
MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GOD

By Daniel A. Brown, PhD

Many of us have misconceptions about God—and a whole host of spiritual matters. We don't mean to have them, and probably can't even point our finger to where it was we came up with these false impressions. We don't come out and say them with our mouth, but the unspoken notions hover in our subconscious and distort our ability to trust God. Perhaps you can recognize some of these:

Many people think of God as a taker rather than a giver. They wrongly imagine that God's whole purpose and will for their lives is to prove how much they really love Him by their willingness to give up all the fun things in life. They feel like a little boy whose mom wants him to share his favorite toys with the little cousin that just showed up: "Don't you want to let little Billy play with your very special things?" The kid wants to reply, "Frankly, no! The thought never entered my mind at all." And yet mom is kind of putting the squeeze on him, so he's got to relinquish his favorite toys.

Exactly the opposite is true. God is interested not in taking from our already impoverished condition, but in giving to us so that we have riches beyond what we could ever imagine. He wants us to experience, as David did, "*Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life...*" (*Psalms 23:6*). He is a giving God who treasures us, who delights in us, who is interested in us, who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Some see God as the "volcano god" whose anger must be appeased. The more they are willing to give up and toss into the great abyss, the more likely they are to escape His wrath. God wants us to prove how much we care about Him by the scarcity and paucity in our life; the less we have, the happier He is. When things are going well for us and life is finally working, that's when God glows a fiery red and blows up the mountain, signaling the time has come for another offering so the lava won't wipe us out.

We wrongly equate "deny yourself" with "hold yourself back from the chocolate cake," opposed to what Jesus meant. "If you want to stay with me, you'll have to get accustomed to contradicting your natural way of thinking" (Mark 8:33-34; paraphrased).

Many believe that we are not each special to God. We grew up in family or cultural settings, and we went to school with playmates who communicated with words and deeds that we were inadequate, not quite what we could/should be. We're plagued with thoughts, "If only I could be more like this" or, "If I wasn't so this way or that way..." We live with a feeling of inadequacy, a sort of rejection, and even when it comes to God, we read that scripture, "God so loved the world..." we think, "Yeah, well it's a good thing I am part of the world because the only way I would get in on such special love is the way that a chronically ill person gets insurance—through a group health plan." Deep down, we subtly envision a party at which the Lord says, "You are all welcome," but when we come to knock on the door He says, "Oh, it's you...well, OK, I suppose it's fine, you can come on in."

We just want to come in and not bother anybody; stay off on the side, and not drink too much punch so we're noticed and get thrown out. Some of us think of ways we can get into that celestial party by, "Well, I'll work for the catering organization that does this party. I will dress up in that outfit and carry a tray around with hors d'oeuvres. That's how I can get in." We are so eager to work to be accepted because we don't think that the sheer delight God has for us is enough to make us welcome.

THE GREAT EXCHANGE

God's interest is to transform broken and bruised people like you and me—blighted souls ravaged by incidents, accidents and willfulness—not only by removing the damage, but also by doing us so much good that we end up with a double portion of blessing from His hand.

We live with feelings of shame for things we have done or that have been done to us. The guilt hangs like a low-pressure zone into which ominous clouds pour their depressing mix of wintry depression upon us because...well, it is true—we have done those things we shouldn't have done; unspeakable acts have been staged upon our heart and with our body. Not all of which were our choice, but the sullied refuse of those times have littered our souls nonetheless, like discarded wrappers, smells and foodstuffs in an alley dumpster.

Even though we know we are forgiven (kind of?), we cannot escape the gnawing hunch that our soiled, used condition disqualifies us from really counting for much in the Lord. Regardless of the potential we used to have to become something of noble use in the Kingdom, we have blown it so badly, and have turned away—making intentional and deep-seated departures from Jesus' instruction so many times that there cannot be any hope for our *future-that-was-His-plan*. The best we can now imagine is that, perhaps (we think we have not forfeited the trust), the Lord will at least accept us as His. Though our waywardness has denied Him, we pray that we are not yet to the point where He will deny knowing us.

We will even settle without complaint for being marginally accepted by the Lord. All thought of being delighted in or used meaningfully by Him vanished long ago, probably the fifteenth time we

repeated a sin when our *I-really-mean-it-this-time* confession from the previous episode was barely off our tongue. How alike we are to the prodigal son; we rehearse speeches and arguments in our mind that we hope will convince our Father of just how repulsed we are by our own behavior. Since we are without excuse for what has happened, we identify the least and lowliest point of continued connection we could possibly have in His household. We think we will please Him with our lowered aspirations about our *surely-by-now* forfeited future.

GOD IS ALWAYS PLEASED TO HAVE YOU HOME

But that does not please Him. What crazed and ill-conceived logic would make Him want to place His son (or daughter) in the servants' quarters, or keep him at a distance now that he has come all the way home? What has changed for the Father? It is so simple that the prodigal cannot see it: "My son was lost to Me. That has now changed because he is home again!" The Father has no need for rehearsed speeches, clever *I-told-you-this-would-happen* lines or lesson-teaching consequences. He says all He has to say with tears and embracing arms.

Nothing in God's heart ever changes toward us—even when our go-it-alone choices have left us marked and stained and changed. The only change He orders is our clothing—from filthy rags to a festive robe. It is still true, don't you realize? Even after that first time when God exchanged your dirty garments, He joyfully does it again and again:

"Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' Again he said to him, 'See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.'" ~Zechariah 3:3-4

"For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." ~Isaiah 64:6

God wants to say to us, "Dear one, not only do I accept you, but I do far more than *merely accept you*. I delight in you. I love you. I choose you as though for the *first-time* to use/include you for My purposes. It is never too late when you return to Me." God knows you, and that what He knows (i.e., you), He likes. He made you on purpose, and He (still) has a high calling and destiny and significance for you, no matter what mistakes or wrong choices you have made.

GOD CAN GIVE DOUBLE PORTION FOR YOUR SINS

I want to explore a fascinating theme in the Bible that we call the *great exchange* or the *great conversion*. It is, as I have said, God's plan to recover you so completely that you become a marvel (believe it or not), a miracle sign for others to behold. The words Jesus read to announce the

beginning of His earthly ministry, (Isaiah 61:1-7) reference that plan to relieve the afflicted, heal the brokenhearted, free the bound, comfort the mourning, and send such restored and strengthened people to rebuild others.

When that plan is in operation, people like you and me will be called “Priests of the Lord.” You will be spoken of as *ministers of our God... Instead of your shame, [you] will have a double portion, and instead of humiliation [you] will shout for joy over [your] portion; therefore [you] will possess a double portion...and everlasting joy...” (Isaiah 61:7).*

A similar verse highlights the restorative ministry of Jesus—and how He chooses to convert us back to our intended condition, as opposed to cutting us off because of the condition we are in.

“A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice.” ~Isaiah 42:3

When God sees a bruised reed (one that has been bent or knocked over—perhaps somebody stepped on it or it was smashed by a boat), He doesn’t say, “That is just so ugly; let’s just pull the whole thing out!” He won’t stub out the barely-aglow candle that used to be in full flame, but now only smolders and smokes from one edge of the wick where a fleeing ember is fast losing its life.

The Lord doesn’t say, “Oh I hate it when they smoke like that.” A smoldering wick He does not extinguish. He does not scorn your bruised condition. Neither does He despise the brokenness of your life, your mind, or your heart. Indisputably, a flame once burned—the fiery passion to serve Him or the radiance of what He meant you to be and now it has diminished and drawn back almost to nothingness—He doesn’t look at that and say, “You had had your chance; there is nothing left for you. I am disgusted when candles dwindle like you have dwindled, so I am done with you!”

His ministry is to the bruised, broken, battered, tormented, inadequate, impoverished places of your soul, and He brings them back to life. But He doesn’t just fix what has been torn; He actually will give you a double portion for all of the wrong you bring to Him from your life.

GOD IS PLEASED TO CONVERT EVERY ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE

Whenever I read this passage, Isaiah 42:3, I think of airports all over the world. I spend a lot of time in airports, and while I cannot tell you much about the countryside in many nations, if you put me in an airport I can identify which one it is better than most people can: “Yeah, this is Schiphol in Holland.”

One of the things I regularly do at airports is exchange my money; I convert my currency. This is what God offers to us, the great conversion. I go to what’s called the Exchange Bureau. Usually it

has a counter, and a lady behind real thick glass. Even without knowing the language of the nation I'm in, the Exchange Bureau works very simply: I remove two \$100 bills from my wallet, and place them on the counter.

My favorite place to do this is in Norway because it's 7 kroner for every dollar. Once I have put the \$100 bills on the counter, the lady sweeps away the money like it's no big deal, like she has done this several times before! She puts them in a little drawer, pulls out some kroner notes, counts them out, and says, "Oh, you get 1400 kroner (minus the commission). Never mind that when I go to buy groceries, it costs me 600 of those 1400 kroner, but for a few moments I have in my hands a very impressive wad of cash. It's no big deal to the lady on the other side of the glass. It's very simple. And I can't really buy much in Norway unless I exchange the currency.

This is exactly how it is in the kingdom of God. The Lord invites you to come and take all of the stuff out of your pockets that you would like to have exchanged—all the unrighteousness in your soul, all the wrong ways of doing and thinking, all of the sin. If you plop \$200 worth of sin up on the counter, the Lord will take that unrighteousness and sweep it away. Instead of putting it in a drawer, however, He throws it behind His back and it lands in the deepest part of the sea. He then counts out \$200 worth of righteousness (1400 kroner), puts it up on the counter, and gives you an expectant look that says, "It's yours, take it!"

THE HEAVENLY EXCHANGE RATE IS 2:1

It is the most incredible exchange rate in all of creation. The heavenly exchange rate is two for one, and you get two righteous bills for every one unrighteous bill that you place on the counter. You can't beat it. The way that we think in our worldly mindset, the best that most of us hope for is just, "If I could just unload this money. If I could just get the unrighteousness out of my life! I don't mind leaving here impoverished, at least I know I have cleaned out my wallet and pockets and I have left all of my junk there. Praise the Lord that He forgives!"

Amen, yes! Praise the Lord that He does forgive, but that's not the whole story. Try to envision this: you come and put your unrighteousness up on the counter, and you are glad that He sweeps it all away. You want to get away as quickly as you can so that no one will associate your presence with that huge pile of unrighteous bills wadded and stacked there. You want to get away quickly, so you almost miss how He takes your pile all away and He puts up double the amount of righteousness. Can you hear a banging on the thick glass of the window while He is trying to catch your attention as you flee? He is saying, "Hey! Come back! You are leaving without your righteousness!"

GOD ENABLES YOU TO PLUNDER YOUR RAVAGERS

Exodus 12:35-36 is one of several other passages in the Bible where we observe this pattern of God wanting to give us bounty out of our bondage. He actually wants you to plunder those who have been plundering you. Out of an impoverished condition, He gives us riches.

The nation of Israel, as you may know, is coming out of Egypt, leaving the land of their captivity and heading toward the Promised Land. God says to them, “Not only are you going to get out of captivity, but on your way out when you are headed to the Promised Land, I am going to enable you to plunder the Egyptians; to take the articles of silver and gold, and whatever it is that they’ve got. They are going to be so happy to get rid of you that they will give you any riches you desire. You will take that plunder into your future as a double portion from your captivity!”

When you get delivered, when the Lord brings revelation to your mind, and your heart gets set free from something, your enemies say, “Hey man, just get out of here! Come on! Go, go, go—you *are* free!”

Your God-intended response might go something like this: “Yeah, I would really like to split, but I’ve got so much stuff I don’t think I can do it without your van.”

“OK, well here, take my van and go!”

“Well yeah, but in addition to your van, I would like some of those stock options you’re always talking about.”

“Fine, here! They are yours!”

“...And I have really been admiring that gold piece on the mantle!”

“Fine, take it!”

We get enriched from the very setting where we have been held as slaves in captivity. That is God’s signature on a great deliverance; He doesn’t just enable us to cope with our bondages, He turns them around with a double portion. Where before you might have been a person with an extreme temper, but after Jesus’ deliverance in your life, you become someone who can hardly get bothered. Resentful people become gracious celebrators of others’ blessing; bitter people become filled with contentment.

When the Lord has really delivered a person out of some situation, they almost always end up with a quality of increased spiritual wealth. There will be a sparkle about them, something that cause

you to think he or she is richer now than they were before. It is very difficult to put into natural words, but when you do get freed, when you do get forgiven and you are enriched in a way that turns hearts noticeably in your direction. The truth of your testimony is remarkable to others.

My point in saying all of this is that it does not matter to what extent you and I have made wrong choices. It is not about the past we'll never be able to escape. No. We serve a God who is alive. We serve a God who is real. We serve a God who is a miracle worker, and He takes your former poverty, your former sin and translates them—He exchanges them, He converts them into a double portion.