

## Rodney Abbott Service Dec 11, 2011

When you think of God, what is God like? Everyone has a different view of God because none of us thinks exactly the same. If I say a word like CHAIR, what do you think of? Be specific. Think of a specific chair. I bet everyone here has a different image. We depend on them for support, we relax in them, we work while sitting in them. Sometimes we've been known to nod off while sitting in them. The point is, we all know about chairs, but we almost certainly do not think about them in the same way. If we can't have a common understanding of what a chair is, how in the world can we have a shared view of what God is like?

The Bible is very helpful in this regard, but even there we see a number of views of God. He is the enthusiastic Creator of the Universe, only to be disappointed by his greatest work, mankind.

He is the angry and jealous God, striking out against those who disobey or reject Him.

He is the patient and long-suffering God who faithfully supports His people through the desert places.

He is the God who gave His Son to give the world another chance to find its way to Him.

He is the Great Physician who helps to heal the sick.

He is the protector of those who are in need, whether they be the poor, the underprivileged, the outcast, all of those crying out for their voices to be heard in a world not very concerned about their needs.

There have been a number of widely accepted views of God over the years, most of which are still here in various forms. The title of this talk is "What Is Your Relationship with God? And Does It Matter?" I would like to suggest a few ways that I have thought of God or ways others have expressed their views of God.

There is the view that God is like a great piggy bank in the sky, from whom we can withdraw what we want if only we ask. Some televangelists seem to literally promise this. I have heard them explain passionately how God wants us all to be wealthy and prosperous. They also ask that a portion of this prosperity be forwarded to an address they provide at the end of their program. I have asked God for many things. I am very thankful that in many cases I have received a positive answer. Seldom has the answer been in the form of a check or images of Benjamin Franklin printed on greenish paper. Now, I'm not saying that He can't bring relief to people in financial need. I think that in most cases the help He provides is related to helping with attitude and with the granting of perseverance in the face of adversity.

There is the view of God that sees Him as a nice person to visit on Sunday, but for whom there is little time to hang out with during the rest of the week. Jobs, families, friends, the rapid pace of modern routines, including the importance of Facebook and Farmville make a relationship with God during the

week really quite difficult. I know, I have three farms on Farmville, my home farm and my English farm, and my Lighthouse Cove farm. It becomes too important not to let your crops wither.

There is the view of God that nothing, absolutely nothing, happens without His direction. I personally have a lot of trouble with that one. I know bad things happen in this world, and I'm like everyone else. I want an explanation. However, I think God gets blamed for an awful lot of awful things. In my mind, bad things happen. Sometimes they just happen. Often they happen because of human error or human misdeeds. Sometimes they just happen. If this were a perfect world, there would be no need of God, would there? Perhaps I'm confused here. I often am. I claim no formal education in theology, so I may well be off track. But it's my belief that God is available to help us through those bad events and awful times. He doesn't create them to see how we are going to react. That sounds too much to me like the old gods of ancient times: Greek and Roman gods, for instance, who found great pleasure in toying with human beings and treating them as sources of entertainment.

There is the view that God created the world according to His perfect plan and then set all the laws of the physical world in motion. This same plan included the way in which human beings should interact with themselves and with Him. Then He set his plan in motion and withdrew to watch how things worked out. Some people have referred to this idea as the "Watchmaker" view of God. Just like an old-fashioned watch, the universe and its occupants are expected to perform in a particular way. I don't know about you, but it seems to me the watch is in need of constant repair.

God as the Creator is an especially wonderful image in James Weldon Johnson's poem, "The Creation."

In Johnson's poem God creates everything in six days, just as it is described in Genesis. When everything except man had been created, Johnson wrote:

God walked around,  
And God looked around  
On all that he had made.  
He looked at his sun,  
And he looked at his moon,  
And he looked at his little stars;  
He looked on his world  
With all its living things,  
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down--  
On the side of a hill where he could think;  
By a deep, wide river he sat down;  
With his head in his hands,  
God thought and thought,  
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay;

And by the bank of the river  
He kneeled him down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;  
This great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen.Amen.

There is the view of children that is refreshing to observe. Jesus said that we need to be like children if we want to have a relationship with God. I remember my daughter Laurie one beautiful summer day, skipping across the lawn as a small child, looking up into the blue sky and yelling, as if to a friend, "Hi, God." I remember my daughter Becky having great faith in prayer when her Grammy's blind dog disappeared during a January cold spell. After a few days, I tried to prepare her for what I was sure was a certain conclusion: the dog had died. She insisted that she was going to keep praying and that the dog would be OK. After about a week, someone on the next road toward Sumner called and said she was searching for the owner of a dog that was acting very strangely in her back yard. She had tried to feed the dog, but the dog was not acting "normal." Could we possibly know who owned the dog? It was Grammy's blind dog, and Becky was very pleased with the power of her prayer. And I, I got to think of myself as "Ye of little faith." My son one day, as we were driving along together in our car on the way to buy some milk from a local farmer, said to me, "I don't think God is up there in the sky. If He was, His foot would be coming through the cloud." Becky was certain. My son was skeptical. Both of them were, in their own way, expressing the same ideas that adults express, even if the language was less sophisticated.

I found two examples of how other kids commented on their understanding of God. One goes like this: "Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and me. Oh, please take care of yourself, God. If anything happens to you, we're gonna be in a big mess." The other one? A kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they drew. She would occasionally walk around to see each child's artwork. As she got to one little girl who was working diligently, she asked what the drawing was. The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "but no one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

There is the view that God helps us in time of trouble. Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own

wisdom and that of all about me insufficient for that day.” I have been there. I know what Abraham was talking about. One of the most important comforts in a relationship with God is the assurance that there is a power greater than our own. There is a power capable of bringing order out of the chaos of our lives, a power capable of bringing peace to a troubled soul, a power capable of helping us through the worst of days. Don’t you think this God is probably available on other, happier days, and would perhaps like to be included in a few celebrations rather than just in times of great need? Perhaps He would appreciate being included more often. Gwendolyn Brooks, one of America’s great African-American poets, wrote a poem called “The Preacher Ruminates behind the Sermon.” I would like to read it as part of today’s talk.

**I think it must be lonely to be God.  
Nobody loves a master. No. Despite  
The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright  
Determined reverence of Sunday eyes.**

**Picture Jehovah striding through the hall  
Of His importance, creatures running out  
From servant-corners to acclaim, to shout  
Appreciation of His merit’s glare.**

**But who walks with Him?—dares to take His arm,  
To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,  
Buy Him a Coca-Cola or a beer,  
Pooh-pooh His politics, call Him a fool?**

**Perhaps—who knows—He tires of looking down.  
Those eyes are never lifted. Never straight.  
Perhaps sometimes He tires of being great  
In solitude. Without a hand to hold.**

Somehow I have trouble with the idea of God having a Budweiser with the boys, but Gwendolyn Brooks’ point is clear. She believed God wants a relationship with human beings, not as insignificant beings, but as beings of great importance, beings with whom He wants a personal relationship.

There is the view that God wants us to communicate with Him. We usually call that prayer. I think there are all kinds of ways to pray. I think the formal kind of prayer that is said in public is very difficult. It makes me nervous to pray in public because I am aware of communicating with the other people in my presence as well as communicating with God. In other words, I don’t know what to say that is going to be adequate for everyone listening. Some people do it very well. I like a story I read long ago by Norman Vincent Peale. He said he sat next to a man on a plane who was a laborer. Peale struck up a conversation with the man, and the man was surprised to find out Peale was a minister. Somehow, the man became interested in how Peale thought he should pray. Peale told him that God wanted him to just talk to him, straight talk, just tell Him what you are thinking. Later, they met again in the hotel where Peale was staying. The man said he’d like to know more about God and how to have a

relationship with Him. Peale invited him to his room and told him to pray. He repeated his previous advice. Just talk to him, use straight talk, just tell Him what you are thinking. I was amused when I read Peale's description of the result. He said the man certainly used straight talk, language Peale would not have considered using, but he also told the man that he was doing just great. The point is that if you believe in prayer, you better be honest and straightforward. It probably is not a good idea to try to be clever with God. And there is prayer in action. To do what you believe needs to be done is a kind of prayer; often a very effective one. Some prayers come from desperation. Here is a story I found posted on a church's website: **"One Sunday in a Midwest city, a young child was 'acting out' during the morning worship hour. The parents did their best to maintain some sense of order in the pew but were losing the battle. Finally, the father picked the little fellow up and walked sternly up the aisle on his way out. Just before reaching the safety of the foyer, the little one called loudly to the congregation, 'Pray for me! Pray for me!'"**

There is the view that God provides forgiveness to those who do wrong. This is a great comfort considering that everyone has done things they shouldn't have done, and most people carry with them a sense of guilt about that wrongdoing. In many cases the guilt is very powerful and even paralyzing to the point of limiting a person's potential for growth. The God of forgiveness offers us a chance to wipe the slate clean and become the person He had hoped we would become. He also claims that vengeance is His. I think that is so because He wants us to practice forgiveness. After all, not one of us humans is perfect. Acting out our expressed beliefs is very important. If you don't think so, consider this story I found on the Internet: **"A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.**

**The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and makeup.**

**As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.**

**He said, 'I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the *What Would Jesus Do* bumper sticker, the *Choose Life* license plate holder, the *Follow Me to Sunday School* bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.'**

There is the view that God wants to make everything that has gone wrong right again. As a Christian, I hold to this idea. The Gospel quotes Jesus as saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He tells us that if we want a lasting relationship with God, He will provide the way. I have the hope of eternal life because of that. I have people I want to be with again: Friends with whom I had spent too little time;

My grandfather Arthur and my grandmother Lizzie; My own father, whom I cannot remember because he died when I was only three; My mother, who kept us going through some hard times; My step-dad, who cared for my mother and the rest of the family for decades. I miss them. I miss cribbage with both by grandmother and my step-dad. I'm hoping there are cribbage boards in heaven. Can I prove to you that I will have this opportunity? Of course not, I just believe it. A good friend of mine, Bill Immonen, who is no longer with us, once said to me, "Belief is not a feeling. Belief is a decision." I have chosen to believe. Every person is responsible for working out his or her own relationship with God. That idea is perhaps the greatest contribution Protestants made to the world. I am not here to tell you what to do. I am sharing what has become very important to me. Do I doubt? Yes. So did Thomas, who knew Jesus personally, here on earth. Do I wonder why things happen the way they do? Yes. So did Job. He was very insistent with God that he just didn't understand, and he was quite forceful in his questioning. When confronted by God Himself, who asked Job where Job had been when the cornerstone of the world had been placed, Job expressed his faith in God's wisdom. At the end of the book of Job, God confronts Job's misguided friends who had assumed they knew God's mind and kept hounding Job to admit to things he had not done. God told them he would ask Job to pray for them. So much for assuming you know what God is thinking. Anyone who has never asked "Why?" must not be experiencing life the way most of us do. I believe a relationship with God is important and that it truly does matter. I hope you agree.

I'm glad to have had the chance to be with you today. I hope you have a good relationship with your neighbors and with God. I hope you love yourself, as well. Jesus told us those things make up the Great Commandment. You can look it up.

I wish you a Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year in 2012, and a great life.