FALL 2026

first stone newsletter

MINISTRIES

"Let him who is without sin cast the First Stone"
And Jesus also said, "Go and sin no more." ***– John 8***

Challenging Our Views of God



Joseph Thiessen, *Office Admin*

Have you thought about how we form opinions about God's character? The picture of God we carry shapes how we relate to Him.

Our Collective View

Being raised in a Christian home certainly helped shape my perception of God, but so did looking at the plants and animals around me. As a young child, I wouldn't have stopped to think about design vs natural selection. I simply saw that these things were cleverly designed, and it was relatively easy for me to believe that God created the world we live in.

In Romans 1:18-23, the apostle Paul tells us that ever since the creation of the world, God has been clearly perceived in the things He has made. But Paul also warns that our unrighteous behavior suppresses our knowledge of Him.

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." Romans 1:19-20 (ESV)

Our unrighteous behavior clouds what God has already made known. Paul goes on to explain that believing in God comes by hearing the Gospel—hearing what Jesus has done to bring us back to God (Romans 10:17).

Once a person has entered into life with Jesus, the journey from there on involves learning more about the Kingdom life He has opened to us. Our learning is as much adding to our lives what is good as it is removing what doesn't belong.

God can use many different ways to teach us about who He is; however, the root of who He is must always be found in Scripture.

If creation were your only evidence, what would you conclude about God?

What forms our understanding of His character?

Our Issues with God

Our experiences of authority figures can play a big part in how we understand God's character. But even those of us who have listened to or read the Bible can form

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thoughts about how God is always angry, remembering that He ordered the Israelites to obliterate whole cities, or hearing Jesus' words about someone's lack of faith.

Gaining a bigger picture of God's desires for His creation through the whole of Scripture helps us see some themes repeated. He longs for us to be near Him. He wants to take care of us. He longs for us to fully trust Him. He sees us as His children.

Historically, what we have not always been able to see is how our repeated inability to trust Him can affect the way we interpret what happens to us. When we feel that we are being pummeled by our enemies, we can begin to think that God made it happen. We conflate those things.

The more time we spend in His Word and align our lives more closely with what He wanted for us all along, the more this kind of erroneous thinking can be corrected.

What follows are some examples of how God has been correcting my understanding of Him.

Our Own Familial Issues

The earliest wound I remember was hearing my father use the word *stupid* in response to a process gone wrong. Like an open bookshelf, that word landed in my mind. Because young children don't yet know how to filter out harmful content, I was a prime target for this encounter to make a huge impact on how I viewed my dad, but also authorities, leaders, pastors, bosses, and ultimately God.

The low view I had of myself caused me to believe that I was the reason my relationship with God wasn't effective. It wasn't until recently that I found this belief to be faulty. I've since taken up the belief that "God hasn't exhausted Himself on me and He can do anything to bring me fully to Him."

My parents, especially my mom, often questioned whether something non-spiritual could have value to a Christian. Dancing at weddings, dancing lessons, or parties with dancing all drew the same puzzled response from her. I'd go and enjoy my time but come home feeling like I had disappointed God by wasting time on earthly pleasures. Even taking a class on doctrine garnered questions from my dad that hinted at the same problem. Perhaps they didn't see it, but I stayed out of trouble, and these things aided my safe passage through my young adult life. However, I always wondered if my time was wasted on these things and whether I should have committed myself to a life lived in service to the Church—and boredom.

Moving away from home and seeing more of God's people around the world has opened my eyes to the many ways people enjoy one another's company. Weddings are celebrated with dancing, and those who like to think and study enjoy things like studying doctrine and early church history. I love that Scripture tells us "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1, NIV), and Romans 14 reminds us that Christians may differ in how they approach matters that Scripture does not clearly prohibit. If there's not outright prohibition, then we are free to enjoy this life!

How has your relationship with your parents affected the way you see God's character towards you?

Black and White Thinking

I've noticed that people often fall into black and white thinking when it comes to religious matters.

When I read the parable of the four soils, I saw these as fixed conditions—that if I'm rocky soil, I'm doomed. My view of God in that moment was that He was inflexible and only spoke in absolutes.

What if this passage was meant to be a litmus test I could use at different points along the arc of my life?

Do you have weeds or stones in the soil of your life that choke out God's word? Spend time eliminating things that distract you, ask God for help removing what gets in the way, and cry out to Him for the deliverance you need! Trust that He has no problem helping us in our distress.

Consider Thomas' need to see and touch Jesus' wounds.



AI Image by MidJourney

"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Eight days later, Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:25, 27, 29, ESV)

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The Staggeringly Merciful God



Jim Farrington, *Men's Minister*

For much of my early Christian walk, I lived with a ridiculously distorted image of God—a God who spoke in love, yet seemed to be constantly watching, hovering, waiting for the slightest failure so He could unleash His anger and punishment.

That view was reinforced by someone in my life back in the 1990s. After I moved to a different city, I would get phone calls at the restaurant where I worked. My manager would call me to the phone in the middle of my shift, clearly unhappy about the interruption. I would answer only to hear, "James, are you sinning? James, are you repenting? James, are you walking with Jesus?"

It was exasperating and alienating. I chose to walk away from the people I knew because I was tired of always being in trouble, and I was trying to figure out what was true about God and about my identity.

Years later, after going out on my own, I went back into darkness. What surprised me was that, in the thick of my sin-filled life, God pursued me. God was making His pursuit of me unmistakably clear, though I was far from Him and in the midst of my sin and shame.

But why? How? If God had consigned me to eternal punishment in hell for rebellion and sexual immorality, then why was He pursuing me? This was not how I had been taught.

When I finally cried out to God, now willing to lay down my life in exchange for His, I was not instantly going from homosexuality to heterosexuality. Rather, I committed myself to following Jesus. As I walked with Him and learned to yield everything to Him, I eventually came to understand that I was never created to experience same-sex attraction, and that truthfully, I was never gay.



AI Image by MidJourney

Throughout my 27-year journey with the Lord, I've grown to see His character in a way that has challenged my earlier perceptions about the harsh, condemning, and punitive nature of God as Father. When I first moved back to Oklahoma City in 2003, I would often drive down a particular parkway. If I encountered a car that was broken down, there was this impression or thought that, if I didn't feel guilty for that car being broken down, God would make my car break down. I attribute this to the critical, fault-finding voice of my father, who never seemed to be happy or satisfied with anything I did: "What's wrong with you? Why can't you do anything right?"

Nothing in the Word of God corroborates this distorted view of the character of God. And He set me free from it over time as I have repeatedly encountered His heart. The way He has spoken to me and the way He has tenderly walked with me through the painful places in my past and present have helped me to come to know Him more intimately. This has changed my perspective on the character of God.

In the past year, I recognized a pattern in many of the men under my pastoral care. Since they come from differing backgrounds, I knew there was something significant in what I was encountering. They all, in one form or another, seemed to have a checklist they believed God was keeping, and they were trying to tick off all the boxes to please Him. But the one element I find missing in each of these men is relationship with the Father *as a Father*, rather than with a punitive dictator who is displeased with everything.

When a church mirrors that latter characterization of God to the people, you end up with people who believe they cannot measure up, can never make God happy, and are always fearful of Him.

Scripture does not paint a picture of a God who winks at sin or passes over rebellion with a "kids will be kids" mentality. His mercy does not diminish His righteousness or His call to faithfulness.

Psalm 103 holds these truths together:

"The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east

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An Outrageous Welcome at Camp Agape



Laura Leigh Stanlake, *Ministry Director*

Over Labor Day weekend, I had the privilege of speaking at Camp Agape, a camp for children who have an incarcerated parent, held in the San Bernardino Mountains in California. The invitation came through my association with my spiritual director, and the camp was organized by Breaking the Cycle.

When I arrived, volunteers were rolling out a beautiful red carpet and preparing for the charter buses bringing the children and their mentors up the mountain.

Then somebody yelled, "The buses are arriving!" Staff and volunteers quickly lined both sides of the carpet, cheering, smiling, and holding out our hands for high-fives. Some of the first-time campers actually pulled back a little. They didn't know what to do with all that attention and celebration. But the kids who had been there before knew exactly what to do. They came running up that carpet, slapping as many hands as they could reach.

I was struck by how much intention had gone into being ready for those children. Long before the buses came up the mountain, people had been thinking about them, preparing for them, praying for them, and making a place for them.

I spoke that weekend on the love of God—His loving intent in making us and the security we can have when our identity is rooted in Him. A Q&A following the message opened the door to a full day and evening of ministry, including many individual conversations and meetings with campers and others who wanted to talk more personally.

Those conversations were a meaningful opportunity to do what First Stone has done for many years: meet people personally, listen carefully to their stories, and help them understand their lives in light of God's truth. We've already had follow-up conversations about ways First Stone may continue to serve and support the work that began there.

After returning home, I kept thinking about that outrageous welcome. Camp Agape pulled out the stops to receive those children. There was something powerful about witnessing such intentional welcome while also having the privilege of speaking to them about the intentional love of God.

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Held Close



Bronwyn Welch, *Women's Minister*

As a mother of eight, I am often asked what it is like to have so many children. I seldom think about having "many" children. In my heart and mind, I see eight faces, eight names, eight personalities—individuals with distinct worth. I delight in the uniqueness of each one.

Likewise, our Father God knows each one of us by name and delights in us. Just think of it: the Creator God of the universe knows our name and delights in us!

God allowed me to see and feel His Father's heart in a special way nine years ago, after my first grandson was born.

My grandson was four months old before I met him for the first time. It was Thanksgiving week. After my son and his family had traveled all day from Iowa to Oklahoma, we all attended a Thanksgiving service at church. Needless to say, after being in a car seat all day, my grandson was restless.

So that my son and his wife could attend the service, I offered to stay in the foyer with him. He was restless and wiggling in my arms. I held him close, spoke quietly to him, and gently rubbed his head.

I told him, "You can wiggle in my arms, and I will not stop loving you."

Gradually, he relaxed, snuggled in, and went to sleep.

That is when I sensed our Father God speaking to my heart: "In the same way that you would keep loving and holding your grandson even when he wiggles in your arms, that is what you are to Me. You can wiggle in My arms anytime."



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is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." (Psalm 103:6–13, ESV)

Did you catch that? As a *father*. And that word *compassion* carries the idea of deep mercy, tenderness, and affection.

This is the kind of tender affection Jesus demonstrated toward Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37. Even in the face of rejection and hostility, His heart was moved with compassion. We see this same heart most profoundly at the cross. While enduring the suffering inflicted by those He came to save, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). If we want to know what the Father is like, we look at Jesus.

The fact alone that God entered our world in Jesus, born into a human family and giving His life for the world, as John 3:16 tells us, is staggering. Jesus engaged in a life-giving conversation with a Samaritan woman at the well. He did not begin by condemning her for her past or castigating her for having had five husbands. He offered her living water before addressing the circumstances of her life. To this day, that encounter is one of my favorite examples of how kindly and mercifully Jesus revealed the heart of God toward someone others might have dismissed.

So when men come to the ministry, burdened by addiction, destructive behaviors, false beliefs, and sin, I will always be honest about what Scripture says. God takes sin seriously. But in light of what He has done for us at the cross, I also point them to a Creator who meets them where they are and calls them to the foot of the cross—to receive His life as they learn to lay down their own.

This is the staggeringly merciful Father I have come to know.

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Continued from page 2 | Challenging Our Views of God

Words like Jesus used in response to Thomas always felt like a slap in the face. Here we have God in the flesh showing Thomas mercy and at the same time mocking his lack of faith. But upon further reflection and study, I'm leaning toward the idea that Jesus wasn't speaking solely to Thomas, but to people like you and me, who need physical experiences just as much as spiritual ones to aid our belief in God.

I believe that Thomas' refusal to believe is much like our own pushback when our experiences leave us exasperated. Reading Jesus' words that those who have not seen and yet believe are more blessed pushed that "I'm stupid" button from my early childhood wound. Because I often want hard evidence of Jesus' nearness, I felt like I was a second-rate Christian.



Was Jesus being duplicitous by meeting Thomas' need, then rebuking him for needing it in the first place? I don't think so.

The Holy Spirit called to mind that Jesus did not meet Thomas' plea to see and touch Jesus' wounds with stonewalling or shame-filled words. If Thomas' desire to touch Him was problematic, then why would Jesus appear in a locked house to meet his need?

In similar fashion, I have encountered God's fatherly love in my own life. Out of desperation, one night while looking at porn many years ago, I kept the image in front of me while I talked to God about what this man meant to me in this moment. Like Thomas, I nearly demanded that I feel the embrace of God so I could have some kind of masculine assurance that I was loved. I don't know what Thomas thought of his own demand, but I felt like mine was too much, as if I had burdened God with something trivial.

But a week later, during worship at church, God sent two young men to embrace me in a full-body hug, one of them facing me and the other behind me. I melted and panicked at my aroused state. I silently pleaded for God to make them stop. God lovingly spoke to my mind, "But you asked me for this."

I had my own personal witness that God could meet me in a tangible way.

What if you are like Thomas in your unbelief?

What if you feel like God is mean, indifferent, or disappointed in you?

How do you think He would respond if you boldly, perhaps even rudely, declared your need for evidence that He cares?

Deeply Rooted Fears

Fear has been present in each of the stories I've shared. I have had many. One fear that's still awaiting healing grew out of that early wound from my dad. It left me with a deep mistrust of authority figures and their words. Some have called this rebellion, but I would caution such language for a person who is hurting like this. The use of strong language such as rebellion only serves to push that child further into his mindset of fear, as it has in my world. Only now in my late 50s am I understanding that this fear was ever present and how it has responded to sharply worded statements by fellow believers.

Scripture teaches us about God's kindness through the character of Jesus. Matthew 12:20 says, "*a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench…*"

There's even kindness hidden in Matthew 19:11-12 for those who are eunuchs. Without going any further into their plight, Jesus acknowledges the difficulty of their situation in contrast to those who are not eunuchs.

He sees. He knows. He loves. And He does so deeply and tenderly toward those who need it most.

At the age of 40, when I learned about the genetic disorder affecting my sex chromosomes and giving me a eunuch-like status, I was opened to a whole new set of thoughts and emotions I hadn't had before. The feelings of being different than other men flooded my mind. Learning that Jesus knew the plight of the eunuch helped me trust how deeply He must love me. My trust is being won over and fears are subsiding!

When you feel afraid of God, whose voice or face from your past does that fear remind you of?

How might trusting in God's merciful love change the way you see Him as Father?

Closing Thoughts

Looking back, I can see how many voices helped paint my picture of God: a single word spoken by my dad, my parents' well-meant cautions, my own all-or-nothing reading of Scripture, and fears I didn't even know I carried. None of these told me the whole truth about who God is. What has changed my view is spending time in His Word and discovering, again and again, that He meets me where I am—and that I don't have to be a super-Christian to undo these lies. Like Thomas, I've asked for more than I thought I should, and He didn't shame me for it. I'm still learning, but I've come to believe that God hasn't exhausted Himself on me, and He hasn't exhausted Himself on you either.

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Resources





Staff

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This Issue: Who's Your Daddy?

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