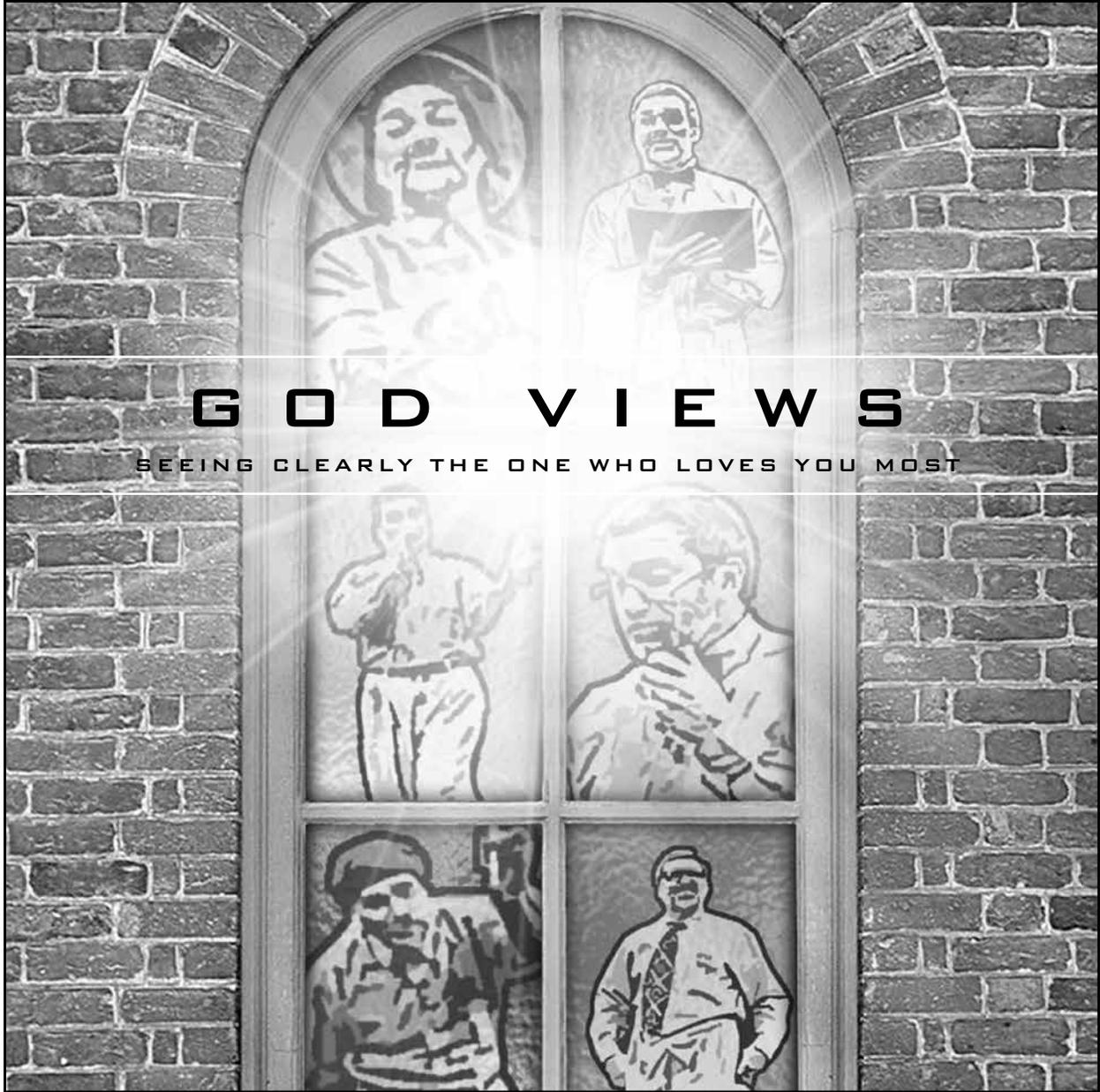


# G O D V I E W S

SEEING CLEARLY THE ONE WHO LOVES YOU MOST



# GOD VIEWS

SEEING CLEARLY THE ONE WHO LOVES YOU MOST

RESOURCE GUIDE

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**G O D V I E W S**  
SEEING CLEARLY THE ONE WHO LOVES YOU MOST

**R E S O U R C E G U I D E**

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*God Views Resource Guide*

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# Introduction

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## FOREWORD

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Reading J. B. Phillips' book, *Your God Is Too Small*, inspired Curt Cloninger. His musings eventually took the form of an original drama, *God Views*, that he wrote and has performed for almost two decades—before audiences of 40 to 40,000.

In 1986, Curt produced a special video version of *God Views* that has been very well received. In the spring of that year, I was privileged to see Curt perform *God Views* and was deeply moved. I snapped up a copy of the video and began showing it in a variety of settings—college, seminary, graduate, and Sunday school classes. The audience response was often amazing. And each time I showed the tape, it seemed Curt was flooded with requests from students who wanted to purchase his video.

Several years ago, LifeSprings Resources contacted me concerning their desire to produce a series of curriculum materials designed to enhance authentic Christian transformation. We developed a dream list of courses and instructors. Always at the top of our list was a course featuring Curt Cloninger, designed to correct misconceptions concerning God and enhance an accurate view.

We contacted Curt about this project, and he graciously agreed to perform *God Views* in front of a live audience—theater in the round. He also agreed to write some more vignettes to help underscore additional theologically correct pictures of God. Around this video base a course has been written.

This course is bound to challenge subtle heresies about God we may hold, while encouraging a fresh and clean image of our creator. As you participate, we believe you will experience a deeper intimacy with and love for your heavenly Father. We also believe you will see our logic in placing *God Views* as the initial course in our *Curriculum of Christlikeness* series. After all, the genuine transformation of Christian formation begins with our learning to enjoy practicing the presence of God. Spending time with Him. “Wasting” time with Him. But for this to happen, we must shatter the false images of Him—pictures that would make us want to run and hide instead of stop to be embraced.

We hope you find this combination of video clips, class discussions, spiritual exercises, and Bible studies to be just the right combination to help you experience the rich mosaic of our God.

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## HOW THIS RESOURCE GUIDE IS ORGANIZED

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### ■ Overview

This resource guide is divided into twelve sessions (lessons). Each 45-minute session involves an integration of a section of the *God Views* video with material presented in the resource guide and participant's guide.

For each session, *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session, *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)

Each session is divided into six parts:

Before You Lead  
Introduction  
Warm-Up  
Content  
Bible Study  
Summary

(Note: The middle five sections—Introduction, Warm-up, Content, Bible Study, and Summary—will serve as the session outline. The additional sections—Before You Lead and Appendix—are resources for the participants that the leader will decide how to use each week.)

### 1 Before You Lead

Before going on to the lesson itself, you will be presented with a brief overview that will include a synopsis, outline, list of materials you will need, and (for some sessions) some recommended readings. It is not necessary to complete the additional reading. All you need to be an effective group leader is contained within this packet and between your ears. However, if you teach this course several times, you may want to read for additional depth and breadth.

### ■ Synopsis

The material provided in this section is for the leader's information. The synopsis is a lesson summary that often contains a story, illustration, or teaching emphasis tied to the main idea for the session. It can be used as part of your introduction or to help stimulate further discussion. Some of the exercises for participants will be related to this synopsis of the lesson.

### ■ Session Outline

An at-a-glance overview of the content and activities to be covered throughout the lesson.

### ■ Materials

The materials listed above are very important for both the leader and each participant. When additional materials are needed (very rarely), you will find them listed in this section.

## 2 Introduction

Includes calling the class together, an opening prayer, and a brief review. This time period should be customized to the personality of the individual group—but should not exceed 5 to 10 minutes.

## 3 Warm-Up

These exercises and/or questions are designed to help everyone begin thinking about the session topic. Warm-up may include a retelling of the illustration presented in the synopsis or refer to material presented in the participant exercises.

## 4 Content

The majority of class time is focused on content through which you will guide the participants. This will always include viewing the video vignette, tips for leading discussion, and suggested exercises.

## 5 Bible Study

Bible studies are provided for each lesson and found in both the resource guide and the participant's guide.

## 6 Summary

This section will include a review of what was covered in the session and occasional suggestions for “homework” or “journaling” exercises. Following the summary section will be an Appendix of exercises and Bible studies.

## 7 Recommended Reading

The leader is invited to read appropriately from additional resources—such as J. B. Phillips' *Your God Is Too Small*. Again, this is not an expectation and is not necessary for the lessons to be effective. These reading suggestions can be passed on to eager participants as well.

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## BEFORE THE FIRST SESSION

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The *God Views* curriculum is designed to be user-friendly. We know it is the rare teacher who has several hours each week to prepare for leading class. We suggest the following preparation (probably less than one hour of your time):

- 1 Watch the appropriate video segment and have the video cued for class.
- 2 Make sure there will be enough pens or pencils for the participants.
- 3 Familiarize yourself with the standard structure of presentation (as previously outlined).
- 4 Read through the resource guide for the lesson and make a few notes for yourself in the space provided in the margins. Read the Scriptures referenced in the Bible study.

### ■ Unique Features

- 1 No requirements for students before coming to class.
- 2 Homework and additional readings for students who become inspired during class and want to go further.
- 3 More material than you will need—exercises can become homework.
- 4 The leader is more of a facilitator than a verse-by-verse teacher.
- 5 Flexibility concerning presentation style (e.g., you may use a small group or large group format for discussion and use of exercises).

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## TIPS FOR LEADING GROUP DISCUSSION

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- 1 Allow group members to participate at their own comfort levels. Not everyone need answer every question.
- 2 Ask questions with interest and warmth, and then listen carefully to individual responses. Remember: No answer is too insignificant.

Encourage and affirm each person's participation.

- 3 Be flexible: Reword questions if necessary. Take the liberty of adding or deleting questions to accommodate the needs of your group.

*And speaking of flexibility, whenever discussion times are teeming with life, do not feel obligated to complete the entire session plan. As a rule of thumb, good discussion beats a structured lesson, but the recommended structure beats lifeless discussion. Again, flexibility and sensitivity are the keys. Any of the exercises can become "homework" assignments if the group becomes pressed for time due to helpful and energetic discussion.*

- 4 Ask for (and expect) differences of opinion and experience.
- 5 Don't be afraid of silence. Allow people time to think. Digestion takes time.
- 6 Never force someone to disclose "homework" or "journaling" activities. In fact, assure them up front that such disclosure will never be required.
- 7 Many items in your session notes (particularly those labeled "Question," "Exercise," and "Discussion") are written in second person to allow the leader to read these words directly to the participants.
- 8 Allow participants to decide if they would prefer to do exercises in small groups (four to six members) or as a large group (entire class).
- 9 You may need to remind participants that the first six portrayals of God are false views—exaggerations of a truth to the point that it becomes heretical. Newcomers to the class may need this reminder as well, so they will not believe that these false pictures of God are meant to represent His true nature.

TIPS FOR USING THE VIDEO

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- ① Before class time, always view the section of the video to be shown in class.
- ② When you listen to the video, walk through all areas of the room to make sure the volume is set correctly.
- ③ Have the video cued to the right place to start.
- ④ Make sure all the equipment you need is in class and appropriately connected. This may mean arriving early for class—allowing enough time to preview the video.
- ⑤ Make sure before your students arrive for class that your video equipment is in good working order.



SESSION ONE

# Finding a God Who Is Big Enough



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

In his inspiring classic, *Your God Is Too Small*, the famous translator of the New Testament into modern English, J. B. Phillips, examines ideas and images about God that are both inadequate and misleading. He suggests that for many of us, the greatest stumbling block to a mature faith lies in the fact that we haven't found a God big enough for our needs—big enough to explain life, offer real hope, and command worship. Big enough to fill the longing we have for love.

He then sets out to demolish false images of God and bring into keen focus the clearest picture we have of God—Jesus Christ.

It was J. B. Phillips' "little book" that inspired Curt Cloninger to write and produce *his* classic, *God Views*. Curt's purpose was the same as J. B. Phillips': to expose our inadequate conceptions of God and help us find the real God for ourselves.

If Curt is correct when he says in the vignette you are about to see, "*Show me someone's picture of God, and I'll show you how they live their lives,*" then the importance of this class is immense.

For example, what if the special life Jesus describes in John 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," requires us to enter into an intimate relationship with His Father?

It does!

And what if we are only fully alive when we are plugged into God like a branch connected to a vine (John 15:1)? Only truly alive when we are so close to God that we experience Him—moment by moment—throughout our day?

I know it's almost impossible to wrap a brain around the notion that the creator of the entire universe wants us to experience an intimate, loving relationship with Him. Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3)

Not know *about* Him. Know Him. Experience Him.

But what if we live our lives away from His presence, on our own terms, with a deep, dark secret—we don't really trust that God has our best interests at heart? Down deep, we may have come to view Him as a cosmic sheriff, a party pooper, or a senile grandfather. Such images might make us want to avoid His presence—or to feel that being in His presence is irrelevant to our daily lives. But if you have done so, you know a profound truth. Our distance from God equals our distance from abundant life in God.

There can be many reasons for creating this distance—and some of these will be the subject of our discussion in the sessions to come. But our initial session will focus on one particular problem: becoming distant from God because of putting the head of our earthly father (or mother) onto the shoulders of God.

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer

### II. WARM-UP

- Exercises and Discussion
- Retelling of the Lesson Synopsis
- Mark Twain on God

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Question/Discussion

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



## ■ Illustration

I'm familiar with the story about a theology professor who does something very strange each year. Before beginning his lectures about the nature of God, he has all the students pull out a piece of paper and draw a picture of their earthly fathers. He then takes up the artwork without saying a word, and proceeds with his lecture—for 15 consecutive weeks (I believe there are some breaks for eating, sleeping, and other classes).

At the end of the semester, the professor asks his students to take out another sheet of paper and draw a picture of God. Remember, God has been the subject of scores of lecture hours. The papers are taken up and placed with the students' original drawings—of their fathers.

What the professor found was amazing. There was remarkable similarity between the two pictures—even after all the God-talk he provided. His conclusion was that we have a strong tendency to create God in an image of our choosing. And the most common misconception is to place the heads of our earthly fathers on the shoulders of God.

As we watch the vignettes and enjoy discussion, let's keep a focus on our own tendency to picture God incorrectly. And let's pay particularly close attention to breaking the lens that may show "our" God to look much too much like our dads.

## ■ Note to Leader

The synopsis is presented here for your background information.

You may, however, want to retell the information presented in the synopsis to the participants as part of the warm-up time or summary. (For this lesson, it is suggested that you read or retell the synopsis during the warm-up time.)

From time to time, questions related to the synopsis will be suggested as part of the lesson.

## ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)





## SESSION ONE:

# Finding a God Who Is Big Enough



## INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session one of *God Views*.

Depending on your familiarity with the participants, you may want to introduce yourself—tell the group your name, a little about yourself and your family, and why you are excited to be teaching this particular course.

### ■ Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the opportunity you have given us to come together as we journey toward knowing you in a new way. Guide our thoughts and hearts. Let us be aware of your presence with us. Allow us to experience you—as you really are—as never before. In the name of Jesus, your son, Amen.*



## WARM-UP (12 MINUTES)

- 1 Before going any further, have the participants complete the exercises titled “Draw a Picture of God” and “Personal Reflection,” found on pp. 9 and 10 in the Participant’s Guide.

### ■ Exercise

Take a moment to think about how you perceive God. What does He look like in your mind’s eye? Now draw a picture of God that reflects your perceptions as described in the first exercise.

## ■ Exercise

Take a little more time and complete the exercise titled “Personal Reflection.” (The leader may want to complete this exercise along with the participants.)

## ■ Discussion

Is anyone willing to share your picture of God? How does the image capture the way you see Him?

Was anyone surprised by the list of adjectives that popped into your mind to describe God? And did you find you were using adjectives to describe God similar to those you had used to describe a parent?

**2** Now share the synopsis with the class (either by reading or retelling) and allow a few minutes for discussion.

## ■ Discussion

Do you believe that your view of God can cause you to increase your distance from Him? Why?

**3** For twelve sessions, we will be meeting to consider our views of God and how they may affect our relationship with Him. Our goals are nothing less than to pull down our false images of God and replace them with new pictures our heavenly Father will provide.

Mark Twain is credited with saying, “*God created us in His image, and Man has been returning the favor ever since.*”

### QUESTIONS

(p. 14 in Participant’s Guide)

- What does this quote mean to you?
- Has your image of God changed over the course of your life?
- Where did you get this picture of God?



## CONTENT (20 MINUTES)

### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 12 minutes)

In this first video segment, we will have the opportunity to meet Curt Cloninger as he is in the dressing room getting ready to perform his live show. His encounter with a friend is, of course, staged. But from this interchange, you will see what motivated Curt to write the drama.

Following the opening scene, you will also meet a person whose view of God was radically changed following her own viewing of Curt's original video. It's a powerful real-life story. Go ahead and play the segment.

### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following:

#### QUESTION

(p. 14 in Participant's Guide)

- Curt says, "Show me what someone's view of God is, and I'll show you how they live their lives." Do you believe this is true?

### ■ Discussion

Beverly presents a very powerful testimony—a true story—about how her view of God was influenced by her view of her father. Is there anyone here who can relate to her story? How so?

After participants have shared their responses, ask if they discovered anything surprising about how they view their earthly parents and how they view God.

## BIBLE STUDY (10-15 MINUTES)



As we consider all this information, let's turn to the Bible for a frame of reference. A short Bible study is found on p. 11 in the Participant's Guide and may be used in class as a brief Bible study. (If the discussions have gone overtime, you may want to assign this exercise as a "homework" activity.) Let's get into groups and work through the passages and questions. (The participants may wish to work in small groups of four to six or as a large group—entire class).

### ■ Group Exercise

If time permits, form small groups and allow the participants to complete the Bible study in class. If you are short of time, the Bible study can be completed at home.

### ■ Leader's Insight

In this passage, God reveals a personal name for Himself. While we will discover many more names for God in our study, this revelation is very significant. It comes directly from the mouth of God, and His self-definition is incredibly broad: "I AM." God says, in essence, that He is "BEING" itself (everything that "is"); and, unlike everything else, He has being in Himself and by Himself.

God is everywhere, and because He is omnipresent, He is *in* everything. If we lower the microscope a bit, other aspects of God are contained in these two words. God is eternal, self-sufficient, and self-determining ("I will be what I will be"); and He is everything that we will need, and everything we can need Him to be.

Additional meanings of the Hebrew word *Hayah* (I AM) are: to be, exist, come about, abide, remain, continue, accompany.



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## SUMMARY

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J. B. Phillips wrote *Your God Is Too Small* to correct false images of God and to help the reader create a true picture. Curt Cloninger adds brilliant color and commentary to the original vision. But the goals for this class go even further. Yes, we want the false to be replaced with the true, but we want even more for you. We want you to enter into a deeper and more loving relationship with your heavenly Father. We want you to know Him through moment-by-moment, personal experience. And we have begun with the encouragement to remove the head of your father (parents) from the shoulders of God. God is simply too big for that ever to look right.

### ■ Recommended Readings

The leader and participants may enjoy reading a copy of *Your God Is Too Small* by J. B. Phillips (any edition) and *Experiencing God* by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King.

### ■ Recommended Homework

Please see p. 12 in the Participant's Guide for an additional homework exercise.



SESSION TWO

# Bony Shoulders



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

Did you know that God longs to spend time with you? Did you know He designed you in such a way that you'll never feel completely satisfied unless you are enjoying a loving relationship with Him? Yes, God, who exists as Trinity (a community of love and fellowship), created you to join in—forever.

Not convinced? Then consider this. There are only four primary themes in all of Scripture—and three of them are about how much God longs to be in relationship with you.

Nelson B. Baker, emeritus professor of English Bible at Eastern Baptist Seminary, wrote an important book called *You Can Understand the Bible by Its Uniting Themes*. He believes that if you step into Scripture—anywhere from Genesis to Revelation—you will be immersed in one or more of what he calls the Bible's "uniting themes."

The first is this: *God longs to be with His children*. We see this in Eden. God walked with Adam and Eve in the midst of the Garden (Genesis 3:8-9). As we turn the pages, things change dramatically. But not this theme! God's desire to be with His people soon takes the form of the Ark of the Covenant—a symbol of His presence.

Keep turning pages, and you will bump into Solomon's Temple. At its center is the Holy of Holies—the place for God's presence in the midst of His people.

Later, this theme reaches full crescendo. God becomes incarnate. He empties Himself of divine glory and humbly steps into human flesh. Why? To be with us for a while so we can be with Him forever.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, God sends His Spirit to reside inside each of His children—if we invite Him in. The Spirit of God becomes a twenty-four-hour-a-day live-in counselor. Available for advice. Available for a chat. Forever. Yes, God longs for communion, community, and conversation with us.

The second theme is also a reflection of how much we are loved by our heavenly Father. *God loves you so much that He has prepared a rich inheritance for you to enjoy.* Again, we see this first in Eden, which means "pleasure." God gave us an inheritance of joy and delight, pleasure and purpose.

But you know the rest of the story—the Fall. But that didn't stop God from continuing to offer His rich gifts. Turn the pages. Eden becomes the Promised Land, and ultimately the abundant life of entering into the kingdom of heaven. Yes, the kingdom of heaven, the number one theme in the ministry of Christ, is our inheritance.

The doors to life in the kingdom are open wide, Jesus came to say. A lavish inheritance for all who will leave the world and live by a different set of rules—His.

The third theme in Scripture is about *our rejection of both relationship*

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Exercises and Discussion

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response and Questions
- Retelling of Synopsis/Discussion
- Alternative Discussion/Exercises

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



*and inheritance.* Adam and Eve, the Hebrew nations, and the majority of those who heard Christ teach said no to God's offer of abundant life. They picked the same tree as Adam and Eve—to be like God instead of to live in love with Him. They chose isolation over living in community with God.

But, thank God, there is a fourth theme. *God continues to pursue His children and continues to offer relationship and a rich inheritance.* Old Covenant, prophetic exhortations, the New Covenant of Christ—God continues to invite us into the joy of moment-by-moment relationship.

God's offers are still on the table. And through fellowship with Christ, we have the means to enter in. As Jesus prayed just before His death, "May they all be one: as thou, Father art in me and I in thee, so may they also be one in us." (John 17:21, KJV)

To use the words of Larry Crabb in *Connecting: Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships*, "I have come to believe that the root of all our personal and emotional difficulties is a lack of togetherness, a failure to connect that keeps us from receiving life...Nothing is more fundamental to appreciating the essence of Christian living than to ponder the implications of a central but often neglected truth: We have all been created by an Eternal community of three fully connected persons. To bear God's image consequently means...we are designed to connect with others (to live in a community of love)."

This all sounds great, doesn't it? Being invited to be in ongoing relationship with God. And somewhere deep down, we know that this is the answer to all our deepest longings, all our emotional distress. But we must learn how to stay in love with God and from Him learn how to live—in love with others.

But there are problems. Barriers that keep us from surrendering to love. Last week, we discussed one of these problems—putting the head of a parent on the shoulders of God and subsequently misunderstanding His nature and character. This week we'll discuss a second problem: *avoiding His presence because of believing that He will see our flaws and reject us.* (Surely God won't want to dance with us when He knows we have bony shoulders.)

## ■ Materials

For each session the *leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session the *participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)





## SESSION TWO:

# Bony Shoulders



### INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

#### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session two of *God Views*. A longer title to this particular session might be: “Will God Dance With Me if I Have Bony Shoulders?”

#### ■ Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you for wanting to be with us. It is more than we can grasp to understand why you, who are bigger than the universe, desire to spend time with creatures so small. We feel insignificant in the light of all you are and all you have done. But somehow, deep down, we know that your love for us makes us significant to you. Our only value is that we are your children. Please teach us to trust your love—even when we may be very aware of our flaws—and walk in your ways. Amen.*

#### ■ Review

Last week, we had the opportunity to hear a powerful story about how God changed a person’s view of Him and how that difference made an impact on her life. Beverly’s view of God was marred by her family history. But at her invitation, God rewrote her past.

Today, we will continue to explore the amazing notion that God wants to spend time with us, and we will examine another potential stumbling block to our acceptance of His invitation to “dance”—our own awareness of our faults and flaws.

Or in the words of that great theologian, Woody Allen, we may be so aware of our shortcomings that we say, “I don’t want to be part of any club that would have me as a member.” Fear of God’s rejection

(because of our weaknesses) is the barrier we want to push aside in this session.

## WARM-UP (15 MINUTES)



Have the participants complete the exercises titled “My Relationship With God” and “Strengths and Weaknesses” (pp. 17 and 18 in the Participant’s Guide). Encourage them to be fearless in their self-assessment, and remind them no one will be expected to share if he or she feels uncomfortable in doing so.

### ■ Exercise

Take a moment to think about how you would describe your present relationship with God. Use the information provided in the exercise to help you organize your thoughts.

### ■ Discussion

Is anyone willing to share an insight you gained from completing “My Relationship With God”?

### ■ Exercise

Now turn to the “Strengths and Weaknesses” exercise.

### ■ Discussion

Was anyone troubled or encouraged by your responses to this exercise?

And now the really tough question...

### QUESTION

(p. 21 in Participant’s Guide)

- Are you aware of a tendency to follow the example of Adam and Eve, avoiding God’s presence when embarrassed about a weakness or shortcoming?



## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)

### ■ Video Vignette (8 minutes)

In this second segment of the *God Views* video, Curt begins his stage performance. He tells a true story about going to a pool party when he was about 12 years old. After working up his courage, he asked a special girl to dance with him. But his thoughts of early marriage were rudely interrupted. She pointed out what she perceived as a serious physical defect—his “bony shoulders.”

Play the segment.

### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following:

#### QUESTIONS

(p. 21 in Participant's Guide)

- Why did Curt avoid being around Susie McClatchy in the years that followed?
- What did he miss by assuming that she could not see beyond his “fault”?
- Do you truly believe that God desires to be with you, warts and all? Not so fast if you said “Yes.” Do you believe it with your heart? And do you act as if it's true?

### ■ Discussion

Share the synopsis with the class. The “Four Uniting Themes of Scripture” are found on p. 19 in the Participant's Guide.

What do these say to you about your relationship with God? And about His desire to have a relationship with you?

## Alternative Discussion

If you have access to a copy of *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*, by Max Lucado (Multnomah, 1998), you may want to read a brief story from the book as an alternative (or additional) discussion. Of particular relevance to this theme is the story of a Brazilian peasant woman who welcomed her prodigal daughter (Christina) home with open arms after she had rebelliously fled to the city, looking for the good life. She had ended up being a prostitute in order to survive. Unlike the Prodigal Son, she was too embarrassed to return home. It wasn't until her mother went into the city and placed pictures of herself all around (with a note to Christina on the back) that the daughter realized the depths of her mother's love and returned home. The story is titled "Come Home." The note to Christina? It read, "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

## BIBLE STUDY (10-15 MINUTES)



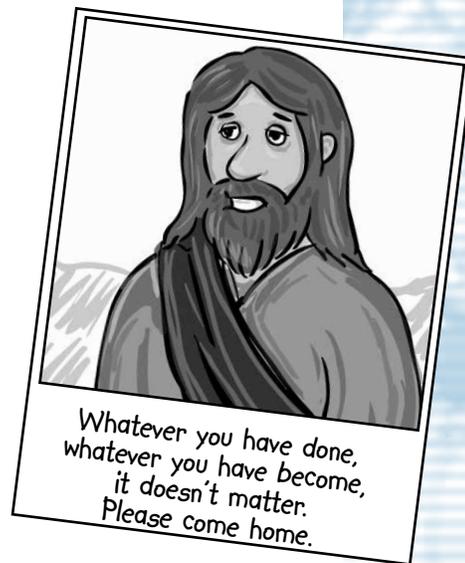
As we consider both God's desire for relationship with us and His acceptance of us, let's turn to the Bible for another picture of these truths. A short Bible study is found on p. 20 in the Participant's Guide. Have the participants get into groups of four to six and work through the passage and questions. You may want to read the entire passage before breaking into small groups. (Note: Some groups will prefer to work individually in the larger group setting. This can work as well.)

## Group Exercise

If time permits, form small groups and allow the participants to complete the Bible study in class. If you are pressed for time, it can be completed at home.

## Leader's Insight

In this passage (John 4:5-24), the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well is told. Several things about this meeting seem very important.





- ① John uses a lot of words to recount this story—the majority of an entire chapter. It must be very significant. Let’s see why.
- ② This Samaritan woman definitely had bony shoulders. That is to say, she had at least three strikes against her, three reasons for a Jewish male like Jesus to reject her:
  - She was a Samaritan! Considered a half-breed and a threat to the purity of the Jewish race. A good Jew wouldn’t be caught dead talking to a Samaritan. But Jesus not only talked with her; he drank from her “polluted” pitcher.
  - She was a woman! At that time and place in history, she was not viewed as being on the same playing field with Jewish men.
  - She was at the well at midday. Only a social outcast would be at the well in the heat of the day. Early in the morning, while it was still cool, was the time to be at the well. Going there at noon was a sure way to avoid the wagging tongues of the upright citizens. Perhaps it was her marital history that made her a social leper. But Jesus initiated a conversation with her and immediately began to offer her a rich inheritance—the living water of eternal life.
- ③ It is also interesting that this passage follows a long story in chapter three in which Jesus has his famous conversation with Nicodemus—a Jewish religious leader and member of the Sanhedrin. Perhaps this underscores the picture of Jesus’ radical acceptance of people, both the social elite and those with bony shoulders.
- ④ While Jesus accepted this woman—faults and all—and offered her the gift of eternal life, he did expect her to change her life and live above the sins of her past. There is a big difference between bony shoulders and a stony heart.

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## SUMMARY

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There are four primary themes in Scripture, and each has to do with some aspect of God's desire for relationship with us. To find the way to experience life in relationship with God is to find the way to abundant life. To know God is eternal life (John 4:14; 5:24). But there are many reasons for us to act like Adam and Eve after the Fall. There are many reasons we may avoid relationship with God—hiding from His face. In this lesson, we explored one of those reasons—our being too focused on our flaws and faults. The story of the woman at the well was studied as a model of Christ's acceptance of us, and his expectations for a changed life.

### ■ Additional Readings

If you have begun reading either *Your God Is Too Small* by J. B. Phillips or *Experiencing God* by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King as a way to supplement this course, that is great! While it is difficult to find, Nelson B. Baker's *You Can Understand the Bible by Its Uniting Themes* is a great book for underscoring how much God desires to experience a relationship with His children.

And you may want to consider *No Wonder They Call Him Savior* by Max Lucado, and *Daring to Dance With God: Stepping Into God's Embrace* by Jeff Walling (foreword by Lucado).





## SESSION THREE

# Cosmic Sheriff



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

In this lesson, we will consider the first of six common misconceptions about the nature of God. You will see each dramatically performed by Curt Cloninger in the video vignettes that correspond to these written materials. God will be portrayed as a sheriff, butler, senile grandfather, party host, mechanic, and God-in-a-box.

The following story, a classic, is presented as an overview of the process many have gone through in attempting to grab hold of a notion of One so vast as God.

### ■ Six Blind Men and an Elephant<sup>1</sup>

A long time ago in the valley of a large river in India, there lived six men who liked to brag about their brains. Although these men were no longer young and had all been blind since birth, they were very competitive. Their “Olympics” was the telling of tall stories.

One day, like all other days, they began to argue. The object of the row was the elephant. Since each was blind, none had actually seen an elephant. So to satisfy their minds and settle the dispute, they decided to hire a guide to help them encounter one.

1. The story that follows is an elaboration of an old Indian folk tale.

The next morning, they found a leader—who spoke only enough of their native dialect to understand what it was they wanted to meet—and they set out. They walked in single file along a jungle trail, each placing his hands on the back of the man in front. The guide served as the engine for a seven-car train.

Eventually, they arrived at a large clearing. As fortune would have it, a large bull elephant was standing by a tree, scratching his head and planning his day. Fortunately, he was tame.

The first blind man to approach the elephant came forward boldly and loudly. But sadly for him, he stumbled over a log and fell face-first into the broad side of the elephant.

“Oh my brothers,” he cried out, “it is as certain as I am smart that this elephant is like a great mud wall baked hard (and a little hairy) in the sun.”

The second blind man was more cautious as he approached the beast. He slid his feet forward, hands outstretched, to feel his way to the “wall.” But since he approached from the front, his hands encountered the tip of a long, sharp object that curved up above his head. It was the elephant’s strong tusk—enough ivory for ten grand pianos.

“Now, my dear brothers,” he exclaimed. “You have been told a lie. The elephant is not a wall. Its shape is exactly like a spear. Long and sharp.”

The others smiled in disbelief.

Now it was the turn of the third blind man, who came at the object of their curiosity from the rear. Carefully, he stepped forward, his hands waving in the air before him until he touched the elephant’s tail. Seizing it in both hands, he felt the strong, bending twine and the coarse fibers on the tip.

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Retelling of Synopsis
- Exercise and Discussion
- God and Putt-Putt Golf

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Discussion/Question

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



“Why, dear brothers, do you not see!?! The elephant is very much like a rope.”

The fourth man stepped forward, shaking his head in confusion. He stepped past his companion—who was still rubbing the tusk of the elephant—and placed his searching hands on a long, squirming object that began to circle about his waist. It was, of course, the elephant’s long trunk.

“Ah, ha!” he shouted. “Just as I thought. This elephant resembles a serpent.”

The others snorted their contempt.

The fifth, a tall old fellow with a tall old turban and long white beard, was a bit more cautious. As he was stepping backward to avoid the possibility of a serpent, he chanced to touch the elephant’s ear.

“Good gracious, brothers,” he cried out in relief, “even a blind man can see what shape the elephant resembles most. The elephant,” he said as an ear-breeze passed across his face, “is like a mighty fan.”

That brought snorting laughter from the remaining five.

At last, it was the turn of the sixth fellow. He, bowed down with age, came forward slowly, passing beneath the elephant’s trunk and tusks, so that his head came in contact with the beast’s stout leg. Feeling it wonderingly with both hands, he called to the others in his wheezy but confident voice.

“The elephant, my dear brothers, feels exactly like the trunk of a great palm tree.”

And, of course, no one believed him.

Their curiosity satisfied, they all linked hands and followed the guide back to the village. Once they were seated in their familiar places, the six blind men began disputing loud and long. Each was now entrenched in his own opinion, firmly based on his own experience. After all, each had felt the elephant for himself and knew that he was right.

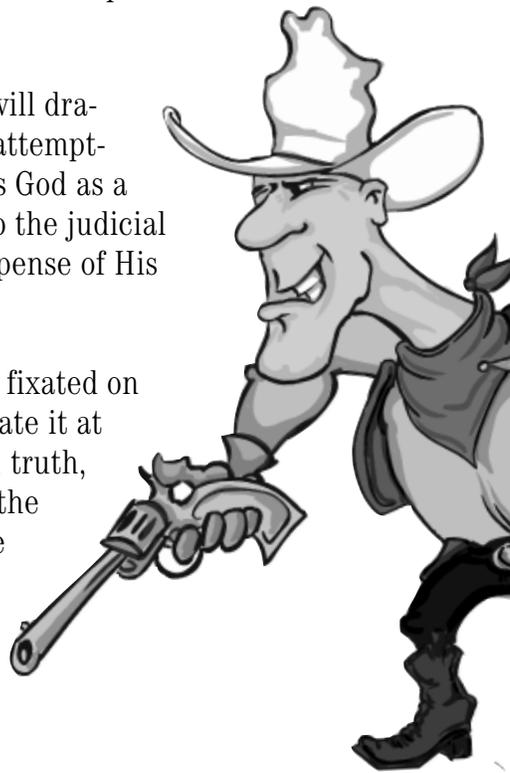
And so it was indeed. For depending on how the elephant is seen, each blind man was partly right and completely wrong.

## ■ Our View of God

When we encounter God, we are very much like the six who found an elephant. (Less arrogant, of course.) But after all, His ways are so much beyond our own that we are, by contrast, blind. His existence is so vast—overflowing the universe—we can hope to touch only a small part of His total identity. If we are not very careful, we may become convinced that some small part of God represents the whole.

For the next six weeks, Curt Cloninger will dramatize common mistakes that are made in attempting to know God. The first of these presents God as a cosmic sheriff. It is a view that latches onto the judicial aspect of God—the place of law—at the expense of His total identity.

This is very unfortunate. Even if we are fixated on something that is true, we may still exaggerate it at the expense of total truth. And as we know, truth, if exaggerated, becomes heresy. Hopefully, the next six lessons will help us avoid being like the six blind men who encountered an elephant—partly right and completely wrong.



## ■ Materials

For the *leader*:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For the *participant*:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)



## SESSION THREE:

# Cosmic Sheriff



## INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session three of *God Views*: “God Is More Than a Cosmic Sheriff.”

### ■ Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you for writing your rules into the fabric of the universe. Help us to be even more motivated and enthusiastic about keeping all of your commandments. But also, Lord, please help us to come to understand even more of your love for us. To feel how much you love us—even when we break your most important rules. That you continue to love us even when we sin is almost more than we can understand. Please stretch our minds and hearts so that we can better hold the feelings of love that you have for us, and to learn your secret—it is only by your living in us and acting through us that we can keep your laws. Amen.*

### ■ Review

Last week, we used the metaphor of dance as a way of thinking about entering into an intimate relationship with God. We also considered another factor that might keep us from approaching Him—being overly concerned with our own faults and flaws.

Today, we will continue to explore the amazing notion of God’s wanting to spend time with us, and we will examine another potential stumbling block to our acceptance of His invitation to be with Him—a false view of Him.

For the next six weeks, we will be examining six common false views of God. We begin with an exaggeration of the “legal” aspect of God’s nature that may cause us to see Him as a cosmic sheriff.

## WARM-UP (15 MINUTES)



- 1 Take a few minutes to read the story about six men and an elephant.

### ■ Exercise

Complete the exercise titled “Aspects of God” as a means of helping you consider any ways you may have come to exaggerate some aspect of God at the expense of the whole picture.

#### QUESTION

(p. 27 in Participant’s Guide)

- Is anyone willing to share your response to this exercise? Any new insights into how you view God?

### ■ Discussion

In the fascinating book *Dear God, This Is Anna*, the main character—a young child—says something like this about God: “God is so big He doesn’t have a point of view. He has points to view.”

What does that mean to you?

- 2 Read (or retell) the following illustration about God and putt-putt golf as a way to think about how the law and grace coexist—and life can still be fun.

### ■ God and Putt-Putt Golf

Imagine that you are playing putt-putt golf with a small child. The child, only four or five years old, has never played the game before—never even picked up a putter. You watch as the child awkwardly holds the club like a broom and begins “sweeping” the brightly colored ball across the carpet.



Making the ball arrive at the hole is not part of the plan. Never enters the child's mind. Instead, the child seems content to smack the ball—at first—in no specific direction. Then, after discovering what a nice sound it makes when the ball strikes one of the bright orange boundaries, the child starts to hit the ball against the wooden planks.

Eventually, after several hundred strokes, the ball accidentally goes into the cup. The child seems amused but also perturbed. Now it has to be retrieved so the game of smacking the golf ball against the boundaries can continue.

You don't mind what is happening. At least the child is having fun. And you are thankful for the orange planks—otherwise, the game might be taken to the grass, or walkways, or out into the parking lot. Thank goodness for the boundaries.

But there is a problem. A line of other golfers has formed behind. And they seem a bit impatient.

You escort the young Tiger Woods to the next hole, where you explain some of the finer points of the game. Standing behind, you show how the club should be gripped and how it should swing like a pendulum, striking the ball and sending it in a straight line. You further explain that the object of the game is not to hit into the boundaries but into the cup.

With you standing behind and guiding the club, the child's game improves dramatically. Eventually, the joy of a hole-in-one is shared.

This story has a lot to say about law and grace.

The bright orange boundaries represent the law. Thank God He placed them there. Without boundaries, there would be chaos.

But we are not supposed to concentrate on the law. We are not supposed to spend all of our time bumping up against it. The purpose of the game has little to do with the boundaries.

We learn this when our heavenly Father has mercy on us. He stands behind us—actually He steps inside us—and shows us how to play. We learn to rely on His wisdom and strength until we are eventually able to get a “holiness-in-one.”

Folks who see God as a cosmic sheriff are still caught up in focusing on the boundaries. On the law. But those who have experienced His grace and the mystery of Christ in us (Col. 1:26-27) understand how the game is to be played. They hit shots straight and true. (Actually, we mostly observe as Christ plays through us.) And while the boundaries are still firmly in place, they are no longer the focus of the game.

## ■ Discussion

What does this story mean to you? Do you know folks focused more on the boundaries than the cup? How would this affect the way they live their lives?

## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)



## ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 4 minutes)

In this video segment, we see Curt portray God as a cosmic sheriff.



## ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following:

### QUESTIONS

(p. 27 in Participant's Guide)

- How could someone read the Bible or listen to Bible stories and come to view God as a sheriff?
- While there is a definite “legal” side to God—He did give Moses the Ten Commandments and has never repealed them—what makes you believe that the view of God as sheriff needs to be modified?



## ■ Discussion

Share the following story with the class. It is about how the famous nineteenth-century evangelist D.L. Moody experienced a change in his God view.

*When Dwight L. Moody first began to preach, his sermons were short on Scripture and long on emotion.<sup>2</sup> He had never had any formal Bible training and he was not a great reader. Not knowing any differently, he preached that God hated sinners—warning the unsaved of their precarious position and the horrors of hell. But Emma (Moody’s wife) made a gentle suggestion that would change the focus of his preaching. She asked him to consider attending a series of meetings led by noted evangelist Henry Moorehouse.*

*“He preaches a little different from you,” Emma told D. L. “He preaches that God loves sinners. When you hear him, I think you will agree with him. He backs up everything he says with the Bible.”*

*Intrigued, Moody attended the services. He later said, “I never knew up to that time that God loved us so much. I could not keep back the tears. I just drank it in. I tell you, there is one thing that draws above everything else in the world, and that is love.”*

### QUESTION

(p. 27 in Participant’s Guide)

- Ask the class what type of impact they feel Moody’s change of God view had on his ministry. Ask if anyone in class has had a similar experience.

2. This story comes from an article written by Christian Ditchfield, titled “Emma: Behind Nineteenth-Century America’s Greatest Evangelist Stood a Remarkable Woman.” It is printed in the January 21, 2001, edition of *Power for Living*.

## ■ Note to Leader

Francis Schaeffer’s famous quote from his film *How Shall We Then Live?* may be helpful as a discussion starter—or simply to be shared with the class. He had this to say about law and love: “Law without love becomes something harsh, lacking beauty. Love without law ultimately becomes permissiveness.”

## BIBLE STUDY (10 MINUTES)



As we consider all these stories and images, let’s again turn to the Bible for a frame of reference. A brief Bible study is found on p. 24 in the Participant’s Guide.

Let’s form small groups (four to six) and work through the passage and questions. (Note: Some groups of participants will be more comfortable working in one large group with the leader reading the passage aloud and then leading the discussion of the questions. Use whatever format suits the needs of the participants.)

## ■ Group Exercise

If time permits, form small groups and allow the participants to complete the Bible study in class.

## ■ Leader’s Insight:

In Jesus’ time, there were four prominent groups among the Jewish people.

- ① The *Essenes* were known for pacifism and separatism. They had withdrawn to the Judean wilderness and lived in monk-like communities. They maintained a strict diet, took ritual baths, and held all possessions in common. They hoped their faithful living would hasten the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist was likely a member of this group.
- ② *Zealots* were the primary Jewish patriotic party. They were well known for their hatred for the Romans and were willing to resort to violence and assassinations to help win independence.



- 3 The *Sadducees* were denounced by both John the Baptist and Jesus. This was the group that seemed most willing to cooperate with Rome or any other ruling party. They were often wealthy. The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife or divine intervention in earthly affairs.
- 4 The *Pharisees* were in many ways the party of the middle road. Although some were wealthy, most were middle class. They were separatists, but not to the same extreme as the *Essenes*. The name *Pharisee* means “separate one.” They pledged to obey all facets of tradition to the most minute detail. There were about 6,000 Pharisees at the time of Jesus. This group originated at some time between the Babylonian captivity and the Maccabean Revolt.

To understand fully the life and mission of Jesus, it seems crucial to grasp why He seemed to be in constant conflict with the Pharisees. In some respects, it is logical that they should be commended for their meticulous devotion to the law. Surely a “Cosmic Sheriff” would deputize citizens so devoted to the law.

Instead, Jesus had very harsh words for the Pharisees. In Matthew 23, this reaches its zenith. Here Jesus pronounces “Seven Woes” against them. (Our Bible study covers but two of these.)

I believe the answer to this mystery is primarily found in two words: *self-reliant* and *self-sufficient*. The Pharisees, because of their focus on salvation by works alone (keeping the law—including oral tradition), simply did not need a savior. Theirs was a plan of self-managed righteousness. Their singular focus on the “orange boundaries” (the law) prevented them from ever saying, “Father, I give up. It’s too hard for me. Please come, step inside me, and love through me.”

The pleas for help that came from Matthew, the tax collector; Mary Magdalene, the prostitute; and Zacchaeus, another IRS agent, never passed the lips of a Pharisee. The law and works had become their (the Pharisees’) mortal enemies and focus of attention.

If time permits, you may want to lead the class through the exercise titled “Application of the Senses,” or this can be used as a homework assignment.

## ■ Note to Leader

Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1-17) found in this exercise could be used as an alternate passage of Scripture for a Bible study. Nicodemus, as a member of the Sanhedrin, was an expert in matters of the law. The participants could discuss how Jesus' responses to Nicodemus were unlike those of a cosmic sheriff.

## SUMMARY



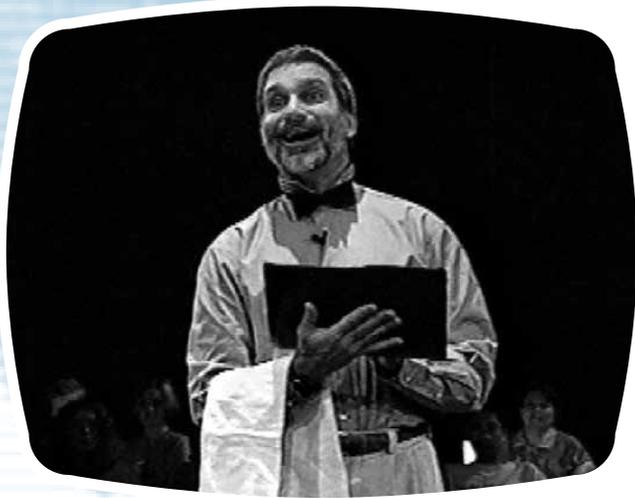
Even when something is true (e.g., God wants us to obey His law), we can exaggerate it until it becomes heretical. God has given us the law for our good and protection. But He has also given us sunsets, babies, warm spring days, fireworks, and chocolate. He also loves the world (including you and me) so much that...

*"...He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."* (John 3:16-17)

God is far more interested in showing us how to love—by living His life through us—than in giving us the flu.

## ■ Recommended Homework

Please use "Application of the Senses" for a homework exercise if it was not completed during class.



## SESSION FOUR

# You Rang My God Bell?



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

In this lesson, we will continue to explore misconceptions about God and consider how our false photos may hinder our relationship with our heavenly Father. Specifically, we will view Curt Cloninger's second caricature of God—as our personal butler.

I have a friend who is fond of saying, “With every virtue come two vices—too much and too little.” It’s a helpful reminder that even a good thing can turn bad if it is either minimized or magnified.

To think of God as being concerned about our daily needs is a good thing. It would be tragic to conceive God to be apathetic to our wants and desires. But we also turn virtue into a vice when we obsess on a view of God as a giant genie—existing only to ensure that our wishes become His commands.

Here’s a familiar example of how desires arising from human nature can sometimes become tragic if granted. We could retitile the story, “When the Name-It-Claim-It Approach to God Goes Awry.”

### ■ The Midas Touch

King Midas liked gold. No, he loved it. His favorite pastime was to sit in the middle of his treasure house and count the money.

Midas was one of the richest kings in Greece. To him, the most beautiful sight in the world was the sparkle of pure gold.

One day, Midas was visited by Silenus, from the court of Dionysus, god of grapes. For days, Midas entertained Silenus in royal fashion. Then he personally escorted him back to Dionysus, high on Mount Olympus.

When they arrived, Dionysus was reclining in his vineyard, eating grapes. “I’m very grateful to you, Midas, for being kind to my old friend,” Dionysus said, as juice ran down his cheeks. “And for bringing him back to me yourself. Please, ask for anything, and it will be granted.”

It didn’t take Midas long to produce a wish. “If I could be granted any wish, it would be that everything I touch would turn to pure gold. Then I would be the richest and most powerful king on earth. And I would be filled with great joy.”

“Your wish is granted, King Midas. But I’m sure you’ll live to regret your greed.”

Dionysus’ warning didn’t register with Midas. Within nanoseconds of hearing the world “granted,” Midas had leaped into the air and raced to his chariot—which, of course, instantly turned to gold. Midas was shouting with glee as he sped away.

When Midas arrived at his castle, he touched its heavy wooden doors at the gate. Instantly, they became solid gold. Midas was ecstatic. So enraptured that he was still unaware of the heavy weight of his new golden clothes.

He race-walked across the courtyard as the stones beneath his feet began to sparkle behind. He tested his touch by picking a flower. It

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Retelling of Synopsis
- Questions
- Discussion and an Exercise

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Discussion/Question

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



became a golden rose in his hand. He was too excited to notice that it also lost its scent.

“I’m rich! I’m rich! I’m the richest man in the world!” he shouted so loudly that his words began to echo against the stone walls of his castle.

His servants began to gather in the great courtroom. Midas, still shouting, said, “And I can make all of you rich, too. Look,” he continued, “I can touch this wall, and it will be pure gold.” He did. And it was.

He reached down to pat his bewildered dog on the head. Instantly, the royal mutt became a golden retriever. Still as stone.

Midas backed away from the dog. Puzzled, but still full of glee.

“Bring me some food!” Midas shouted to a servant.

By the time the man entered the room, every inch of it was aglitter. He set the food down in front of the king.

Midas dipped his hands in the washing bowl and was barely able to withdraw them before the golden water gripped his fingers forever. He grabbed a drumstick. It became pure gold. He put a glass to his lips. Instant gold.

Midas began to panic. He grabbed his servant by the arm. “What can I do? I’ll starve to death!”

But the servant, of course, could not answer.

“Daddy! Daddy! Make our ball golden!”

“Stop!” the king cried. But it was too late. His two children jumped, for the last time, into his lap. They instantly turned into heavy statues of gold.

Midas began to weep. Tears fell onto the floor as droplets of gold. They struck the floor with sharp metallic sounds.

Midas ran back outside the castle. And being careful not to touch his horses, he mounted his chariot and set out to Mount Olympus.

“I hate the sight of gold,” he announced to Dionysus. “Why did you ever grant my stupid wish!? I can’t eat. I can’t drink. My precious children are lumps of gold. Please, Dionysus, take away this terrible curse. I beg you.”

Dionysus could not help but smile. Midas had changed so completely in such a short time. He took pity on him.

“A curse, you now call it. Very well, go to the river and wash yourself from head to foot,” he said. “And then wash everything you wish to be restored.”

Midas flew to the river. Without even considering whether the river would be turned to gold, he dove in. He surfaced in waist-deep water and threw a cascade of blue droplets over his head. Flecks of gold began to fall from his clothes and hair, settling to the bottom of the riverbed.

A large clay pot was on the bank of the river. Midas filled it with water and drove back to the palace as fast as his horses could take him. First, he bathed the two golden statues that had been his children. Instantly, they were reborn and began to chatter about having their toys turned to gold—as if they had never been statues.

“No!” cried Midas. “Don’t speak to me about gold. I never want to see it again. Please, now, drive with me to the river. I want to get more water and wash every inch of this palace.”

And so they did. Beginning with his servant, then the dog, then the walls, floors, and flowers.

Rumor has it that Midas never again set foot in his treasury and began to give its contents away faster than it could be replenished. In the end, King Midas came to see what was valuable and what was not.

### ■ Unpacking the Parable

The story of Midas and his golden touch is a sobering illustration of how bad things could become if God granted all our desires. For this to happen, God would, of course, cease to be God—our appetites and desires would reign instead. If God were to become our personal butler, it seems most likely that we too would follow the



story line of Midas, discovering that there are far more precious things in life than what sparkles and shines. Only our heavenly Father knows what we most need, we would discover.

## ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)





## SESSION FOUR:

# You Rang My God Bell?



## INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session four of *God Views*: “God is More Than a Personal Butler.”

### ■ Prayer

*Dear God, thank you for your bountiful blessings. Thank you that you love us as your children. Sometimes, Father, we give our own children candy, even though it isn't good for them, just to see them smile. Sometimes we ask you for “candy,” and sometimes you say yes, just to see us smile. But we know that you are the only one who knows what is best for us. You know what we most need.*

*Help us to surrender our wills to yours. Help us never to be tempted to treat you as a butler or a genie in a lamp. Because until our transformations into perfect reflections of you are complete, we simply don't know what is in our best interests.*

*Yes, we want to enjoy health. But sometimes it takes physical illness before we will ask you to heal our souls. We want to be financially prosperous. But sometimes it takes poverty before we fully appreciate the richness we have in you. Oh, Father. Please grant this one wish. Give us the wisdom to fully surrender our lives to you. Amen.*

### ■ Review

In the first two sessions, we focused on a couple of things that might prevent us from drawing close to God: seeing Him through the lens of our parents (session one) and withdrawing from God because of our faults and flaws (session two).

Last week we began a series of six false views of God. We started with the result of overemphasizing the law at the expense of grace: seeing God as a cosmic sheriff. This week, we examine the heresy of viewing God as a butler or cosmic genie.

While there are many reasons we may develop a false picture of God, holding on to a heresy is often due to some sort of “gain” in maintaining the false picture. It is relatively easy to see why a picture of God as a butler would be held. With this false image, it is actually ourselves who are God. God, here, is our servant and subject to our wishes. If we are truly changed, matured, so that our hearts beat to the exact rhythm of God’s, and our minds think His thoughts, there is no problem. But if we are still babes in Christ, we’ll probably ask for stuff that will rot our teeth.

## WARM-UP (10 MINUTES)



- 1 Take a few minutes and read (or retell) the story of Midas and his golden touch.

### QUESTIONS

(p. 33 in Participant’s Guide)

- In the story of Midas, the king is set free by washing in a certain river. Does this image suggest any symbolism from the Christian faith? What comes to your mind?
- How do you think being born again (as symbolized by water baptism) changes our view concerning what is valuable and what is not?

### Discussion

In 1491, Ignatius was born at the family castle of Loyola in the Basque country of Spain. He was an aristocrat and a soldier, a man encrusted with a strong sense of duty and obedience.

In 1521, Ignatius received a leg wound in a battle against the French. He came back to Loyola to recuperate. For a long period of time, he relieved his boredom by reading a copy of the *Life of Christ* and a collection of stories about the lives of the saints. During this time of intense reading, he became stirred deep within to become as much like Christ as possible.



Eventually, Ignatius' thoughts took written form, and would be known as *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. The classic disciplines contained in Ignatius' exercises would play an important role in fueling the internal reformation of the church.

*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* are often experienced as a thirty-day time of systematic prayer, reading, and reflection. At the heart of these experiences are meditations on the kingdom of God and the contrasting standards—those of Christ and those of Satan.

Ignatius believed that the best attitude Christians can have toward health and wealth is one of indifference. What he meant is this: Even though it is normal and natural to want to be healthy and prosperous, we also know that sometimes God uses suffering and poverty to perfect the growth of our souls. Therefore, since we don't know what is in our ultimate best interests, our interests are best served by letting go of our attachments to things of this world while allowing our trust in God (that He loves us and has our best interests at heart) to grow.

We become indifferent to all things of this world—even those most often identified as “success”—so that we can be most fully focused on things out of this world—the kingdom of God.

## QUESTION

(p. 33 in Participant's Guide)

- What do you think of Ignatius' notion of “indifference”?

## ■ Exercise:

Complete the exercise titled “Changing Our Attachments” as a means of helping you consider the notion of “indifference” to things of this world so that you can be more focused on things of the Spirit.

## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)



### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 4 minutes)

In this video segment, we see Curt portray God as a butler (or, if you prefer, a cosmic genie).

### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following:

#### QUESTION

(p. 33 in Participant's Guide)

- In portraying God as a butler, Curt Cloninger gives us a picture of the Divine in which He is contacted only when His “employers” are experiencing a crisis or have a fleshly need. Here’s an odd question: How do you think that feels, from God’s perspec-

### ■ Discussion/Question

As J. B. Phillips points out in *Your God Is Too Small*, the early church was criticized because nearly all early converts were drawn from the criminal or debased slave classes. This is not a fault, however, but a strength. Jesus himself seemed most attracted to the down and out—prostitutes, tax cheats, and his last convert was a criminal. It is the sick who know they need a physician. It is only the truly desperate who are willing to exchange their broken lives for brand new ones.

Phillips is more concerned with modern critics of the faith who have contended religious faith is for the emotionally immature—those with a childish desire to escape all forms of pain and suffering. They want a God who will be a butler or a genie in a bottle and bring them whatever they want and shelter them from pain.

But this was not the way of Christ and has not been the way of the heroes of the Christian faith. Take a few moments to discuss the following:



## QUESTION

(p. 33 in Participant's Guide)

- What is the potential impact of this type of immature faith (treating God as a genie) on unbelievers?



## BIBLE STUDY (15 MINUTES)

We will consider a passage from the Old Testament (Genesis 13:1-15) and one from the New Testament (Matthew 26:36-45) to help us understand that we are to dismiss all notions of God as a personal butler.

Let's form small groups (four to six) and work through both passages. (Note to the Leader: Always feel free to remain together as a larger group if this is the preference of the group.)

### ■ Group Exercise

If time permits, form small groups and allow the participants to complete the two Bible studies in class. It may be necessary to assign one of the passages as “homework.”

### ■ Leader's Insights

In Genesis 13:1-15, Abraham desires to stop the quarreling between his family and the family of his nephew, Lot. He returns to Bethel (Bethel means, “house of God”), a place 12 miles north of Jerusalem—a place where he had first built an altar. There he calls on God for guidance. Although we do not know what Abraham was told, we assume his willingness to offer Lot the best land was inspired by God. Abraham's radical willingness to surrender his will to God and his radical trust in his heavenly Father foreshadow both the placement of his son on the altar (Genesis 22:1-14) and Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-42).

Both of these passages stand in marked contrast to an immature faith that would seek to use God as a cosmic butler.

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## SUMMARY

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Hey, maybe you're thinking, "Yeah, right. I got the Midas touch. Everything I touch has been turning into mufflers. I could use a little gold right now." And this is where it gets tricky. Sometimes God's love causes Him to give us "candy." But sometimes, maybe most times, we get vegetables. Why? Because sometimes He knows what we need most is to smile. But most of the time our needs are for strength and growth.

Our desire for candy can cause us to begin thinking like Midas or wishing for God to be our personal butler. We want to be in control. We want that candy, gold, health, and wealth. But God wants us to be mature Christians, prepared to rule and reign with Him forever. And He's given us examples like Abraham and Jesus, who show the way to mature faith and a clear view of our Father.

### ■ Recommended Homework

Please complete the second Bible study if there is not enough time to do so in class.



## SESSION FIVE

# The Grand Old Man in the Sky



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

In 1977, the movie *Oh, God!* was a surprise hit. In the film, John Denver played an assistant manager for a produce store. He was an honest man with a wife and two children. Just your normal kind of guy—until God (played by George Burns) requested an audience with him. The appeal came via a typewritten note that (you guessed it) contained a misspelled word.

The movie was very successful. So winning, in fact, that it spawned two sequels. And with this trilogy, the image of God as an elderly man—with all manner of human frailties—became even more deeply etched in our collective consciousness.

What's wrong with the notion of God as a “grandfather”? Well, actually, there are a lot of things right with the concept. When I think about a grandfather, many wonderful associations flood to mind. Immediately, I see a strong, gray-haired man sitting on a wooden dock, flanked by two grandchildren. All three are holding cane poles. A trio of red and white floats are riding ripples on the face of a small pond. It's a scene that would make Norman Rockwell smile and unpack his paints.

As I continue to gaze at this picture of a grandfather spending an afternoon with his grandchildren, several words flash across my mind: *approachable, benevolent, patient, wise, loving, focused on*

*the needs of others.* There is a lot of love and knowledge to share. In my mind's eye, the old man is smiling with deep contentment. So are the children.

I recall a bumper sticker I recently saw on a middle-aged Buick. "If I had known grandchildren would be this much fun, I would have had them first."

What a beautiful notion, God as a loving grandfather. Why would Curt want to use an old man as one of the six heretical pictures of God? What's wrong with George Burns as God?

As we've mentioned earlier, each of the false God-views we are examining contains at least a kernel of truth—and Scriptural support. Heresy is not all false. It is instead the exaggeration of *a* truth at the expense of *the* truth.

There are a lot of things right with picturing God as a grandfather. Unfortunately, there can be at least three things wrong with such a view. And it is to these areas we will now turn our attention.

## ■ Materials

For the *leader*:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For the *participant*:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Exercises and Discussion
- Three Problems

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Questions/Discussion

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



## SESSION FIVE:

# The Grand Old Man in the Sky



### INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

#### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session five of *God Views*: “The Grand Old Man in the Sky.” If first-time attendees are present, you may want to have them introduced to the class and have someone in the group provide a 60-second summary of what has been missed.

#### ■ Prayer

*Dear Jesus, we thank you for another time we have to be together and learn about you. Please, Lord, have complete access to our minds and hearts. Remove all false pictures we have of you, and illuminate us with accurate ideas and images of you. And let us today be filled with great joy as we contemplate the fact that you are all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present. And mystery of mysteries, you love us with all your might. Amen.*

#### ■ Review

We have now examined four reasons for holding on to a false view of God—parental images, self-reproach, overemphasis on a single aspect of God, and the gain a false image may afford.

This week we will continue to examine heretical notions of God. Specifically, we will focus on three problems associated with seeing God as a “Grand Old Man in the Sky.”

## WARM-UP (20 MINUTES)

**1** Problem #1: Seeing God as Old-Fashioned

Do you think God knows anything about Web page design, or infrared data transfer between two laptop computers? If you are like a lot of folks, your first impulse may have been to say, “No.” (Perhaps your second impulse was to laugh at your first.)

In *Your God Is Too Small*, J. B. Phillips makes reference to a similar question being asked to a group of adolescents several decades ago. Since it was before the age of computers, the teenagers were asked a different question: “Do you think God understands radar?”

In nearly every case, the immediate answer was “No,” followed by a laugh—as soon as the conscious mind realized the absurdity of the answer. How could the omniscient God not know everything?

But as simple as this test was, it exposed something important. Something that may be walking around in the back of your mind right now—the idea that God is old-fashioned and out of touch with our modern age.

Back to J. B. Phillips’ experiment for a moment. Through subsequent discussion with the people who were questioned about God’s knowledge of radar, it was revealed that most admitted their ideas of God had been formed years before—and had become locked away in a separate compartment from their modern experiences. In Phillips’ words, “It was as if they were revering the memory of a Grand Old Man, who was a great power in His day, but who could not possibly be expected to keep pace with modern progress.”

And there’s the first problem with viewing God as an old man—the tendency to imagine that God is not merely “old,” but “old-fashioned.” Sure, He was impressive a long, long time ago. But that was then, and this is now. The most recent ink in His book is almost 2,000 years old.

Some who rightly believe that God was both active and impressive in bygone times may still find it difficult to fathom that He is relevant to 21st-century problems, still able to lead His children across a modern-day wilderness.



Freezing God in the past (Divine cryogenics) is no doubt made worse when church life and practices tend to encourage the “old-fashioned” concept. The Bible is often read in beautiful but bygone language. Can a God who says “thee” and “thine” really understand what’s on my mind?

Prayers and the language of church services are often very different from the way we talk at work and Wal-Mart. Again, the words of Phillips: “We address God in our prayers in the archaic second person singular—and these prayers themselves often give the impression of being cast in a form that the Grand Old Man can both understand and approve.”

Sermons are often packed with religious jargon and technical terms that do not say to the modern listener, “God wants to walk beside you as your best friend. And He really understands all the stress you are experiencing in trying to keep up with technology and teenagers.”

The powerful, world-shaking God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of today. He not only knows about radar and infrared data transfer now; He knew about them when fire was first discovered. God may be older than Gibraltar, but He neither sleeps nor slumbers, and still remembers the names of all His children.

## ■ Exercise

Complete the exercise titled “The Grand Old Man in the Sky” as a means of celebrating all the grandfatherly associations with God while trying to avoid typecasting Him as old-fashioned.

## 2

### Problem #2: A False God View Can Affect Our Worldview—And Vice Versa

In his book, *The Universe Next Door*,<sup>1</sup> James Sire describes seven different worldviews, devoting a chapter to each—Christian theism, deism, naturalism, nihilism, existentialism, Eastern pantheistic monism, and the New Age.

His chapter on deism is titled “The Clockwork Universe: Deism.” Viewing God as the designer of the universe, the great clock maker in the sky, who is now on a coffee break, is very similar to

Curt's portrayal of God as "the grand old (and forgetful) man in the sky."

Deism developed, some say, as an attempt to "bring unity out of a chaos of theological and philosophical discussion which in the seventeenth century became bogged down in interminable quarrels over what began to seem even to the disputants like trivial questions." (Sire, p. 47)

Serious questions (such as why bad things happen to good people) and silly ones (how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?) left some to conclude that there are no satisfactory answers. Perhaps, some reasoned, it would be better to view God as loving but weak or as an absentee landlord who has left His creation to function on its own.

Philosophical deism leaves us with something less than God—perhaps with the image of a compassionate but absent-minded clock maker in the sky. And the reverse can also be true; viewing God as a senile grandfather leaves us only a short drive from deism.

### ■ Exercise

Complete the "War of the Worldviews" exercise as a means of better understanding the relationship between philosophical deism and the view of God as a feeble-minded grandfather.

## 3 Problem #3: Seeing God as a Grandfather Can Diminish His "Omni's"

### ■ Exercise

Use the exercise titled "God's Character" as a way to meditate on God's many-splendored attributes.



1. The second edition of this book was published by InterVarsity Press (Downers Grove, Illinois) in 1988.



## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)

### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 6 minutes)

In this video segment we see Curt portray God as a grandfather (or, if you prefer, a grand old man in the sky).

### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following questions:

#### QUESTIONS

(p. 40 in Participant's Guide)

- How can the church inadvertently perpetuate the image of God as old-fashioned?

(Hint: You may want read or retell the synopsis.)

- What can you do to help dispel the notion that God is weak or feeble-minded?

(Hint: How long has it been since you attended a service that featured testimonies?)



## BIBLE STUDY (10 MINUTES)

As we consider this information, let's again turn to the Bible for a frame of reference. A brief Bible study is found on p. 39 in the Participant's Guide and may be used in class or as a homework assignment. As you are now accustomed, if you do this Bible study in class, you will want the class to divide into groups of four to six and work through the passage and questions.

### ■ Group Exercise

Time permitting, form small groups and allow the participants to complete the Bible study in class.

## ■ Leader's Insights

This passage from Revelation reveals a cosmic conflict that makes *Star Wars* imagery look tame by comparison. It's warring imagery orchestrated by a powerful and warring God. This battle is not for the faint of heart—and certainly not for a feeble grandfather. Satan is overcome by the power of the heavenly hosts, the blood of the Lamb, and the word of testimonies. This passage is intended to highlight God's power and encourage Christians to strengthen one another's faith through the sharing of testimonies of the strength and goodness of God.

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## SUMMARY



In this session, we examined three potential problems that arise from holding the view of God as a “grand old man in the sky.” These are: 1) seeing God as not only old but old-fashioned; 2) becoming vulnerable to a deist view of God—which can start a philosophical tumble toward New Age spirituality; 3) losing the picture of God the Bible presents as our omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnipresent (always with us) Father.

## ■ Recommended Readings/Homework

The leader and participants may enjoy reading *The Universe Next Door* by James Sire.



## SESSION SIX

# God as a Party Host



### BEFORE YOU LEAD

#### ■ Synopsis

In this vignette, Curt portrays God as a party host who is fond of dropping phrases like, “Of course, everybody goes to heaven!” and “I just want you to *feeeel* good and have a good time at my party.”

This picture of God is a composite sketch of universalism and cheap grace—the polar opposite of viewing God as a cosmic sheriff (impossible grace). Or as the commercial for a popular steakhouse says, it’s “no rules, just right.”

As with the other false views of God we have discussed, there is a truth here—exaggerated truth. God does like to see us smile. His Son came to earth so that we might enjoy abundant living. And as the Westminster Catechism states so profoundly and concisely, our chief end is to “glorify God and *enjoy* Him forever.”

Certainly there is nothing wrong with our desire for joy. Perhaps this longing is a homing device that points us God-ward. But as is the case with all other truth, it can become exaggerated to the point of heresy.

While God wants all his precious lambs to be with Him forever in heaven—and that will be *some* party—Scripture tells us that many will choose to live as goats and butt their way into hell (Matthew 25:31-33). He wants us to be ecstatically happy. But for

the Christian, times of emotional famine often occur in cycles with times of joyous feasting.

In Christian living, there are both large portions of broccoli and huge servings of cake. Or, another way to say it, there are always two “crosses” encountered along the path to joy—Christ’s and our own. To gain everything requires losing everything. It takes the pain of losing our own lives to find true life in Him. There is nothing cheap or whimsical about the process of becoming like Jesus.

In order to make it to God’s party, three difficult obstacles must be overcome—the world, the flesh, and the devil. Thank goodness, Christ is available to step inside and help; otherwise, no one could get in.

### ■ Note to Leader

As part of presenting this lesson, three stories will be told to illustrate why the view of God as a party host is inadequate. Each will focus on a different obstacle (world, flesh, and devil) that must be overcome before enjoying God’s party. Or as mothers like to say, “Better eat your vegetables if you want to have some cake.”

### ■ Materials

For the *leader*:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video
- *VeggieTales: Madame Blueberry*

For the *participant*:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant’s Guide (Optional)

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Three Stories
- Question/Discussion

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Discussion/Exercises

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



## SESSION SIX:

# God as a Party Host



## INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

### Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session six of *God Views*.



### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you once again for this time we have to come together and learn more about you. Please continue to bring into clear focus the correct images of you that we hold in our minds. We know that to see you clearly is to love you deeply. Remove all obstacles to our relationship. Help us to experience your love as we study together today; help us to sense more deeply your compassion, even as we examine the costly aspects of grace. Amen.*

### Review

We have now examined three false pictures of God—as a cosmic sheriff, butler, and senile grandfather. We also have attempted to be very honest about the reasons we may have for holding on to our misconceptions.

Today we examine the notion of God as a party host. This view has a lot of appeal: Everyone goes to heaven (universalism); and our own sinful nature and appetites don't stand in the way of getting to enjoy God's cosmic party.

But for all the appeal, this view of God misses the main point of existence—our purpose in living. Transformation. As human beings loved by God, we are invited to enter into a process of authentic transformation. We are invited to communion (daily fellowship) and union (Christ living inside) with Jesus. It is a wonderful process. But it also involves a thousand deaths to self and control.

Oh, there will be a party. The biggest bash the universe has ever seen. And even now, while still on this side of eternity, each day can be festive with celebration. But each day also is filled with hard work—the labor of battling the world, the flesh, and the devil: the “bouncers” who would keep us outside the party.

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## WARM-UP (12-15 MINUTES)

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### ■ Note to Leader

Three stories will be presented for you to either read or retell. The stories are chosen to illustrate the obstacles Christians face—which are ignored by a party host God.

The first story is from the *VeggieTales* video series. It’s the tale of Madame Blueberry. If you or your church has a copy, you may want to play a portion instead of telling the story. Because the entire video is approximately 30 minutes in length, you will want to tell the first part of the story and show only the last 5 to 10 minutes.

### ■ Story #1: Madame Blueberry: A Lesson in Thankfulness

If you aren’t familiar with the *VeggieTales*, welcome back from space. Just kidding. But it is important for you to know the following about the *VeggieTales*. Bob is a talking and singing tomato. His friend, Larry, taller and less round, is a cucumber. Together with other veggie-friends, they live in a colorful world of 3-D animation. As stated on the video cover, theirs is a world of “Sunday morning values, Saturday morning fun”!

The story of Madame Blueberry is the 9th video produced in the series. And it’s a very blue (sad) story. Madame Blueberry has fallen prey to Madison Avenue advertising. The *world* has informed her that she cannot be happy unless she buys stuff, more and more stuff. And even though she already has everything she needs—good friends, good food, and a nice tree house to live in—she isn’t happy. In fact, she’s downright depressed. Why? Because some of her friends have more stuff than she does. It’s more than enough to make a greedy blueberry grumpy.

When Bob tries to remind her about the happiness found in friendships, a chorus sung by Stuff Mart employees drowns him out... “Happiness waits at the Stuff Mart...all you need [to be happy] is lots more stuff.”



As fate would have it, the grand opening of a new shopping center is underway—a gigantic Stuff Mart. Madame Blueberry goes to the brand new superstore along with Bob (the tomato) and Larry (the cucumber). She quickly begins a shopping frenzy with the energy of a thousand feeding piranha.

After filling dozens of shopping carts—and her tree house—with stuff, Madame Blueberry listens to a little boy asking his father for a train. When his Dad confesses that he cannot afford to buy his son a train, Madame Blueberry expects the child to be disappointed and angry. But instead, the boy accepts his father’s offer to buy him a ball and breaks into song about the joy of playing pitch with someone he loves.

At that moment, Madame Blueberry has an epiphany. She realizes that she does not *need* any of the stuff she has bought. She *wanted* it in hopes that it would make her happy. She then announces to Bob and Larry that what she really *wants* is a happy heart.

The story continues, but the point has been made. To find happiness, we must turn a deaf ear to the world’s (Madison Avenue) voices and listen to our own hearts. What we truly need is love, relationship, and thankful hearts. “A happy heart doesn’t come from a store.”

## QUESTION

(p. 47 in Participant’s Guide)

- How does the story of Madame Blueberry contradict the picture of God as a party host (who exists to satisfy our appetites)?



## ■ Exercise

Take a moment to complete the exercise titled “Fun on \$10 a Day.”

### QUESTION

(p. 47 in Participant’s Guide)

- Examine your responses on the “Fun on \$10 a Day” exercise. What was emphasized more in your list of activities, relationships or money?

## ■ Story #2: How Much Is Enough?

Our second story concerns our need to conquer the flesh—if we’re going to have a good time at God’s party. It’s borrowed from Leo Tolstoy.

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, lived a very painful life. His novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* brought him world acclaim. The nobility of his family ensured him wealth and the means to read and travel widely. But Tolstoy’s life was marked by inner struggle. He suffered through bouts of depression with dark thoughts of suicide.

In 1878, at age fifty-one, Tolstoy was converted to Christianity. The change in his life was so dramatic that most scholars divide his life into pre- and post-conversion. After this experience, he became captivated by the simple lives of Russian peasants and their faith in God. His writings changed. All of his post-conversion works concerned faith and Christian living.

In 1885, Tolstoy wrote the short story, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” It is a powerful portrait of how Satan can exploit a person’s appetites. It is presented here to underscore a problem with the notion of God as a party host. If left to our own fleshly desires, we might eat cake until we pop. And that’s what happened to Tolstoy’s central character in this famous short story.

In “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” Tolstoy creates the life of a poor but successful farmer. A summary of the story goes like this:



Many years ago, there lived an old farmer who wanted to be a landowner—a wealthy landowner. Every time he heard that a piece of property was for sale, he saved his money and bought it. Even though he always enjoyed success, it wasn't long before he would become dissatisfied, longing to have more.

His lust for land took the farmer across the vast country of Russia in search of better deals and larger tracts of land.

Eventually, he heard about a chieftain who controlled a vast amount of virgin farmland in a remote corner of Russia. He also heard that if the chieftain liked you, he would give you large sections of his land for a very small price.

The farmer traveled to meet the chieftain so he could offer him gifts and flattery. Immediately, the chieftain liked the farmer and made him an incredible offer.

“You can have as much of my land as you want, for only 300 rubles.”

“Do you really mean it?” the farmer asked doubtfully.

“Yes. You can begin in the morning if you like. You can have a day's worth of land.”

“A day's worth?”

“Yes, that's how we measure land here. It's the amount you can walk around in one day.”

“How does that work?” the farmer asked, hardly able to contain his glee.

“Just mark the land as you walk. That's all you have to do.”

“I can walk as far as I like?” the farmer asked.

“Certainly. But you must return to the same place from which you begin—before sunset. If you fail to do so, you will lose both the land and your money.”

The farmer agreed and went to bed early. But he tossed and turned all night with anticipation. He used the time to plan how he would run his huge farm. When he finally fell asleep, he had a

strange experience. He dreamed the chieftain was the devil—tempting him with this offer and putting his soul at risk.

When morning came, he wondered for a while why he could not be satisfied with what he already had. But his desire for wealth caused him to push the thought from his mind. He kept his appointment with the chieftain.

The farmer set out from the crest of a small hill. A large oak tree marked his starting line.

He walked and ran all morning. He was forming the first leg of a square of land that would be his gigantic farm. Every time he felt he should stop and walk the second side of the square, he would spot a parcel of land he felt he could not do without. “It would be a shame not to include this pond, or this patch of hardwood trees,” he reasoned.

Eventually, he made himself head in a different direction—to mark the second boundary of his “square.” But this “leg” also brought temptation. “How can I stop now? I can’t be satisfied without this pasture.”

The farmer fought hunger and thirst. His feet became cracked and sore and began to bleed. Suddenly, he became aware of the position of the sun, already halfway between high noon and the horizon. The day was three-quarters spent. When he realized he might have gone too far, he panicked and began his return—sacrificing the symmetry of a perfect square.

“I’d rather die than lose my land,” he said to himself as motivation to continue on through his pain.

Painful hours passed. When the finish line came into view, half the sun was still above the horizon. He ran even faster.

In the last rays of daylight, the farmer took a long breath and ran up the hill to where the chieftain stood waiting. As the farmer dove to the ground, he thought he heard the chieftain laughing. And at that moment, he remembered his dream. He looked up and saw that the chieftain was the devil. It was the last thing he saw.

The farmer’s servant picked up a shovel and began to dig a grave for him to lie in. In the end, as it turns out, six feet of land—from his head to his feet—was all he really needed.





Oh! That's cruel. Why tell such a terrible story here?

It's told as an illustration of fleshly appetite out of control. And because the view of God as a party host can result in just such an ugly picture too.

Sure, it's fun to think about a Party-God who just wants us to be happy and indulge our appetites. But with such a "God," we might eat until we pop. We need more than all-you-can-eat-cake-and-ice-cream. We also need broccoli, and we need boundaries. It's unity with Christ that brings happiness and peace of mind—not wealth or the satisfaction of fleshly cravings.

### ■ Question/Discussion

What relevance do you think Tolstoy's famous story has for practical Christian living? That is to say, does it inspire you to live your life differently in any way? How so?

### ■ Story #3: Princess Amanda and the Dragon

We will now turn our attention to the third obstacle that must be overcome on the way to God's party—the devil.

David and Karen Mains have written a delightful book called *Tales of the Kingdom* (Chariot Books, 1983). The book is a collection of allegorical adventures about life in the kingdom of God. Hero, who symbolizes every Christian, is a featured character, but there are a host of other characters to meet—both good and evil.

Princess Amanda is another of the main characters. The story titled "Princess Amanda and the Dragon" has particular relevance for this lesson. If you have access to a copy of *Tales of the Kingdom*, you may want to read the Amanda story to the class. If not, a brief retelling occurs below.

Amanda, like so many of the characters in *Tales of the Kingdom*, seems real enough to remind us of ourselves. In this particular story, she is faced with a dilemma. She has been warned by Caretaker (He is the Christ figure in the stories) not to keep any of the dragon eggs that are present in the spring—for obvious reasons.

A dragonet soon hatches from its egg. And while it appears fairly cute and cuddly at first, within six months it will be a full-grown monster—with rock-hard scales and fiery breath.

One warm spring day, Amanda finds an egg and decides to keep it for a while instead of taking it to Caretaker’s house to be disposed of. It isn’t long before a baby dragon cracks through the amber-colored shell—as cute as a dragon can appear. Amanda is torn. She knows what she is supposed to do but cannot resist playing with the newborn reptile for a little while.

The little while turns into weeks and then months. As it turns out, the cute creature becomes a demanding pet. All of Amanda’s time is taken up with the care and feeding of the dragon.

She does not notice all at once, but the cute begins to wear off, and an ominous yellow glow appears in the dragon’s eyes and grows brighter with each passing day. When Amanda finally comes to her senses and realizes what she has done, she takes the dragon far away from her home and tells it to stay away from her and the people of the kingdom.

The dragon becomes very angry. Amada fully realizes that her cute pet has become a deadly monster. Her life and the lives of the residents of the kingdom are in danger. She cries out for Caretaker to come rescue her. He appears instantly, and she cries, “Kill it! Kill it!” But he cannot.

Caretaker tells Amanda, “I cannot kill this dragon. Only the one who loves a forbidden thing can do the slaying. You will always hate me if I do it. Only *you* can slay this dragon.”

He gives Amanda an ax, and he stays close by while she fights her dragon. A fierce battle ensues. And with the coaching of Caretaker, Amanda is able to slay her beast.

In the last lines of the story, the authors provide this profound summary. “...When one loves a forbidden thing, one loses what one loves most. This truth is a hard-won battle for each who finds it and is always gained by loss.”

What a powerful illustration for fighting dragons—our dragons. Whether they are materialism, addiction, perfectionism, legalism, or any other form of idolatry, we must ultimately decide we no longer want the monster we have raised, take the weapons offered by





Christ (See Ephesians 6:10-20), and slay the beast.

After all, while we (as Christians) are certainly invited to God's party, our pet dragons are not.

### ■ Exercise

Take a moment to complete the exercise titled "Dragon Fighter."

### ■ Discussion

Discuss as a group how each of the elements of the holy armor of God can be used to defeat unholy dragons.



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## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)

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### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 3 minutes)

In this video segment, Curt Cloninger portrays God as a party host. It's pretty funny. And it's really serious too. In it we see the not-so-subtle universalism and complacency that are part of this God view.

Go ahead and play the segment.

### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following question.

### ■ Question/Discussion

Discuss how Curt's portrayal of God as a feel-good party host seems in contrast to the seriousness of the task of overcoming the world, the flesh, and the devil.

## ■ Discussion

We have discussed stories as illustrations of how serious we need to be in our battles with the enemies of our souls. But we have not dealt with the other problem with the notion of a party-god: universalism. Read the following Scriptures aloud.

- “...Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36)
- “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven...I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21, 23)
- “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46)

Discuss how these verses argue against universalism and cheap grace, and how they can be true but at the same time God can be described as “loving” and “compassionate.”

## BIBLE STUDY (10 MINUTES)



As we consider this information, let’s again turn to the Bible for a frame of reference. Let’s divide into groups and work through the passage and questions.

## ■ Group Exercise

If time permits, form small groups and allow the participants to complete the Bible study in class. If you are running short of time, the Bible study can be completed at home.

## ■ Leader’s Insight

This passage was selected for two purposes. First, it illustrates that the Christian life encompasses more than just a party. Also, the three temptations of Christ may be viewed as a model for us in two ways.

First, Jesus relied on a spiritual discipline (fasting), communication with his Father (implied by the time in the wilderness and by Jesus’ continued use of solitude as a way to hear from his Father), and Scripture as the means of defeating the enemy.



Second, it is noteworthy that Jesus had to overcome his flesh (“tell these stones to become bread”), the world (“All this [the kingdoms of the world] I will give you...”), and the devil (both literally and also implied within the temptation to be immortal—“throw yourself down”).

It also seems important to note the different ways Satan and Jesus used Scripture. Satan was a proof-texter, disregarding context and broad principles in using Scripture to suit his purposes. Jesus, however, used texts in a manner consistent with the broad meaning and purposes of all Scripture.



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## SUMMARY

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No doubt about it, heaven is going to be a blast. In fact, the foretaste we enjoy now (the here-and-now kingdom of God) is described by Jesus as “abundant life.” And the emotions (love, joy, peace, etc.) associated with His presence in our lives (the fruit of the Spirit) are the most pleasant feelings a human can experience. But to emphasize this to the point of turning God into a party host is heretical: false teaching, because it disregards the serious battles that must be fought against the world, the flesh, and the devil. False because it leads to the ultra-cheap grace of universalism.

### Recommended Readings/Homework

The following resources were referenced in this session. Each would be a good addition to your church or personal library.

- *VeggieTales—Madame Blueberry: A Lesson in Thankfulness*. Available through [www.bigidea.com](http://www.bigidea.com)
- *Tales of the Kingdom*. Written by David and Karen Mains. Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook, Chariot Books.



## SESSION SEVEN

# Manic Mechanic



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

In the preceding chapters, we have examined many possible reasons for having a false view of God:

- Session 1: Putting the image of an earthly parent on the shoulders of God.
- Session 2: Being overly focused on our own faults and flaws.
- Session 3: Exaggerating a truth in Scripture—such as “the law”—until it turns into heresy.
- Session 4: Accepting the personal payoff (what is in it for us) in maintaining a false view.
- Session 5: Being influenced by false philosophies.
- Session 6: Attempting to ignore—instead of resist and conquer—the world, flesh, and devil.

In this session, we will examine the potential for our personality traits to create a false view of God. While the spectrum of personality (the characteristics that distinguish us from other individuals) will be considered, we will devote most of our attention to two particular traits that have been known to distort pictures of God—perfectionism and insecurity.

In the video vignette, you will see Curt Cloninger portray God as a mechanic who is interested only in performance and cannot possibly spare the time to attend to the details of the lives of his

“employees” (you and me). According to J. B. Phillips, “...Of all the false gods, there is probably no greater nuisance in the spiritual world than the god of one hundred percent [a perfectionist, performance-driven god]. For he is plausible.” (p. 27)

If you have any tendencies toward perfectionism or insecurity, be advised that what you are about to read is for you. If you do not struggle in these areas, pray for the rest of us as you read.

## Materials

For each session the *leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session the *participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant’s Guide (Optional)

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION



- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP



- Discussion of Personality
- Exercises and Discussion

### III. CONTENT



- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Questions/Discussion

### IV. BIBLE STUDY



- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY





SESSION SEVEN:

# Manic Mechanic



INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

## ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session seven of *God Views*. If first-time attendees are present, you may want to have them introduced to the class and have someone in the group provide a 60-second summary of what has been missed.



## ■ Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you for your love. As we strive to see you more clearly, please know how grateful we are that you see us so clearly and yet love us so deeply. We are also appreciative that you created us with different personalities, no two of us alike. But guard us from ever distorting your image by seeing it through the lens of our personality. Our sincere prayer continues to be that you would allow us to experience the fullness of your majesty—as never before. In the name of Jesus, your son, Amen.*

## ■ Review

Please see the synopsis for a concise review of what has been covered to this point. You may want to use this time to entertain questions that may have arisen during the past week.

## WARM-UP (10 MINUTES)

**■ Personality: God's Palette for Making People**

Have you ever seen a beam of light shining through a glass prism become a rainbow of colors? Who would have thought that every beam of light contains a palette of color?

In a similar fashion, you and I are like a ray of light. As Christians, we are to be reflections of the light of Christ that has come into the world. But each of us is also a rainbow of personality differences. We have distinctive personality traits that make us unique human beings. We are both the light of Christ and the colors of ourselves.

Some of the “hues” on the palette of human personality are universally viewed as being good (i.e., inquisitiveness, intelligence, humor, compassion, etc.). Some traits are considered to be neutral (introversion versus extroversion, orderliness versus messiness). Some are “negative” (obsessive thinking, narcissism, emotional instability).

While doing a thorough assessment of personality is beyond the scope of this session, let's have a little fun by taking a bird's-eye view of some of your personality traits. On pp. 49, 50 in the Participant's Guide, you will find a presentation of what is called the “big five” personality dimensions. This is not a test. It is merely an exercise to get you thinking a bit about your personality and how it may influence your view of God.

- 1 Before going any further, have the participants complete the exercise titled “You've Got Personality.”

**■ Discussion**

Is anyone willing to share how their personality may influence a view of God?

**■ Note to Leader**

If the pump needs to be primed before discussion begins, you may consider observations such as the following:



Introverts (about 25% of the general population) need times of solitude to “recharge their batteries.” Extroverts (about 75% of us) recharge by being in crowds—they need and are energized by people. Being an introvert or extrovert does not have much to do with shyness, as some people think. It’s more about whether a person is oriented to his inner world or to the external world; and where one recuperates from stress—in solitude or with people.

When it comes to approaching God, it makes sense that an introvert would be drawn to biblical passages about silence, solitude, and quiet, listening prayer. The practice of meditation would probably come very easily to an introvert. It may be comforting for an introvert to picture God as a gentle shepherd.

Extroverts might be more easily drawn to biblical passages about action and adventure. Perhaps more extroverts than introverts would be attracted to auditory, intercessory prayer. The practices of meditation and contemplation may be more difficult for the extrovert to enter into. Extroverts may enjoy images of Jesus as being the life of a party or view God as an active, conquering king.

It has been humorously suggested that extroverts drive introverts crazy by writing books on street evangelism. But introverts have a way of getting them back. They write books on contemplative prayer and being quiet before God.

Perhaps a member of the group will talk about how she believes she is more tough-minded than tenderhearted. She may volunteer that this aspect of personality makes it easier for her to view God as a tough-minded judge than a tenderhearted counselor.

See where the discussion goes following these examples.

**2** Now, let’s shift gears and talk about a couple of aspects of personality that are not always “neutral” (such as being introverted or tough-minded, referenced above).

There are several personality traits that can be destructive in relationships—including our relationship to God. Two of these traits often occur together—perfectionism and insecurity.

Perfectionism can be considered an extreme form of “conscientiousness,” which was one of the five items assessed in the personality exercise. Insecurity may be one facet of the personality dimension “emotional stability/instability.” For some folks, insecurity can fuel perfectionism—and the combination can be quite combustible.

We discuss these now because of the potential impact they may have in producing a particular God view—God as mechanic or shop foreman.

### ■ Perfectionism and Insecurity

Ask the class to consider these questions—but don’t ask participants to disclose their thoughts to the group.

- Do you feel that what you accomplish is never quite good enough?
- Do you often put off turning in work—waiting to get it just right?
- Do you feel that you must give more than 100% on everything you do?

If so, instead of simply working toward success, you may be trying to be perfect. True perfectionism exists as a pattern of self-defeating thoughts and behaviors aimed at reaching excessively high and unrealistic goals.

Although perfectionism is often mistakenly seen in our society as desirable, recent studies have shown that perfectionistic attitudes actually interfere with success. The desire to be perfect can rob you of both the joy of personal satisfaction and the ability to achieve as much as people with less lofty goals.

### ■ Exercise

Take a quick look at the exercise titled “Perfectionist or Striver?” It’s a series of descriptions to help you decide if you are something of a perfectionist.

Make a mental note of how you scored.





If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you learned early in life that other people valued you because of how much you accomplished or achieved. Perfectionists often wrestle with a deep insecurity concerning their worth to others and to God. As a result, they may have learned to value themselves only on the basis of other people's approval—which leaves self-esteem based on external standards.

Perfectionists need to do several things to help themselves before the failure to meet unrealistic goals (or the failure of loved ones to meet their unrealistic standards) produces depression, anger, and isolation.

The second page of this exercise contains some suggestions for overcoming perfectionism. Participants may want to consider these ideas outside of class time. For our purposes, however, we will focus on the impact of perfectionism and insecurity on our view of God.

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J. B. Phillips is keenly aware of how someone who struggles with insecurity and perfectionism may be prone to create what he calls “the god of one hundred percent.”

This false view of God is particularly difficult to dislodge—especially for the perfectionist. It is difficult because it is plausible. After all, doesn't the Bible say, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”? (Matthew 5:48)

Yes, it does. But the perfection to which Jesus alludes is a perfection of love and relationship, not task and toil. And even this perfection (loving as the Trinity loves) is not possible by human effort, but only by allowing Christ to come live and love through us.

But for some, what was meant to be perfect freedom has become an anxious slavery that can lead to nervous breakdowns and rob the Christian life of spontaneity and joy.

## ■ Discussion

J. B. Phillips states that the words of Christ, “learn of me,” provide the best clue for how to be free from joy-robbing perfectionism. “Christianity,” Phillips reminds us, “is not a performance but a way of living, and in no sense a performance acted out for the benefit of the surrounding world.” To “learn” implies growth and implies

making mistakes along the way. Jesus wants us to use our mistakes as occasions for the greatest growth.

*How can mistakes be considered good things and occasions for growth?*

\_\_\_ (Hint: Our mistakes can produce humility and the sincere request for Christ to come and live His life in us.)

## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)



### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 4 minutes)

In this video segment, we will see Curt portray God as a performance-oriented mechanic. J. B Phillips might refer to this type of god as the “god of one hundred percent.” His emphasis is on production and how much we can do for him.

### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following:

#### QUESTIONS

(p. 54 in Participant's Guide)

- What was happening with your emotions as you watched this vignette?
- What are some passages of Scripture that argue against this type of God view?

Hint: Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden light.” (See Matthew 11:30.)

Or Paul, even after many years of following Christ, confesses that he is still “press[ing] on toward the goal” (Philippians 3:14). (That is, he has not attained 100% perfection.)



## ■ Discussion

Do you agree with J. B. Phillips' statement that "of all the false gods, there is probably no greater nuisance in the spiritual world than the god of one hundred per cent"? Why or why not?

How would you help a Christian who is burdened by this view of God?



## BIBLE STUDY ( 1 5 M I N U T E S )

For this week's Bible study, we are going to do something different. Two passages will be presented—one from Matthew's Gospel and the other from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

## ■ Group Exercise

Form small groups and allow the participants to complete the Bible study, either individually or as a group project.

## ■ Leader's Insight

In the passage from Matthew, it seems important to remember that we enjoy an "easy yoke" only when we are yoked together with Christ. And in actuality, we have it even better than oxen. Our yoke partner is not just beside us, but also inside us—giving us His strength and power from within.

A veteran farmer—who had spent many seasons behind a couple of oxen—told me there can be a problem when one of the oxen attempts to walk ahead of the other. Not only is he doing too much of the work, but the yoke irritates his neck. Perfectionists who are Christians must guard themselves against walking ahead of their partner, Jesus—or they could get hot under the collar.

For the Galatians passage, it is important to keep the context in mind. In Paul's early ministry, he had traveled in the Roman province of Galatia and planted several churches. His message was about the free life in God that was available through Jesus Christ. A

few years later, Paul learned that religious leaders from the “old school” were attempting to convince others that God was big on perfect compliance with religious rules and regulations.

Paul wrote his letter to tell the Galatian Christians not to give up the free life they had in Jesus. In the words of Eugene Peterson in his introduction to Galatians, “God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within.” God is more concerned that we surrender to Christ’s presence and love than to keep a list of rules perfectly.

## SUMMARY



Dallas Willard, in his book *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship With God*, provides the best summary for this session. In a section of the second chapter labeled “God as Taskmaster,” he has this to say:

*In the same way we demean God immeasurably by casting him in the role of the cosmic boss, foreman or autocrat, whose chief joy in relation to humans is ordering them around, taking pleasure in seeing them jump at his command and painstakingly noting down any failures. **Instead we are to be God’s friends (2 Chronicles 20:7; John 15:13-15) and fellow workers (1 Corinthians 3:9).***

*The role of taskmaster, whether a pleased one or an angry one, is a role that God accepts only when appointed to it by our own limited understanding. (p. 33)*

As Christians, we are challenged to celebrate and enjoy our unique personalities insofar as our traits are not barriers to viewing God correctly and enjoying him as friend and coworker.

### ■ Recommended Readings/Homework

The leader and participants may enjoy reading a copy of *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship With God* by Dallas Willard.



## SESSION EIGHT

# God-in-a-Box



## BEFORE YOU LEAD

### ■ Synopsis

Did you ever have a jack-in-the-box toy when you were a child? I recall one—but I don't remember if it was mine or if a friend had brought it over to scare me. I can still see the box very clearly.

It was plastic, with thin blue and white vertical stripes and a red top. There was a crank on the side. As you turned it, a metallic tune played—not heavy metal, very soft as I recall. The song was “Pop Goes the Weasel.”

After several turns of the handle, the top would spring open with a loud pop, and Jack would jump out, on cue with the lyrics of the song. He wore the pointed hat of a jester. Bells attached to the tips of the hat added to the racket. I'm pretty sure the first time Jack popped out, my toilet training took a step backward.

What is it about a jack-in-a-box that makes it a classic toy for children? The bright colors? The build-up and anticipation? Or maybe it's the rush of adrenaline when Jack jumps out. But for most, the thrill is short-lived. Most jack-in-the-boxes find their way to the back of a closet—to be brought out only for the “benefit” of unsuspecting friends, and then not at all.

For some Christians, God has become something like a jack-in-the-box. How is that? Well, for these folks, their “god” lives in a

box—the church building—and only in a box. He’s seen on rare occasions, which generally work like this: Friends gather around, and the “crank” is turned. For some, the “cranking” involves fast-paced music; for some it’s well-crafted sermons, while others crank through liturgical practices. But if all goes well, their “god” will pop out and entertain the crowd for a while.

Then He’s put back in His resting place, and the people walk away from the box. For the next several days, life is lived as if He were in the back corner of some closet—or as if He didn’t exist at all.

### ■ The “Churchiness” Box

Now hold on. I’m not saying that every church puts God in a box! Far from it. I do mean to suggest, however, that two factors can sneak into our minds and, if not resisted, result in the “confinement” of God. These factors are churchiness and the fear of surrendering control of our lives to an unpredictable force. Let’s begin with churchiness.

I had a couple of friends I’d like to tell you about. The first we’ll call David. David didn’t attend my church. In fact, he wasn’t even a member of my denomination. I assumed, as a boy, that his soul was in great peril but decided to be friends with him anyway.

As the years passed, I got to know David pretty well. Time proved that he was someone who genuinely cared for people. If anyone had a need, David was there—usually didn’t even wait to be asked. His life was one of the clearest reflections of Christ’s that I had ever seen—certainly better than my own. Eventually, watching the way David lived made me come to terms with some of my own misconceptions.

I had long assumed that God lived at my church and that if He got out at all, it would be to visit other

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Question and Discussion

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Exercises/Discussion

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



churches within my denomination. If pressed, I would probably have admitted that folks from other faith groups might make it to heaven, but I surely didn't think they would be in any of the big houses.

David went to a church that didn't worship like ours. And his church didn't emphasize the same things we did. Initially, I thought I was being gracious to think that he might slip in the back door of glory. But after seeing how he lived and how much he loved Jesus, I began to hope that *I* might be allowed to sneak into his heaven.

It was good for me to realize that the God I had created was much too small and that I had kept him confined (in my mind) to the small box of my church. Quite by accident, David expanded my view of God.

Later, I met another person who caused me to question what I believed about God. It wasn't long before I realized he was looking down on me the way I had initially peered down my snout at David.

This friend—let's call him Jerk—constantly asked me questions about my church and my beliefs. Most conversations quickly became theological debates—well, monologues really—on theological correctness. Jerk felt that God was very picky about His theology. There was only one way to believe about anything remotely related to God. The planks of his theology were narrow and short. The points were sharp enough to make fellow Christians bleed.

Both of my friends, in very different ways, caused me to believe that it is too easy to put God in a box—particularly the box of churchiness. But my first friend, David, demonstrated how powerful it could be to let God out of the box so that He could be with you everywhere. Indirectly, my second friend confirmed this in my mind.

### ■ Note to Leader

This is the last lesson before we turn our attention to examining four accurate pictures of God. With this lesson, we also conclude our discussion of some of the reasons people may develop divine misconceptions. It is suggested that excessive churchiness is a common cause for putting God in a box. Later, we will discuss the fear factor.

## ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)





## SESSION EIGHT:

# God-in-a-Box



## INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

### Welcome

Call the group together and welcome participants to session eight of *God Views*.

### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, please accept our apology for ever viewing you in a way that is inconsistent with your character. We pause today to consider how we may have confined you—put you in the small box of our churchiness. Or desired to confine you because we didn't want to surrender control of our lives. Lord, if we secretly wish to control you because we secretly fear you, please remove our anxiety about who you are. Please teach us the truth about your nature and stretch our hearts until there is room for you, for all that you are. Amen.*



### Review

With this session, we complete our examination of the sixth and final misconception of God, and we examine two more reasons we may have for holding on to a false view—churchiness and fear of surrender to a vast and powerful God. Next week we will begin to examine four true views of God.

## WARM-UP (10 MINUTES)



- 1 Take a moment to consider the following question.

## QUESTION

(p. 62 in Participant's Guide)

- How comfortable are you with the notion of God being *out* of a box?

Wait a minute. Before you answer, consider all the implications. Just how comfortable are we with the notion of God being everywhere we are, twenty-four hours a day? When you wake up grumpy in the morning, do you really want God there? When you burn your toast, spill your milk, or raise your voice at your children? When someone cuts you off in traffic while talking on his cell phone, do you really want God sitting beside you? When you're filling out your income tax forms? Deciding which movie to rent? Determining what to say next in the middle of a fight with your spouse?

For some people, the notion of an out-of-the-box (omnipresent) God is very frightening. It may feel safer when we know where He is and that He is under our control.

Now, go back to that question: how comfortable are you with God being out of a box?

If you answered “very comfortable,” congratulations! You apparently have found peace and comfort in your relationship with your maker.

If you answered “not completely comfortable,” congratulations! You are refreshingly honest, a trait that may serve you well in improving your relationship with God—and letting Him out of a box.

Let's consider a couple of common ways Christians put God in a box and some reasons for doing so.



## ■ Discussion

Even in Jesus' day, people were putting God in a box. Consider again the four groups Jesus encountered. (We discussed these groups in session three, but with a different emphasis.)

- 1 *Zealots* were the primary Jewish patriotic party. They were known for their hatred for the Romans and militant ways. Zealots were willing to resort to violence and assassinations to help win independence.

Zealots can be seen as an extreme form of our religious right—those who would use force and the world's ways to make “Rome” (the government) do things their way.

- 2 The *Sadducees* were denounced by both John the Baptist and Jesus. This was the group that seemed most willing to cooperate with Rome or any other ruling party. They were often wealthy. The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife or divine intervention in earthly affairs.

The Sadducees are like modern Christians who are more concerned with maintaining status in the world than the work and mission of Christ in the world.

- 3 The *Pharisees* were in many ways the party of the middle road. Although some were wealthy, most were middle class. They were separatists, but not to the same extreme as the *Essenes*. The name *Pharisee* means “separate one.” They pledged to obey all facets of tradition to the most minute detail. There were about 6,000 Pharisees at the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees are like today's Christians who are more interested in doctrinal conformity in the lives of others than in growing the fruit of the Spirit from their own.

- 4 The *Essenes* were known for pacifism and separatism. They had withdrawn to the Judean wilderness and lived in monk-like communities. They maintained a strict diet, took ritual baths, and held all possessions in common. They hoped their faithful living would hasten the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist was likely a member of this group.

Modern Essenes have put so much energy into avoiding the world, becoming separatists, that they have no one to tell Jesus about but one another.

- 2 Discuss how each of these groups viewed Jesus. How did each try to put him in their box? Do the same for their modern counterparts.

### ■ Leader's Insight

The *Zealots* wanted Jesus to join their cause of overthrowing Rome. They wanted to take advantage of his popularity with the people and because of their “zeal,” they misunderstood his teaching about the kingdom. They wanted him to usher in a here-and-now physical kingdom. They wanted him in their box or not at all.

Modern Zealots have made Jesus a member of a certain political party and are sure they know how he would vote in every election.

The *Sadducees* wanted Jesus out of their sight and confined to a very small box. He was a threat to their wealth, position, and power. When he would not be quiet, they arranged for him to be in an even smaller box—a coffin—or so they thought.

Modern Sadducees may visit the box in which they have placed God only if it is good for business.

The *Pharisees* were champions of self-managed righteousness. Jesus' teaching on God's love, grace, and forgiveness could not be contained by their narrow box.

Modern Pharisees will let you peer in at their god only if you've earned the right through speech, thought, and behavior. My second friend (see synopsis) could be viewed as a modern-day Pharisee.

The *Essenes*, similar to Jesus and John the Baptist in many ways, wanted to confine what Jesus said and did. How could he mix and mingle in the “world” they had fled to the desert to avoid?

Modern Essenes are no longer the salt of the earth. They exist in unpalatable salt licks.

The four prominent groups in Jesus' day would have been okay with Jesus if he had just been willing to step inside their boxes. But he blew the lid off all that.





## ■ Discussion

In *Your God Is Too Small*, J. B. Phillips discusses how difficult it must be for people outside the church to understand why people on the inside tend to put God in the box of their particular faith group. He has this to say:

*The thoughtful man outside the churches is not offended so much by the differences of denominations. To him, in his happy ignorance, these are merely the normal psychological variations of human taste and temperament being expressed in the religious sphere. What he cannot stomach is the exclusive claim made by each to be the “right one.” His judgment is rightly empirical—did not Christ say, “By their fruits ye shall know them”? If he were to observe that the church which makes the boldest and most exclusive claim to be constituted and maintained according to Almighty God’s own ideas was obviously producing the finest Christian character, obviously wielding the highest Christian influence, and obviously most filled by the living Spirit of God—he could perhaps forgive the exclusive claim. But he finds nothing of the kind. No denomination has a monopoly on God’s grace, and none has an exclusive recipe for producing Christian character. It is quite plain to the disinterested observer that the real God takes no notice whatever of the boxes; “the Spirit bloweth where it listeth” and is subject to no regulation of man. (p. 41)*

- 3 What seems obvious by looking back through two thousand years—the prominent religious groups of Jesus’ day wanted Jesus to fit in their boxes—may seem clear as we examine ourselves living in the midst of our own faith group. Discuss any ways, in your own life, that churchiness (the box) may have become overly confining for the person of Christ.

As a follow-up, the exercise titled “Visible Fruit” may be used to examine how free we are to let Jesus out of the box to live his life through us.



## CONTENT (15 MINUTES)

### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 3 minutes)

In this video segment, Curt portrays God (with a Jerry Lewis voice) as being confined to a small box. We are making the case in this lesson that churchiness and fear of surrender are two primary reasons why this happens.

## ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the video segment.

### QUESTION

(p. 62 in Participant's Guide)

- In a very poignant moment in the video vignette, Curt (speaking as God) says, "Maybe someday everybody will [let me out of the box]." What do you think would be necessary for this to become true?

## ■ Exercise

Please see pp. 59, 60 in the Participant's Guide for an exercise on the names of God. Complete the first part of this activity labeled "In Class." We will take the time to hear from everyone who wants to share. Complete the second part of this exercise as a homework activity.

## BIBLE STUDY (15 MINUTES)



Let us once again turn to the Bible for a frame of reference. A short Bible study is found on p. 61 in the Participant's Guide. Please continue with your custom of either dividing into small groups (of four to six people), or continue to meet as a larger group if you wish.

## ■ Group Exercise

If a small group format is being used, you will want to allow approximately 10 minutes for the members to read the passages and work through the questions. If a large group format is employed, read the passage to the entire class and ask the question to the group.

## ■ Leader's Insight

It is noteworthy that the images of God found in 1 Kings 19:11-13 are each consistent with how God presents Himself—wind (Genesis 1:2, John 3:8, Acts 2:2), earthquake (Matthew 27:51, Hebrews 12:26, Acts 16:26), and fire (Exodus 3:2 and 13:21, Acts 2:3).



But God will not be put in a box. In this instance, He reveals Himself in a whisper. Why? Perhaps because the purpose of this appearance was personal and intimate communication with Elijah. Putting God in a box limits His ability to appear to us in a way that meets our changing needs.

The two additional passages are used to provide an image of God (rushing wind and tongues of fire) that cannot be contained by a “box,” and to underscore that love (as a fruit of the Spirit) is the best evidence of God’s presence in the heart of a believer. Love is the first fruit of God’s presence.



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## SUMMARY

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To quote again the remarkable words of Anna in *Dear God, This is Anna*, “God is too big to have a point of view. He has points to view.” The profound truth of her words can be seen when you observe a list of all the ways God is identified in Scripture (The “Names, Titles, and Descriptions of God” exercise provides but a small fraction of these). The Bible provides hundreds of descriptions of God. Obviously, God is far too vast to be confined by a label. And He is far too awesome to be placed in a box. We must strive very hard to overcome two subtle ways of limiting God—the artificial boundaries of churchiness and the self-protecting walls created by our fear of total surrender.

### ■ Recommended Readings/Homework

Reading *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* by Bruce Wilkinson may be a helpful way of experiencing the vastness of God.



## SESSION NINE

# Return of the Prodigal



### BEFORE YOU LEAD

#### ■ Synopsis

This session will differ slightly from our typical pattern. There will be more focus on the video vignette (approximately 21 minutes) than in previous times together. There will also be an emphasis on placing ourselves within Jesus' story of the prodigal son. By way of introduction, we will turn first to the insights of Henri Nouwen.

Henri J. Nouwen (1932-1996) is one of the most beloved writers in the area of Christian spirituality the twentieth century produced. He wrote about his own spiritual journey—both triumphs and tribulations—with such openness of heart that he made it easy for the reader to be honest as well.

In 1983 Nouwen discovered Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The painting absorbed his thoughts for several years. Eventually, it inspired one of his most important books, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. In it he chronicles his personal reflections on the painting and his own life.

Rembrandt's painting shows the prodigal son being embraced by his father. The son is kneeling. His clothes are dirty and little more than rags. One shoe is missing. The other is worn. His head is shaved.

The father's hands are gently placed on his son's back. He is draped by a red cape—the color perhaps being symbolic to Rembrandt of the heart, or compassion. The son is engulfed by the father's love.

There are three other characters in the painting. Two are not identified. They are observers. (Perhaps one is a servant, the other a friend of the father.) But there is no mistaking the third: it is the distant and aloof older brother. His eyes are downcast and reflect distance and displeasure.

Nouwen believed that the painting did more than portray the climactic scene from Jesus' famous parable. It questioned him. Who are you? Which of the figures do you identify with? Nouwen's initial thoughts were that he didn't know what it would be like to be the prodigal son, held and loved by the father. He felt more like one of the two unidentified onlookers.

Nouwen confessed, "For years I had instructed students on the different aspects of the spiritual life...But had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?"

Such an honest statement by a respected writer on the topic of God's love is unexpected. Perhaps it will motivate us to invest some time reflecting on Rembrandt's painting, while considering with which of the figures we most readily identify. Let's take a closer look, as we consider our place in the picture.

### ■ The Prodigal

A Pulitzer Prize-winning author (Richard Rhodes, to name names) once said that all stories are the same. A person falls in a hole and struggles to get out. I

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Self-Examination

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response/Discussion

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



believe he is onto something. Ever since Adam, the primary struggle of humankind is to get out of the hole into which we have fallen.

I believe this is why Jesus' story of the prodigal son is so powerful. We each identify with the notion of being separated from God because of self-centered choices. We long to believe that God's love is like that of the prodigal's father—a pursuing and outstretched love. We know that what is best for us is to give up any notion of happiness apart from God and to come home.

Perhaps some of us are at a place of strong identification with the prodigal son at some stage of his journey: moving away from home to pursue happiness apart from God; in the midst of prodigal living; in the pigpen of despair; or facing back toward home, hoping only to participate outside the Father's home as a laborer. Perhaps some have gone through all these cycles and are enjoying the surprising embrace of the Father's love.

### ■ The Older Brother

Some of us may identify with the older brother. We have never left our Father's house, but neither have we enjoyed the full embrace of his love.

Older sons often have dark feelings that fester in their hearts: envy at the liberties taken by “brothers” in Christ, judgment, condemnation, and bitterness. Older brothers are physically present in the Father's house, but their hearts are in a faraway country, imprisoned by self-righteousness. Their resentment is like the attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the law who opposed Jesus.

### ■ The Father

Maybe there are others in the group who can even identify with the Father. Their love has become strong and mature. Not only can they imagine reaching out to a prodigal child (and perhaps they have), but they can also do as the father did for the second child. They can imagine reaching out to the older son as well. If you carefully reread Luke 15:28, you will observe that not only did the father go out for the younger son; he went out for the older brother as well. It could be argued that a better name for this parable would be “The Father's Love” rather than “The Prodigal Son.”

## ■ Conclusion

In Jesus' most powerful parable, the younger son made a change when confronted by the depth of his father's love. As Nouwen wrote, "People who have come to know God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself...." They move back home and see their Father in a whole new light.

In this, the first of four true views of God, we consider the image of the prodigal's father as a clear reflection of the love of God. And we are invited to realize what Nouwen did. God is not hard to find. In fact, He is the one doing the looking. It is we who linger outside, or even in hiding, needing to learn to trust a true view of our real Dad. It's the only way to get out of the hole we have each fallen into.

## ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)





## SESSION NINE:

# Return of the Prodigal



### INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

#### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session nine of *God Views*.

#### ■ Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we confess to you that we have fallen into a hole and cannot get out without your help. We are at times like both the prodigal son—separated from you by our selfish choices—and his older brother—separated from you by our self-righteousness. We rejoice that you love us so much that you are willing to go out and meet us where we are. You invite us to enjoy a celebration of your love for us. Please let your love be more than enough to cause us to come to our senses and come all the way home. Amen.*

#### ■ Review

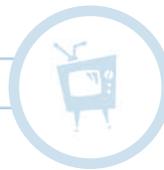
With this session, there is a major shift of emphasis. In previous sessions we have been examining false views of God and the reasons they are maintained. This time together, and for the following three lessons, we will focus on true pictures of God.



### WARM-UP (10 MINUTES)

Share with the participants the material presented in the synopsis. You may wish to read it verbatim or simply provide a summary. The key ingredient will be to have each participant examine Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, and locate a character in it with whom they most readily identify. You may want a few of the participants to share their selections and the reasons behind the choice.

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**CONTENT (25-30 MINUTES)**

**■ Video Vignette (21 minutes)**

In this video segment, Curt performs a modern-day adaptation of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. It is a powerful story about the love of a father for his child—a love so strong that it cannot be quenched by the child's rejection of him or other sinful behaviors.

Pass out the tissue and play the segment.

**■ Class Response**

Solicit responses from the group to the vignette.

**Q U E S T I O N S**

(p. 68 in Participant's Guide)

- Why do you think Jesus' parable of the prodigal son has become a classic summary of the gospel message?
- If there had been an older brother in Curt's story, what do you think his reaction would have been?
- In what way(s) did Curt's retelling of this parable touch you?

**■ Discussion**

Ask if anyone is willing to share an experience from his life in which he was overwhelmed by unexpected grace.

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**BIBLE STUDY (10-15 MINUTES)**


Let us once again turn to the Bible. In the fresh light provided by Nouwen, Cloninger, and the artwork of Rembrandt, we will examine the Parable of the Prodigal in Luke's Gospel.



## ■ Group Exercise

Divide into smaller groups (or remain as one larger group) and spend some time examining Jesus' original parable.

## ■ Leader's Insight

The primary question for this study involves an examination of how the story of the prodigal (some may prefer the NIV's translation, "lost son") is a summary of Christian theology.

### ① Creation

The doctrine of creation affirms the goodness and lavish love of the creator and His desire to be with His creation.

Jesus' parable opens with the son being with his father in an Eden-like environment—a place of abundance where all conceivable needs can be met.

### ② Human Nature

As a son, the prodigal is an image or reflection of the father. But also like the prototype, Adam, he desires autonomy and independence from his Father. He wants to be free of parental restraint and to spend his inheritance as he pleases—primarily for pleasures of the flesh, instead of the spirit. The result of this "sin" is pictured as what the Jews would view as the ultimate indignities—the distasteful work of feeding unclean animals, and having fallen so far as to desire to eat the food of pigs.

### ③ Nature of God

God exists in a community of love—as Trinity. Because of this love, He creates and invites His creation to be members of the family. The father in Jesus' story desires for his children to live together with him, sharing love and relationship. But he respects the free choice of his son and allows him to leave. The love of the father becomes the dominant theme of the rest of the story.

#### 4 Incarnation

In this parable, the father does something very unusual. He leaves home, runs to his son, and throws his arms around him. He hugs a son who undoubtedly reeks of dirt and pig slop. In that culture, such an act would be perceived as debasing. It parallels Jesus' self-emptying to embrace us as a servant.

#### 5 Redemption

The father not only enters the world of the son, but also brings him back home and provides him with a robe, ring, sandals, and a feast. Each was a sign of restored position and acceptance by the father. Solely as a result of the father's grace, the son is restored.

If the pump needs to be primed, you may want to share some of the above with the participants. But the main emphasis for the discussion should be placed on the second question. Where do the participants see themselves in this story of redemption through a father's love?

## SUMMARY

Is this parable of Jesus really about the prodigal son? I don't think so—at least this is not the primary focus. The story is about the father and his amazing love for both of his children. And consequently, it is about the lavish love of God. But do you know what you will find when you look up the meaning of the word “prodigal”? It means “reckless,” “extravagant,” and “lavish.” Maybe “prodigal” is the right adjective. It's about the prodigal (“lavish”) love of our heavenly Father.

### ■ Recommended Readings

Henri J. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Published by Doubleday, 1994.





## SESSION TEN

# Bubba: On the Nature of God



### BEFORE YOU LEAD

#### ■ Synopsis

Many people have brought new life to the Scriptures through producing modern translations.

Kenneth Taylor began paraphrasing the New Testament on the train while commuting to Moody Press. His motivation for rewriting the KJV was to make the Bible more accessible to his own children. The result, *The Living Bible*, has sold over 40 million copies. The financial success of the project made possible the establishment of Tyndale House Publishers in 1963.

J. B. Phillips, author of *Your God Is Too Small*, also produced *The New Testament in Modern English*—a very readable version of the New Testament loved by many people around the world.

Following in this line, Eugene Peterson has produced *The Message*—arguably the most poetic and captivating of the modern translations. Some go so far as to say that he makes it fun to read Paul's letters.

If Peterson's translation is the most artistic, surely Clarence Jordan has given us the most lovably offbeat version of Scripture. His *Cotton Patch Gospels* is a modern rendering of the New Testament with a distinctively Southern twist. When asked why a "cotton patch" version, Jordan replied, "...[W]hile there have been

many excellent translations of the Scriptures into modern English, they still have left us stranded in some faraway land in the long-distant past. We need to have the good news come to us not only in our own tongue but in our own time.”<sup>1</sup> It turned out to be so moving that it inspired Harry Chapin to write a Broadway musical by the same name.

While the message of the gospel does not change with time, modern translations are successful if they open the timeless truths of Scripture to new readers and create fresh longing to experience the gospel. Describing the works and words of God from a new vantage point can unlock deep spiritual truth that may have—for some—remained hidden.

In this session, Curt Cloninger will allow one of his alter egos—Bubba Johnson—to provide a Southern-fried slant to describing the true nature of God. Yeah, it’s a bit weird. But it is also a novel way to picture the depth of God’s love for you.

### ■ Note to Leader

As with the previous session, the video vignette will be shown early in your time with the group. It will be foundational to the discussion and Bible study that follow.

### ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant’s Guide (Optional)

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Quick Transition to Video

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Questions/Discussion/Exercises

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review

1. See “Clarence Jordan and the Cotton Patch Gospels.” Found at: [www.koinoniapartners.org/Clarence.htm](http://www.koinoniapartners.org/Clarence.htm)



## SESSION TEN:

# Bubba: On the Nature of God



### INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

#### ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session ten of *God Views*.

#### ■ Prayer

*Heavenly Father, make our hearts open and receptive to any words you wish to share. While it is not possible for us to fathom the depth of your love for us, help us to experience your grace to a degree we have never felt before—to such an extent that our hearts become stretched with gratitude. And in the warmth and confidence of your love, help us to have the courage to be honest with you about the areas of our lives that still need your healing touch. In the name of Jesus, your son, Amen.*

#### Review

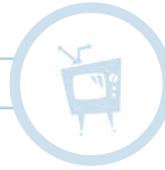
In this session, we will consider the second of four positive views of the nature of God. It is a natural follow-up to (and extension of) the view of God as the Prodigal's father, and a good-ol'-boy slant on how much God loves "mutts."



### WARM-UP (5 MINUTES)

For this session, we will move immediately to the video vignette. You may want to read (or provide a summary of) the synopsis before playing the video.

## CONTENT (5 MINUTES)

**■ Video Vignette (Approximately 12 minutes)**

In this video segment, you will see Curt Cloninger portray “Bubba Johnson” as he tells a story about a dog. Within the story are three truths about the nature of God. To keep from stealing the punch line, let’s go ahead and watch the vignette. We’ll talk later.

**■ Class Response**

Bubba’s Bible-made-easy on the nature of God suggests three things:

- ① God loves mutts and loves to forgive them.
- ② It’s better to admit you’re a mutt than to pretend you’re a poodle.
- ③ Only forgiven mutts get to ride shotgun in the cab of God’s pickup (that is, enjoy His constant companionship).

**■ Discussion**

Before continuing with some exercises and directed discussion on these three insights, ask the participants if anyone would like to share about a time he personally experienced God in one of the ways Curt suggests—a time of feeling like a forgiven mutt, the experience of raw honesty before God, or the deep enjoyment of His companionship.

(Note: As with any time of group discussion, the leader will need to decide at what point to return to the “lesson plan.” However, in some situations it may be appropriate to stay with this type of sharing for the remaining time together. Honest and inspiring testimonies of God’s love are always better than the planned activities of the lesson. But planned activities always trump flat discussion or unsafe sharing.)

- ① *God loves mutts and loves to forgive them.*



## ■ Exercise

Divide into smaller groups (or remain together). Then allow the participants to complete the exercise titled “Match the Marvelous Mutts.”

### QUESTIONS

(p. 76 in Participant’s Guide)

In response to this exercise, have the participants consider the following questions:

- Why do you believe Jesus was so attracted to “mutts”?
- Why do you suppose so many “mutts” were attracted to Jesus?
- Why are mutts (real ones this time) sometimes preferred to purebreds?

## ■ Note to Leader

Jesus’ message called for people to quit living life on their own terms. And he called them to turn around, reverse field, and be willing to live life a whole new way—on God’s terms. A person would have to be pretty desperate to admit that he doesn’t know anything about how to live and is willing to lay down his life in exchange for another. Mutts, living out on their own, scrounging for food, would likely be more willing to accept Jesus’ offer than would contented poodles, living inside and eating prepared meals.

## ■ Exercise

This exercise is really a meditation. Turn to “Incredibly Loyal Mutts” and reflect on the loyalty shown by some of the “mutts” Jesus picked.

- 2 *It’s better to admit you’re a mutt than to pretend you’re a poodle.*

## ■ Discussion

Ask the participants to recall stories from Scripture that illustrate this point.

## ■ Note to Leader

Several illustrations are readily apparent. There is a sense that Jesus' running battles with the Pharisees had to do with their refusal to see themselves as "mutts" while pretending to be "poodles." Their wearing of phylacteries<sup>2</sup> may be seen as somewhat poodle-*esque*.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) could be viewed in terms of how difficult it is for an established "poodle" to admit that he or she is a "mutt" in need of a savior. Nicodemus was a leading Pharisee, "a ruler of the Jews" and a member of the Sanhedrin. While he wasn't ready to give up being a poodle that night (although he was deeply touched), there is evidence that he may have done some mutt-morphing later on (See John 7:25-44 and 19:38-42).

In Philippians 3:4-11, we find the story of the change in Paul when he stopped pretending to be a "poodle."

But there are many more good examples:

- ① Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:10-14)
- ② Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:27, 28)
- ③ Thief on the cross (Luke 23:40-43)

### QUESTIONS

(p. 76 in Participant's Guide)

- Why is it better to admit you are a mutt than to pretend you are a poodle?
- What were the consequences in your life when you made this decision?

2. A phylactery is one of two small leather boxes containing slips inscribed with scriptural passages traditionally worn on the left arm and on the head.



## BIBLE STUDY (10-15 MINUTES)

- 3** This is where we will consider Curt's third point: *Only forgiven mutts get to ride shotgun in the cab of God's pickup.*

Let's once again turn to the Bible for a broader understanding. We will examine selected verses from the twenty-first chapter of John's Gospel. It may be helpful to share information presented in the "Leader's Insight" section (below) before the participants begin the Bible study found on p. 75 in the Participant's Guide.

### ■ Group Exercise

Continue with whatever has become your custom—either breaking into small groups or completing the study as one large group. And if time has expired, the Bible study can become a homework assignment.

### ■ Leader's Insight

Chapter 21 of John's Gospel provides many insights into the nature of God—as reflected in the life of His son, Jesus. These insights also seemed to amplify Curt's three points about God's nature. Let's look at a few.

- 1** *The Setting:* Each of the Gospel writers tells the story of how the first disciples were called by Jesus. Mark (1:16-20) and Luke (5:1-11) provide the most detail. You are familiar with the scene. Peter had been fishing all night with his brother Andrew. They had caught nothing. But at Jesus' instruction, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4b), they obeyed. The result is a haul of fish that almost sinks Peter's boat—and an additional catch of Jesus' first four disciples. In John 21 we see, perhaps, a nostalgic, sentimental, and compassionate side of Jesus. Peter's denial of his master, no doubt, still has his stomach tied in a knot. Jesus knew this. His nature would not allow him to ascend into heaven until setting Peter free from his guilt. Jesus re-created the scene of Peter's initial call into ministry as the setting for his healing. Surely,

Peter often reflected on the similarity of these, the two most important events in his life, and how both were orchestrated by his master, Jesus.

But you already knew this about Jesus. He loves mutts and loves to forgive them.

- ② *Your Fish Plus My Fish.* Not only did Jesus reset the scene of Peter's call into ministry, but he fished breakfast for him too. Read John 21:9. "When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread."

Jesus took the time to prepare a special breakfast of fish and loaves. But listen carefully. He has already prepared fish but still asks that they bring some of what they have caught. Why? Because his fish plus our fish make it a better breakfast.

Jesus didn't need their fish—and doesn't need ours. In a similar fashion, the parents of a two-year-old don't really need her help in preparing a meal. But when her help is given and received, the child feels loved and a part of something very special. And the meal becomes a better one for the parents too.

Jesus said, in essence, "Your fish plus my fish make it a better breakfast." He loved the disciples enough to cook for them—but even more. He loved them enough to want them to feel good about making a contribution.

- ③ A lot has been made of the fact that the Greek word for "love" in Jesus' first two questions was different from the word he used when he asked the question a third time, and from the word for love used by Peter in all of his answers. A lot has been made of this for good reason!

To "truly love" (as said by Jesus in his first two questions to Peter) suggests a love in which all of oneself is involved, including the will. It is to love with all of who we are and consequently is a transforming love.

The lighter version of the term (used by Peter) suggests only a natural affection or fondness.



Jesus knew that Peter had not yet been transformed by love—as evidenced by his poor performance on the night Jesus was arrested. But he wants this for Peter. He holds it out as a live option. And he even lets Peter know the litmus test for the transformation—caring deeply for others, becoming their shepherd. It’s the same deep love Jesus was modeling. He truly loved Peter so much that he could not return to heaven before seeing him reinstated. And he spared no details in the setup for this teaching. Yep, that’s Jesus. Loves mutts. Loves to forgive them. Knows they need to realize their muttiness, then invites them to ride with him, side by side, in the cab. The Holy Spirit will soon be sent, and then Jesus and Peter will be inseparable.



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## SUMMARY

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It’s hard to say it any better than Bubba. We serve a mutt-loving God, who wants us to be honest with ourselves about our wretched state apart from Him. And He wants us to practice His presence—ride shotgun by His side—for the entire drive through this life, and then forever. Part of the nature of God involves the offering of constant companionship.



SESSION ELEVEN

## God With Skin On



### BEFORE YOU LEAD

#### ■ Synopsis

Let's return for a moment to the source of Curt Cloninger's inspiration for his *God Views* drama, J. B. Phillips' *Your God Is Too Small*.

Phillips lists two purposes for writing his book. First, he wanted to expose inadequate conceptions of God which, he suggests, still linger in the minds of many people on the pew. It was his desire to see these harmful images "demolished." Why such strong language? Because, as we have observed together, these false pictures may prevent us from catching a glimpse of the true and living God.

Phillips' second purpose was for his readers to seek God where He has most clearly revealed himself—in the person of Jesus Christ. Clearly, Jesus is the best and most objective picture we have of God. What we know about Jesus we also know about God.

And fortunately, from the recorded sayings of Jesus, we can learn how to come to know *his* true identity. In particular, Jesus gave three remarkable indications by which we can recognize divine nature.

- 1 "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." (John 14:9, KJV)

We must look closely at the life of Christ as revealed in Scripture. His character and the patterns of his life make known the true image of God.

- ② “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14:6, KJV)

It is important to acknowledge our inadequacy for finding ultimate truth or experiencing real life apart from Jesus. It is only by virtue of what Christ accomplished on the cross and what he is willing to complete in us that we have hope of knowing God.

- ③ “If any man will do his [i.e. God’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.” (John 7:17, KJV)

We can never know Jesus by thinking about him. Even talking with him will not provide full revelation. We must dive into the current of his will and actively participate in his life. We can know Christ only by doing the will of his Father.

In this session, we will attempt to get to know Jesus a little better as a way of enhancing our God view. In doing so, we will consider the above three teachings of Christ as they relate to three of the most important themes in his life:

- ① His use of *solitude*.
- ② The mystery of the *Incarnation*.
- ③ The way he remained true to the primary purpose of life—*loving God and others*.

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Retelling of the Lesson Synopsis
- Illustration
- Exercises and Discussion

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Question/Discussion/Exercise

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



Practicing the spiritual discipline of solitude, appreciating the mystery of the Incarnation, and living out the primary purpose of life—these three things are at the heart of Christ’s nature. Participating in them ourselves is the path for becoming more like him—and understanding more about the nature of God.

## ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant’s Guide (Optional)



SESSION ELEVEN:

# God With Skin On



INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

## ■ Welcome

Call the group together and welcome the participants to session eleven of *God Views*.

## ■ Prayer

*Thank you, heavenly Father, for sending your son into the world. We were all born on the wrong side of a gulf that separated us from you. It was a distance that we could never cross on our own. But since we could not come to you, you came to us. You, through your son, Jesus, identified with us, became one of us. We acknowledge that your Incarnation was the supreme act of deliverance, restoring us to communion with you. Restoring us to wholeness. Thank you for the model of selfless love and obedience that your son became. Thank you that fellowship with you has been restored. Help us to be just like him. In his name, Amen.*

## ■ Review

For our final two sessions, we will focus on the view of God reflected by the two other members of the Trinity—Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The spotlight of this session will be on better understanding the nature of God by examining prominent aspects of the nature of Jesus—his use of solitude, the mystery of the Incarnation, and his fulfillment of the two supreme commandments (the primary purpose of life)—loving both God and all others.

## WARM-UP (10 MINUTES)

**Note to Leader**

Before going into our examination of these three aspects of the life of Jesus, you may want the participants to generate a list of statements about the life and character of Christ. What are the adjectives that can be used to describe him?

Have someone record the statements and then read them all to the group. It may be eye-opening for some to realize that everything that was accurately said about Jesus is an aspect of God's nature as well.

**1 Jesus practiced solitude.**

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Out of Solitude*, claims that there is a sense in which the secret to Jesus' ministry is hidden in the lonely places where he goes out to pray—often long before dawn.

When we study the life of Jesus, we discover that solitude was a major theme in his life. Many times in the Gospels he retreats from people to be alone. Why? Always the same reason. He wanted communion with his Father. He desired quietness so he could better hear the voice of his Dad.

To list but a few examples of times when Jesus practiced the discipline of solitude:

- 1 When he inaugurated his ministry by spending 40 days in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11)
- 2 After his first evangelistic crusade at the house of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:32-39)
- 3 Before he chose the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12)
- 4 When he received the news of the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 13)



- 5 After feeding the 5,000 (Matthew 14:23)
- 6 As he prepared for the crucifixion, going to be alone in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46)

What is solitude?

Dallas Willard, in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, offers that when we practice the discipline of solitude, we “purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interactions with others.” Why? To give ourselves to interacting with God.

He describes solitude as the most fundamental of all Christian disciplines, because it allows for a quiet, undisturbed atmosphere for being present with our heavenly Father.

Jesus is a member of a community of perfect love—the Trinity. When he came to earth in human form, he still longed to experience the love and fellowship of that community. In the experience of solitude, Jesus found connection to the words and wisdom of his “Family” (God and the Holy Spirit).

Jesus, the perfect person and our holy example, desired to experience union and communion with God. And somewhere deep inside, we long to do the same.

Once again, in the words of Henri Nouwen,

“...Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures. The careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life and should be the subject of our most personal attention.”

## QUESTION

(p. 84 in Participant's Guide)

- What does Jesus' use of solitude say to you?

## ■ Exercise

Take a little time to complete the exercise titled “My Contract for Solitude.”

## CONTENT (20 MINUTES)



## ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 8 minutes)

In this video segment, Curt is having a conversation with John—his friend who “interrupted” the introduction to this series. Curt was taping in the dressing room. The show is over, and Curt is crashed in a chair where the audience was sitting. John sits alongside and shares a story of his own, about Jesus as a reflection of God.

## ■ Note to Leader

It may be a good idea to summarize the three main points in this video segment—that is, unpack the parable. Watch the segment before class and then summarize the following points before opening the discussion.

- 1 John’s being outside the fish tank, frustrated that his fish are frightened of him, is meant to symbolize our perceived separation from God (as He exists in heaven) and how we may have a false image of Him.
- 2 When John noticed “baby Jesus” crying in the Christmas pageant, he had a revelation. Jesus had left the comfort of heaven to enter into our world. He loved us so much he was willing to enter into our “tank” so that he could be with us.
- 3 The notion of God as a fish (like us) is presented as a metaphor for the Incarnation of Christ.

## ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group to the following:



## QUESTIONS

(p. 84 in Participant's Guide)

- How does John's story about his fish relate to the love of Christ?
- How do you feel about the lengths to which Jesus went so that he could communicate with us?

## 2

### Jesus and the Incarnation.

#### ■ Discussion

The word *incarnation* means “being in the flesh.” The idea of the Incarnation means God taking on human flesh, undergoing a voluntary process of humiliation to enter into human history and take on the entire experience of human existence.

#### ■ Illustration

When we deeply ponder what it meant for Jesus to become incarnate, we realize that the powerful story of the prodigal son does not go far enough in helping us to understand the love of God. Not only is God like the prodigal's father (loving, forgiving, generous), but He goes even further. For the story of the prodigal son to match with the mystery of the Incarnation, the father would have had to leave his home, empty himself of wealth and power, dress in the filthy rags of his prodigal son, and enter into the mud and slop of the pig pen.

No! The love is even deeper love than that. The father would still be a human. He would still be holding onto that aspect of his former life. To find a match for what Jesus did, we have to turn to the story of Pinocchio.

Imagine that after Geppetto's creation left home and became a donkey, Geppetto loved him so much that he was willing give up his whole life as he knew it and become a donkey himself in order to bring his “son” back home.

Yes, the mystery of the Incarnation causes us to realize that even the story of the prodigal son stops short of revealing the depth of God's love for His children.

### ■ Exercise

Locate the exercise titled “Personal Reflection,” which contains a poem about the Incarnation. Read it reflectively and then sit quietly before God. Ask Him to whisper to you about how much He loves you.

## 3 Jesus fulfilled the ultimate purpose of life—He loved sacrificially.

### ■ Discussion

J. B. Phillips suggests that there are three fundamental questions in life. These questions, along with Phillips' suggested answers, are presented below.

#### Q1. What sort of person is God?

A. Christ's answer is unequivocal. He is the “Father.” And his story of the prodigal son suggests the radical extent of our Father's love for us. In solitude, Jesus plugged into the love of his Father.

#### Q2. What's the main problem in life?

A. The main problem in life is sin. That is, love has been turned inward instead of flowing outward. There is no sin that can be named that does not originate in the love of self. And the sins that do the most damage and cause the most suffering are those that have the highest content of self-love.

Jesus' acceptance of the Incarnation—and ultimately the cross—provided the cure for self-centered love. It also is the model for how to live.



### Q3. What is the purpose of life?

- A. There are two main principles of living on which all true morality and wisdom depend. The first is to love God with the whole of our personality (will, mind, heart, emotions, and actions). The second is to love others as much as we so naturally love ourselves. Jesus lived the purpose of life. He loved with a servant's towel, and he loved by accepting the cross.

#### QUESTION

(p. 84 in Participant's Guide)

- Take a quick and fearless inventory. Assuming God's ultimate will is that each of us practice the two supreme commandments—being in love with Him and others—where are you in doing the will of God?



#### BIBLE STUDY (10-15 MINUTES)

As we consider the life of Christ as a mirror to the nature of God, let's go again to the Bible for additional insight.

#### ■ Group Exercise

Form small groups (or remain together) and complete the Bible study found on p. 83 in the Participant's Guide.

#### ■ Leader's Insight

Paul begins this passage with a reference to being "united with Christ." This was a very important teaching for Paul. He used descriptions that made reference to being "in" Christ, or Christ being in us, 164 times in his writings.

The early church did not use phrases like "being saved" when describing our relationship with Christ (or with God). The reality

of salvation was included in the notion of living in union (connected like a vine and branches) with Christ. It is unfortunate that so many modern Christians have lost familiarity with the powerful imagery of union. It is a much more vibrant, alive, and ongoing concept than recalling the time when our sins were forgiven.

Please do not misunderstand. Having sins forgiven is very important. Having one's name written down in the Book of Life should be an ultimate concern. But Paul believed living out of a union with Christ the Savior is the way a Christian experiences intimate personal relationship with Jesus and avoids the snares of sin. Maintaining an awareness of this union is why the spiritual discipline of solitude is so vital to Christian living.

The other important imagery in this passage is that of “Kenosis,” which refers to Christ’s being willing to “empty himself” of (or lay aside) the glory of divinity voluntarily for our sake. In the words of the early Church father, Origen, “The whole of man would not have been saved, unless he [Jesus] had taken upon himself the whole of man.” But to do so meant that Jesus was willing to empty himself, making himself “nothing” to be with us. In the words of Curt’s friend, John, Jesus became a fish for you and me. That emptying process is called “kenosis.”

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## SUMMARY



Jesus understood the true nature of God—and used solitude to stay connected to his Father. Jesus knew what was the main problem in life—self-love. And through the mystery of the Incarnation he came to demonstrate the solution—selfless love that would pick up both a towel and a cross in service of another—any other.

Jesus also knew the purpose of life—to let love flow out of us toward God and others. And he was obedient in the fulfillment of life’s main purpose. He loved. He simply and profoundly loved.

Again, the words of John:

“If any man will do his [i.e., God’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether I speak of myself.”  
(John 7:17, KJV)



SESSION TWELVE  
**TWENTY-FOUR-HOURS-A-DAY  
LIVE-IN COUNSELOR, OR  
How to Become  
an Alien**



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**BEFORE YOU LEAD**

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■ **Synopsis**

Christianity exploded onto the world scene with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. The overwhelming experience of vision and inspired language brought proof that the new era prophesied by Joel had arrived.

The events of that Pentecost morning also confirmed that Jesus kept his word—no matter how outlandish the claim. Not only had he “rebuilt the temple” of his body in three days, but now the twenty-four-hours-a-day live-in counselor he had promised was open for business. God, who had dwelt among humankind in the person of Christ, was now available to live inside each believer—with holy power and divine wisdom.

But to appreciate Pentecost and the new era of the Spirit fully, I believe we have to travel back in time a few millennia and stand at the foot of the Tower of Babel.

Look around. What do you see?

Thousands of people are working together constructing a stairway to heaven. Listen to the roar of construction noise. Metal is striking stone. Oxen are pulling large blocks across highways of rolling logs. Whips crack across the backs of animals and slaves.

Look. Look way up. The tower ascends from a base larger than four great pyramids jammed together to the bottoms of clouds. Soon, the people believe, it will puncture the sky, and they will climb the stone steps and see God, eye to eye.

The motivation for being as tall as God is the same drive that got Adam and Eve booted from the garden. Like their foreparents, the tower builders wanted to be God. They wanted to have His power and His wisdom under their control. Theirs was self-centered, self-serving ambition. Through the sweat of their brows, they hoped to obtain power and security, riches and glory.

But you know how the story ends. God intervenes. He sends down new languages from heaven, and it becomes impossible for the people to work together. With the outpouring of new tongues, He crushes their plans for self-rule. They scurry around confused by these new dialects. Their unity dissolves—the negative image of Pentecost.

It took a few thousand years, but on Pentecost morning (A.D. 33, give or take six years), the problems associated with the Tower of Babel are finally torn down. At Pentecost, there is a second outpouring of languages from heaven. But this time with the opposite result! The gift of the holy language of love produces unity, not divisions. Those baptized with the Spirit speak, and people from different cultures hear the gospel of love proclaimed in their native tongues.

But the similarities don't stop with the gift of new language. There are other commonalities between Babel and Pentecost. The desire for access to God is granted. Not only can you get close enough to touch Him, but He's available as a twenty-four-hour-a-day live-in counselor. The full impact of the tearing

## SESSION OUTLINE

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Review

### II. WARM-UP

- Exercise
- Retelling of the Synopsis
- Question/Discussion

### III. CONTENT

- Video Vignette
- Class Response
- Discussion/Exercises

### IV. BIBLE STUDY

- Small Groups or All Together

### V. SUMMARY

- Review



of the veil in the temple is felt in human hearts, where a second veil is torn—the covering that keeps us hidden from Him.

At Pentecost, God is no longer separate from the people. The Immanuel (God with us) of Christ becomes the Immanuel of the Spirit.

The desires of the *Babel*-onians for power, security, and riches are also granted. The power of the Holy Spirit is poured out. The security of eternal life is given. And the riches of abundant life—living life in union with God—become an unwrapped present.

What makes the difference? Why did God freely give what was denied the builders of Babel? Two words, and they both start with an “S.” *Surrender* versus *self-service*.

Adam and Eve, Babel’s builders, and Jesus’ chief nemeses, the Pharisees, all had one thing in common. They followed a plan of self-management. They wanted matters under their own control. They were not willing to die to themselves. They preferred God at a safe distance instead of as an intimate friend and counselor.

Jesus provided the polar-opposite model. Through the Incarnation and the cross, he demonstrated selfless love, surrender of control, and trust that God had his best interests at heart. And above all things, he valued companionship with God.

At Pentecost, God pours out the gift of His precious Holy Spirit to become incarnate in the hearts of believers. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, it becomes possible to do all the things Jesus did, and more—because it is truly Christ himself acting in and through us.

The Holy Spirit speaks through disciples in the universal language of love. The divisions at Babel are undone, and the desire to see God is both sanctified and fulfilled.

## ■ Materials

For each session *the leader* will need:

- Resource guide
- Bible
- Video Player, Monitor, Stand, Extension Cord, etc.
- *God Views* Video

For each session *the participant* will need:

- Bible
- Pen or Pencil
- Participant's Guide (Optional)





## SESSION TWELVE:

# TWENTY-FOUR-HOURS-A-DAY LIVE-IN COUNSELOR, OR How to Become an Alien



## INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

### Welcome

Call the group together for the final session of *God Views*.

### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of spending time together to consider your nature and character. We thank you for meeting with us and using this experience to help us gain a clearer picture of you. We are overwhelmed by your love, and we are challenged to become better reflections of you. Now please seal in our hearts all that you have whispered to us. And teach us how to surrender more fully to your precious Holy Spirit, who yearns to live your life through us. Amen.*

### Review

Turn to the exercise titled “Review” for a summary of the twelve lessons. You will find a summary of the lesson topic and suggestions for how our views of God can become stumbling blocks or stepping-stones on the path to Christian spiritual maturity. This final session is the last of four that present positive views of God.



## WARM-UP (10 MINUTES)

### Exercise

After presenting the review exercise to the participants, ask if any students are willing to share how their view of God has changed during this time together.

Also ask if anyone has received help from God in having a “stumbling block” removed, or in more fully appreciating one of God’s “stepping-stones.”

## ■ Synopsis

You may want to read or retell the synopsis as an introduction to this session. Briefly entertain discussion before making a transition to the leader’s insight listed below, which focuses on understanding the Trinity.

## ■ Leader’s Insight

Understanding the Trinity is mind-boggling. It took eight Councils (counting the first meeting in Jerusalem in 49 A.D.) and almost eight centuries for the church to sort out the mysteries associated with the nature of the Trinity and the person of Christ.

How do we begin to conceive of a being who is simultaneously one and three?

Perhaps the most striking picture of this mystery to be found in Scripture is Jesus’ baptism. In reading Matthew 3:16-17, we find Jesus, dripping wet, standing next to John the Baptist. God is present there too—in the form of a booming voice from heaven. And at the same moment, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends from the Father and rests on the shoulders of the Son.

Three distinct “Persons” are present. There is no denying this division. But we also know Jesus taught that he and his Father are so similar that if you have seen one, you have seen them both.

After a few centuries of pondering this mind-defying riddle and fending off heresies, the church finally concluded that the Trinity is made of three separate *persons* who are all one in *substance* (*homoousia*). Three persons, one essence.

Many have attempted metaphors to help mortals grasp the mystery of God. The Trinity has been likened to water, able to exist in three forms (liquid, solid, gas); a three-leaf clover; the three prongs that can be seen when staring at a single flame; the mind, body, and spirit of a person; and our own ability to function simultaneously as a daughter/son, wife/husband, and mother/father.



But the correct answer to this unsolvable mystery is simply too large to fit in human heads. It must be solved by heart. It is the heart that must grasp the concept of the members of the Trinity being simultaneously more alike and more different than the brain can imagine.

Wait a minute. Why bring this up here?

Because, while the Holy Spirit is a different “Person” from God and Jesus, he is also the very same essence.

Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30); the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11); and the Spirit of the living God (2 Corinthians 3:3). And it also describes the Spirit as being the Spirit of Christ (1 Peter 1:11); the Spirit of His Son (Galatians 4:6); the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:19); and the Spirit of the Lord (Isaiah 63:14 and Luke 4:18).

Because the members of the Trinity are one in essence (*homoousia*), it is appropriate to apply all we know about the nature of God and Jesus Christ to our understanding of the Holy Spirit as well. God’s love for us is the same love the Spirit feels for you and me. And the fruit of the Spirit are also the very character traits of Christ.

Any adjustments we have made in how we view God or Jesus need to be applied to His (Their) Spirit as well.

According to the eminent theologian James D. G. Dunn, the most important development in earliest Christian understanding of the Spirit is that the Spirit is now seen to be the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19; Peter 1:11).<sup>1</sup>

This is amazing! The same Spirit that inspired Jesus, that lived within him and empowered him, is available to do the same for us. And it is out of the shared experience of life in the Spirit that the church can truly become one. That is how it becomes true that we can do all that Christ did.

And the news gets even better. The Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of Sonship (adoption). Through life in the Spirit, we are adopted

1. Please see the article “The Holy Spirit” in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, edited by Walter A. Elwell.

members of the loving family that is the Trinity. Not by our merit but by the mystery of the Holy Spirit living in the heart of the believer—the life of the Trinity inside you.

### QUESTION

(p. 93 in Participant's Guide)

- What does being adopted into the family of God mean to you personally?

(Note: Allow time for this question to be considered, or other questions asked. But if they ask you a tough one, you're on your own.)

### CONTENT (15 MINUTES)



#### ■ Video Vignette (Approximately 7 minutes)

In this video segment, Curt continues his conversation with John. This time, it's Curt's turn to tell the story. It's about his continuing encounter with an alien that is taking over his body. Go ahead and punch the button.

#### ■ Class Response

Solicit responses from the group concerning their reaction to the vignette.

#### ■ Leader's Insight

To use words that Webster would like, to be “alien” is to be different in nature or character—typically to the point of incompatibility. An alien is from another place and owes allegiance to another country or government.

Curt's description of the Holy Spirit as an alien does more than make us cringe. The Spirit of Christ living inside us *is* alien—different in nature and character from our own fleshly nature.



And it is incompatible with our flesh and the desire for self-rule. The Holy Spirit is from another place (the kingdom of God) and owes allegiance to that form of government.

The Holy Alien wants to take over our bodies, minds, and spirits. But this will happen only against much opposition from our flesh. Our flesh will fight to its death.

## ■ Discussion

For Paul, the gift of the Spirit is but the beginning of a lifelong process that will not end until the believer's whole person (will, mind, emotions, behavior, social interactions) is brought under the Spirit's direction (Romans 8:11, 23; 1 Corinthians 15:44-49). The gift also means that our initial experience of faith is one of a life-long tug-of-war between what God has already begun to bring about in the believer's life and what has not yet been brought into surrender to the Holy Spirit (Philippians 1:6). Spirit battles the flesh; life wrestles with death as we journey toward total conformity and surrender to life in the Spirit, life in union with God.

Take a look at the exercise titled "The Great Tug-of-War." Fill it out—either in writing or just by using your thoughts. Then share some of your own battle stories (victories or defeats) concerning the process of surrendering your soul to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

## ■ Exercise

Two primary barriers to surrender have to do with our difficulties in becoming able to trust God to have our best interests at heart and learning to hear His voice. We have spent a lot of time in discussion about how developing an accurate view of God is necessary before we can learn to enjoy spending time with Him. It has been implied that spending time with God will lead to the development of deeper levels of trust.

We have not said very much about learning how to discern God's voice during these times of hanging out together. The exercise

titled “Discerning God’s Voice” contains a list of ten questions to ask ourselves (or others) to facilitate the development of our spiritual “ears.”

Take a few minutes as a group to be quiet before God. Then let each participant silently ask God a question (e.g., “What do you think of me?”). Then let them use the questions presented in this exercise to help discern whether or not they actually heard from God through his Holy Spirit.

## BIBLE STUDY (15 MINUTES)



We conclude our time together with an examination of Galatians 5:16-25, some of Paul’s best words on life in the Spirit.

### ■ Group Exercise

Form one or more groups and complete the Bible study found on p. 92 in the Participant’s Guide.

### ■ Leader’s Insight

In Galatians 5:16-25, Paul refers to the cosmic tug of war going on in our insides. The flesh and the Spirit battle for total possession of the soul of each believer. Paul presents two lists. Galatians 5:19-21 presents fifteen acts that are caused by the sinful nature operating within. We can consider these the rotten fruit of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Or—perhaps even better—weeds.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul provides the labels for the fruit of the Spirit that can grow out of the soul of each believer. And he continues to tell how it becomes possible to grow Spirit fruit instead of worldly weeds.

Paul uses a very strong word—one that causes us to consider the model of Christ on the cross. If we truly, deeply, and completely belong to Christ, we will allow (and even welcome) the *crucifixion* of our sinful nature with all its passions and desires. And we will seek to live in union with God through the inward work and power of the Holy Spirit until each step we take is a movement that He makes through us.



## ■ Suggestion

Our final Bible study will be done differently this week. Have the participants slowly and meditatively read Galatians 5:16-25. Then, instead of using group questions, have them consider their lives (over the past few weeks) and silently ask God to let them know how many of the “weeds” have been growing from the soil of their souls. Encourage them to pray for forgiveness as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Then ask them to consider the fruit of the Spirit and ask God to prompt their memories concerning times each was evident in their lives over the past few weeks. Encourage openness to the appropriate emotions—from grief to joy.

Lead in a prayer that each participant will be open to God’s becoming an even more active gardener in each life—applying weed killer and “Miracle Grow” as needed.



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## SUMMARY

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This brings us to the conclusion of our time together. All of us who have been involved in the creation of these materials hope that God has used them to reveal Himself more clearly to you. And it is our hope that you are presently experiencing God in a more personal, intimate, and loving manner. Our concluding Bible study on the fruit of the Spirit was very intentional. The purpose for producing the entire *Curriculum of Christlikeness* series is to promote Christian formation—the formation of the life and character of Christ within the believer. We began with *God Views* for a simple reason. We believe that our perception of God is foundational to future growth in Him. But the end product of such growth can be seen right up front: living lives that reflect the character of Christ, lives that produce the rich fruit of His Spirit.

# Get Ready to Experience God in a Whole New Light!

Welcome to *God Views*, the first installment in a *Curriculum of Christlikeness* series.

We believe that one's view of God is the most fundamental element of personal Christian formation. To misperceive God may result in a lifetime of avoiding His presence. But to see God clearly is to discover that the most powerful being in the universe is our compassionate Father.

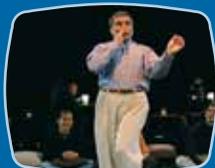
With the *God Views* curriculum materials, you and your group will enter a journey of discovery. Along the way you will examine six of the most common false views of God, and four true pictures. You will also experience a variety of Bible

studies and creative exercises designed to help you enter into more intimacy with your heavenly Father.

Curt Cloninger, a talented teacher and comedian, will be your guide. His portrayals will make you laugh, and they will make you cry. Sometimes at the same time.

The resource guide, participant's guide, and video are all you need to conduct the 12-session series successfully. The enclosed CD will add to the convenience of using these materials.

Bon voyage, and welcome to an adventure in Christian formation.



"I have taught Sunday school for over fifty years, and the *God Views* curriculum materials are the best and most meaningful that I have ever seen. Our view of God is the foundation on which Christian formation can be built."

Dr. Culbreth Melton  
*Retired College President (Emmanuel College)*  
*Veteran Sunday school teacher*

"For years I have wanted a curriculum that could accompany my *God Views* presentation to help it have lasting spiritual impact. I'm thrilled that finally that curriculum is here. The quality of these materials surpasses all my expectations."

Curt Cloninger  
*Writer-Actor*



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