable, Living Son. As we go forward, let's strive to make sure we have a true, fixed image of God.