

IMAGES OF GOD



"For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8:38-39 (KJV)

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Scripture:

Psalm 105:1-8

¹O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. ²Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. ³Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. ⁴Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually. ⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered, ⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. ⁷He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth. ⁸He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations.

Romans 8:26-28, 35-39

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

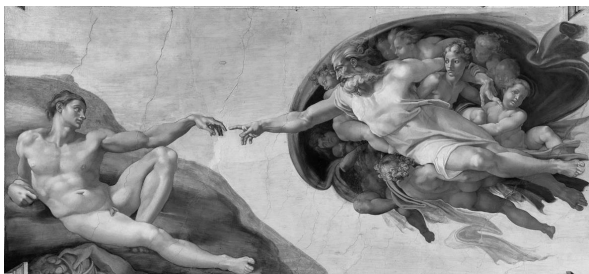
³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!

IMAGES OF GOD

Good morning. So, what is your image of God? I'll bet that at least in your subconscious mind you have one. I cannot imagine anyone identifying with God, whether a believer or disbeliever, having no concept whatsoever of what he or she believes in or rejects. Somewhere in the subconscious is an image of God. The Old Testament gives us a few examples: There is a towering cloud occasionally, the famous burning bush of Abraham, and then there is my favorite, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, the work of Michelangelo.



A beautiful picture; I love that scene of God creating Adam.



Look closely at another head of God, also on the Sistine Chapel, and see what you read into the nature of God from that image. It is more judgmental, perhaps, than compassionate.

I prefer the previous one.

GOD IS SPIRIT

The New Testament has only one clear statement, without ambiguity or qualification. "God is Spirit," says Jesus Christ in John chapter 4:24. "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." I'm a bit sorry that he put the word "him" in there, because spirit has no gender. Blame it on the translators.

What is spirit? Look it up and you will find several meanings, most of them derived from the idea of essence, the removal of all impurities.

I lived for a time next door to a liquor store. It was a substantial store, a substantial building. It had, for years, a big sign on the building that asked, "Low in Spirits? See us!" (Of course I never went in the building.) I often wondered why the church down the street didn't recognize the parody and put the same sign in front of the church. Had Pastor Cindy been in charge, they would have.

Our spirit, our idea of spirit, cannot be counted, measured, or weighed; it has no physical characteristics. Therefore it cannot be precisely equal to a picture on the Sistine Chapel, or any other picture. A spirit has no gender; it has no dimensions, or any other character visible to the eyes and ears. Therefore, any spirit that you may have in mind, any image of God you may have in mind, is neither right nor wrong. If it helps you, hang onto it. We are not here to knock anybody's image of God.

TRUE RELIGION AND TRUE SCIENCE CANNOT CONFLICT

My image of God rests on one firm foundational assumption: No true religion and no true science can conflict. The notion of religion versus science is anathema, totally unacceptable to me, so my personal image of God must satisfy that criterion. I'll tell you where I start: God is Spirit. Where I end – (I'll tell you that now.) – is that everything is connected to everything else, and God is the connection. Now, Pastor says I'm to fill fifteen minutes, so I'll try to bridge the gap between that beginning and that ending as best I can.

MY IMAGE OF GOD

My image of God meets the criteria of being spiritual, and as far as I'm aware, it has no conflict with science.

If you perceive a conflict between science and religion, the reason is that you do not fully understand one or the other, or more likely both. But you don't have to understand everything in order to use it. You don't understand everything about a car perhaps, but you can drive it. You don't know in detail how an airplane works, but you can fly in it. Most of what we see we do not fully understand, but we put these things to use every day.

To tell you about my image of God I need to stretch your imagination just a little bit. We live, mostly, aware of things through our five senses. We think of things as big or as small compared to what we expect from our experience in life. We think of a small golf ball or of a big basketball, or a big moon or a small moon as compared to the earth. We think of the earth as huge at eight thousand miles in diameter, until we think of Jupiter, which is bigger. And then we think of the solar system, and the sun, ninety-three million miles away. These are distances that stretch our imagination. How far is ninety-three million miles? Compare it to the circumference of the earth and it's a huge distance, until you think of the galaxy having thousands of suns in it. And how far away are they? Well, the nearest one is about six light-years away. Light-years? The speed of light is one-hundred-eighty-six-thousand miles a second; multiply that by sixty and you have the distance light travels in a minute; multiply that by sixty again and you have a number that is

getting big, and bigger, and it only accounts for an hour; multiply that by twenty-four and you've got a day; multiply that by three-hundred-sixty-five and you have one light-year. And the nearest star is about six times that far away. That's a huge distance! But, with the help of orbital telescopes they tell us that the edge of the observable universe is four-and-a-half billion, that's billion with a "B," light-years away. Can you conceive of a distance like that? Can you relate to it in any way? What kind of God can create and manage something as vast as the universe?

STRETCH YOUR MINDS

Stretch your minds a bit in the other direction. We learned as children that everything is made of molecules, and then we learned that molecules are made up of atoms. Atoms must, therefore, be smaller than molecules. How big is an atom? Have you ever seen an atom? Has anyone ever seen an atom? Suppose you had a huge number of atoms, a big basketful of atoms, and you set out to put them all in a line, a straight line. Start at the steps of the chancel and line them in the aisle. How far would they go? The third pew? The sixth? Into the Narthex? Across the street to Lucky's market? How long is a string of a huge number of atoms? Take the carbon atom, twenty-seven protons in the nucleus, a mid-sized atom; stretch them out in a line. Fifty thousand carbon atoms would extend in a line equal to the width of a human hair. Now that's science. We are dealing with very small things!

Every atom has a nucleus; every nucleus has protons that must be smaller than the nucleus. Carbon has twenty-seven of them. Has anybody ever seen a proton? Of course not. They are now telling us that a proton is made up of quarks: top quarks, bottom quarks, all kind of quarks. Bosons

– we've discovered the Higgs boson. We didn't discover it; it was predicted mathematically and we found it. Well, in a way we found it; they tell us it's there!

What sort of a God can deal with the incremental detail of sub-atomic particles, and also deal with the expanse of the universe? What is your image of God? Does it stretch to cover that territory? Mine does, and I'll tell you about that.

DR. NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON

The well-known astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, of New York's Hayden Planetarium, famously said, "We are all made of stardust." Well, of course we are. Stars are made of the same elements as appear in the periodic table. We are made of the same elements as appear in the periodic table. So is everything else that you see, touch, or imagine. That may not be all that there is; there are some things we haven't found yet. Everything that we know about is made of the same elements.

Dr. Tyson also said, in an interview with Bill Moyers on television that if your God is limited to what science cannot explain, then you are faced with an ever-diminishing God. Now logically that makes sense, doesn't it? Well, Dr. Tyson, our God is not limited. In fact, our God is what science is trying to explain. Turn that concept around; God is what our scientists are trying to explain.

A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Up until this point I've been talking about science, and give or take room for human error, everything I've told you is fact. In talking about my image of God, I

now move to something that is not based on science. It is a personal philosophy. I think it is plausible. To the best of my knowledge, it is not refuted nor in contradiction with any science, nor, so far as I have found in my thinking thus far is it contrary to any teaching of Jesus Christ. (There is more work to be done on that.) And of course given two-thousand years and a different place, -- the teachings of Jesus Christ were directed to his compatriots in language that they might possibly understand -- some interpretation is required.

SYSTEMS

My image: Everything that I've described to you in scientific terms consists of organized systems. The periodic table is structured according to the number of protons in the nucleus of each atom, clearly a system. What makes those atoms cling together in interesting and useful combinations? There's a lot of hydrogen out there; there's a lot of oxygen out there, and some of the hydrogen and some of the oxygen comes together to give us water. Why? How?

The same can be said of other molecules; every one of them except hydrogen consists of multiple atoms. What organizes them and holds them together? There is a system of some kind that chemists are learning about, and which I do not understand. (I barely passed chemistry.) Physics is a little easier and we try to understand those things. Engineers work with those relationships all the time without fully understanding them.

At the larger scale, the solar system is a system; we call it that. The moon-earth relationship is a system; it is predictable, it is consistent. Therefore we know where it was, and where it will be tomorrow. We know where Jupiter and Mars are relative

to the earth and the sun, because it is a system, it is organized.

There is a galactic system that keeps the stars in place. There is a cosmic system that keeps the galaxies in place. There is an atomic system that keeps the atoms functioning the way they do, and there must be a quark system that places them too.

In life, as we live it, there's a traffic system, an aircraft control system, a circulation system in the body, an aerobic system for our breathing, a nervous system that makes our muscles work. Everything that we know and work with is part of a system. And there is no system that functions in total isolation from neighboring systems, in some of which it is a part.

**Systems work together,
and groups work
with other larger systems,
and my image of God is
the ultimate system.
Put all the systems you know
about or can imagine in a basket,
and that's my image of God.**

YOUR BODY

Now accept it or not as you choose, let me say a few things about how useful that image of God might be. I visualize my body, my hand, my arms, my legs, my head. These are my possessions, they belong to me; your body belongs to you. But it is not you. Your body is run by your brain, this marvelous thing full of neurons, of which there are millions in a one millimeter cube. The brain is yours, it is not you. Your brain and your body are mortal; they will die. They will dis-

integrate one way or another and all of the material of which they are made will go back, per the periodic table, and be recycled into all of matter.

YOUR MIND

You have a mind; that's where you live. You are your mind in my philosophy, again, not backed up by science, but plausible. You are your mind; that's where you live. Your mind is spiritual and immortal. You are immortal. The mind is in constant contact with the overall system.

Your brain is the residence of the Ego. The motivation of the Ego, above all other considerations, is survival. It also thinks highly of pleasure and other picky things, but it concentrates on survival. The brain with its Ego cannot survive without help from the mind. Most of the work of the brain is subconscious; it runs the lungs, the heart, the muscles. If you decide of your free will to do something, the brain carries it out; it is in charge of operations. But the free will for the making of big decisions is in the mind and the big decisions are made up there, where there is contact with the System.

All things that are characteristic of the System—God are available to the mind at all times, no exceptions. But there is a catch: The attention span of the mind is finite. The attention span is finite. The Ego places demands upon the mind, and you have to respect some of those demands, not all of them perhaps, but to survive you've got to pay attention to the Ego, in the brain. The more attention you give to the demands of the Ego, the less attention you have available to deal with God, the System. In my imagination, if the mind is a circle, there is a diaphragm across the middle of it, a flexible diaphragm. The Ego pushes the boundary up, praying pushes the boundary down. You control how

much of the mind can give attention to God, the System, by praying.

HOW DO YOU PRAY?

So how do you pray? You ask God for a black-and-white pinto pony, or you ask God for that new car, or if you're a child for a new tricycle? Why of course you do. But if you're thinking in terms of my image of God, you don't expect it to be delivered tomorrow morning. When it is the right thing for you to have, you may get it. All of this power is available from God, but you have to ask for it.

When we sing in our Doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," we're not saying that to please God. God doesn't need to be pleased. God does not answer prayers by analyzing the situation and your behavior and deciding whether or not to answer the prayer. All of the blessings and power of God that are good for you are there all of the time. They have been put there already. What matters is your ability to receive. And when we say, "Praise God from all blessings flow" we are talking to ourselves. We're talking to our minds. Recognize and put yourself in receive mode.

That's the bottom line. So, figuratively speaking, open the windows, and the doors, and go check the mailbox. And while you do that, remember always, Hau mene pau ole ke aloha. [Love never faileth.] Amene!



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