



# THE REAL GOD

How He Longs for You  
to See Him

**CHIP INGRAM**



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I dedicate this book to all who earnestly seek to  
know God as he is and long to reflect his likeness  
in every moment of every day in every way.

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# INTRODUCTION

I was twenty-one years old at the time. It was my first visit to Asia, traveling as part of an evangelistic basketball team. While in Hong Kong, we stayed in the home of a veteran missionary who captivated my interest. On one particular morning, he invited my fellow players and me into his study for a discussion.

Although the entire room we entered was lined with books, one wall of shelves filled with paperbacks immediately caught my attention. As he walked over to that particular bookcase, the missionary explained that he had a well-established habit of reading one Christian paperback every day. He had learned speed-reading techniques to go with his obvious God-given quick mind. I could tell from the titles that he wasn't just engaged in light reading, since I recognized many of the classics on those tightly packed shelves.

He and I had already had several conversations, and I think he spotted a spiritual hunger in me that drew him to me. I realized later that I was the primary target of that gathering, for which I owe him an eternal debt of gratitude. He selected a volume from one of the shelves and turned to face us, looking directly at me.

The warmth in his eyes told me I needed to pay attention to what he was about to say. My teammates were busy finding seats, so I wasn't surprised when he said, "Chip, have you ever read this book?" He held it out to me invitingly.

I took the book and looked at the cover. Not only hadn't I read it, but I had to admit I'd never even heard of it. He accepted my admission with a smile and then said, "It's the best book I've ever read." I looked down at it again, determined to remember the title and author so I could read it when I got back to the States. But he wasn't finished. "Why don't you take it and read it during your stay here in Hong Kong. You can return it before you leave."

I can't describe the specific reasons, but the character of this missionary challenged me deeply. I wanted to learn what he had learned and read what he had read. Little did I know that the book he had just placed in my hands would change the entire course of my life.

Later that day I opened the slim volume and began a journey that I have continued ever since. Before I left Hong Kong, my missionary friend allowed me to keep as a gift what had become my constant companion during those days. In fact, that same book is still a regular occupant of my briefcase everywhere I go.

A single sentence, early in the book, had a powerful impact on my life. The author opened by saying,

What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.<sup>1</sup>

The book was on the attributes of God, and the author introduced me to ways of seeing the God of the Bible that I had never thought about,

let alone imagined. Almost immediately, my prayers began to change as I realized how big, powerful, and all-knowing the God I was praying to really is. Identity issues and struggles with guilt began to dissipate as I pondered the depths of God's forgiveness and compassion. My awareness of God's majesty and holiness came into sharper focus even as I realized, as never before, that the God of creation was eager to be friends with me.

This book is an invitation to you to join my journey. For some of you, the content of these pages will be very familiar. Those of you who have been exposed to A. W. Tozer and J. I. Packer and others like them will quickly realize how indebted I am to them. I have tried to carefully credit their (and others') exact words when I have used them, but those who know the classic writers on the character of God will hear the echoes of their influence on every page. I neither claim nor aim to be in their category as scholars. My life has been immeasurably enriched by the many who have faithfully used their thinking and writing gifts to inform my own voice.

Readers with theological experience will notice the limited scope of this book. When it comes to the character of God, any book will reach its limits long before it exhausts its topic. This book is not intended to be exhaustive, but instead to be inspirational and practical. My aim is to engage the reader in a lifelong pursuit of knowing, seeing, and experiencing the Real God.

No spiritual exercise in my life has had greater impact on me than my continual reviewing, meditating on, and applying the implications of God's traits in my daily living. I have been repeatedly stopped, stirred, or strengthened by being brought back to who God really is instead of who I might casually conceive him to be. Once you begin this journey,

you will discover God has something new to show you about himself every day.

My hope and my prayer is that as you read this book, God will do for you what he's been doing in me since I began my study of him—expanding your mind and enlarging your heart as you begin to see God as he longs to be seen.



# 1

## IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU SEE IT

In the middle of my sophomore year, a student named Denise transferred to our school from another college. I had been a Christian for about three years. I was growing spiritually, and I wanted to be as faithful as possible with each opportunity to learn or serve. As an eager, motivated believer, I had begun stepping into leadership roles in campus ministry. Denise immediately jumped into campus ministry events. Within about thirty seconds of meeting her, I began to feel an overwhelming sense of intimidation. Both her credentials and her actions thoroughly impressed me.

For some reason, I felt very self-conscious around her. She was so “together” that I was sure she would instantly notice my insecurities and struggles. What if I made the wrong impression? I wanted so much for her to like me that I quit being myself and froze up. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself. I nervously focused on making sure I didn’t say something stupid that would come across as spiritual ignorance. The result, of course, was that I didn’t say much at all. It wasn’t a very promising beginning for a friendship.

In the months that followed, I watched Denise blossom with grace and humility as she got to know the other people at school. She seemed to lead with effortless skill. She was a natural to head up the women's Bible studies, and her advice was always sought for various ministry decisions on campus.

All the while, I longed for her to know the real me so we could be friends. We were like-minded on so many things. And my respect for her was in the stratosphere. But once I started down this awkward path of insecurity, it quickly got more and more difficult to unveil my true self. The longer it went on, the more intimidated I became. Whenever I was around her, I was paralyzed. If I saw her in a Bible study, at a team meeting, or just around campus, I would always struggle to have anything to say that got beyond superficial chatting and politeness. And when I did manage to speak, I was usually so tense that it came out sounding stupid. Instead of getting closer and closer, she seemed farther and farther away. I was sure her impression of me just kept getting worse. I was convinced that everything I did confirmed to her that I was a spiritual dud.

For two years, I carried on a superficial relationship with this girl I held in such high regard. Externally, others noticed nothing. We were both part of the leadership team on campus and the ministry was going well. Inside, I always felt like a puppy swimming. The guy others could see looked calm enough, but beneath the surface I was scrambling to stay afloat. I was just glad Denise was such a mature Christian; if she weren't, she would certainly be laughing about me behind my back with her friends.

## **The Veil Is Lifted**

Finally one evening during our senior year, Denise needed a ride down to Wheeling, a town about thirty minutes away from campus. She asked

me in her typically gracious manner, “Is there any way you can give me a ride?”

“Sure,” I said without thinking. I was usually happy to offer anyone a ride, let alone a beautiful, godly coed.

But the minute we climbed into my little green Volkswagen Beetle, I began to feel uncomfortable again. With miles of twisting, turning road ahead of us, there was no escape. It was worse than a blind date. My Beetle never felt smaller.

For the first ten minutes, there was awkward silence. As my sweaty palms gripped the steering wheel, I desperately searched for a coherent sentence to utter. Denise was probably struggling to think of some common ground that she could share with the mute simpleton riding beside her. She had to be regretting her choice of chauffeur.

Eventually, she broke the ice. “Chip,” she began, “could I share something with you?”

“Go ahead.” I was relieved she took the lead.

“There’s something that I think has been a barrier in our relationship for the last two years,” she began.

*Uh-oh*, I thought, *now she’s finally going to tell me what she thinks of me.*

“You know,” she continued, “I’ve watched God grow you these last two years. You’ve really stepped up to the plate in the men’s ministry. And well, I don’t know if this has ever happened to you, but here’s the thing. From the first time I met you, I’ve just been so intimidated by you.”

My jaw hit the floor.

“And I’m afraid I’ve been so uncomfortable around you that I’ve never felt like I could just be myself. Now that we’re finishing our senior year, I feel kind of sad about that. But I just wanted to get that out in the open.”

If we hadn’t been on a straightaway, I might have run right off the road. Stunned at first, I finally burst out laughing. “You mean *you* were intimidated by *me*?!” I howled. “I was the one intimidated by *you*! Every time I’d try to say something, the words came out all wrong.” We both had a good laugh, and from that day forward, Denise and I became good friends.

I’ll never forget how my assumptions and misconceptions about Denise were a barrier in our relationship. Our inaccurate views of each other stunted the growth of our friendship. The friendship and encouragement we could have shared during those two years were put on hold—all because I had a warped perception of her, and she had a warped perception of me.

### **A Clearer Picture**

The lesson I learned with Denise has divine application. What you think about God shapes your whole relationship with him. In addition, what you believe *God* thinks about *you* determines how close you will grow toward him. Many of us have formed a picture of God from impressions we’ve picked up throughout our life. Consciously, or unconsciously, our families, teachers, friends, and churches have impacted our picture of God. Our culture consistently sends us messages about how to see God as well. All of us have been affected and can carry a distorted image of God. If we see him as an impulsive policeman, we’ll always be walking on eggshells. If we see him as a vengeful judge, we’ll always feel guilty. If we see him as an apathetic father, we will

struggle with believing he loves us. If we think he's just like us, we'll be casual about our sin. But are those ideas accurate? What if they're not true at all? Misperceptions about God can certainly create a barrier in your relationship with him. And meanwhile, the friendship, love, and encouragement you could be sharing with your heavenly Father are never realized—all because of wrong assumptions about him.

This dynamic is also true about every relationship in your life. Our relationships are formed by our perceptions of each other. How you see somebody makes all the difference in the world, as does how you think the other person sees you. Our perceptions then affect how we act toward each other. I thought Denise didn't like me. I thought I didn't measure up. And it didn't make a bit of difference that she actually thought very highly of me, because I assumed she didn't. My mind was made up. Because she didn't like me, I did not try to get to know her. I was operating under my perception of Denise and what I thought she thought rather than the truth.

So, let me ask you life's most important questions:

- What do you think about God?
- What do you think he thinks about you?
- How do these perceptions affect your relationship with him?

---

**What you think  
about God shapes  
your whole  
relationship  
with him.**

**In addition, what  
you believe God  
thinks about you  
determines how  
close you will grow  
toward him.**

Think about that. He created you for closeness, love, and friendship. Are you experiencing that? His Word is meant to disclose his deep, personal thoughts to you, and prayer is meant for you to disclose your deep, personal thoughts to him. Are you enjoying that kind of intimacy? Do you feel like you can never do anything right, that God is “down on you” or waiting for you to mess up so he can discipline you? Do you often find it hard to pray? Does the thought that you are the object of his utter delight seem foreign to you? Are you living much of your life in fear? Do you secretly struggle with obeying him because you think you might miss out on the fun in life if you are completely committed to him? Your answers to these questions will tell you a lot about your perceptions of God.

### **A Longing for God**

If there's one thing I've learned about people, it's the fact that we all long for the fulfillment that comes from a close, intimate relationship with God. Some may have become deluded by false philosophies, blocked him out of their lives, or simply become distracted by other things. But underneath it all, God has created each of us with an innate desire for deep, meaningful fellowship with him.

Think about that desire for just a minute. Try to listen to it. Is it speaking to you right now? Can you hear its voice crying out? You may be used to thinking that God is a distant, impersonal observer who is too busy to be concerned with you. Despite your desire, he may have always seemed out of reach. Forget that for a moment. Just for now, can you set aside the feelings that tell you you're not good enough to be accepted by him, or that he's been unfair, or he doesn't care? That may be extremely difficult if those feelings are deeply

ingrained, but ask God to help you, and then do your best to let go of them.

Now imagine breaking through all those misperceptions and somehow experiencing complete acceptance and deep intimacy with your heavenly Father . . . the God of the universe . . . the One who created you and delights in you. What if all the hurts that you've felt from other people could be dissolved in his perfect love? What if your disappointments could be instantly reversed by the complete satisfaction he brings? What if you could stop looking at God through all the distortions of life and begin to look at life through him instead? Can you picture yourself in a perfect relationship with God like that?

Believe it or not, that desire lives deep inside you right now. You may not feel it very strongly at this moment, but it's there. Perhaps it's a faint memory, but the longing remains. You may have learned to divert that desire to other things over the years, but you cannot squelch it completely. It is the key to finding purpose in a life that can seem overwhelming on some days and absolutely meaningless on others.

In the pages that follow, I hope you will begin to feel that desire rekindled and fanned into a flame, perhaps for the first time. If you're like many people, including me, your misconceptions about God have formed a barrier that keeps you from experiencing him as he really is—and as he wants to be seen.

Deep inside, I felt like Denise and I were meant to be great friends. Our hearts beat in rhythm on so many things. Her life represented the kind of person I wanted to become. There was so much to be gained if we could just make a connection . . . so much to enjoy if only I could have set aside my misperceptions of her. An authentic, deep friendship was waiting just beyond our common misunderstanding. The same is true about our understanding of God, but there's so much more at stake.

## **Yet Another Moment of Truth**

Several years ago, I learned another unforgettable lesson in the way my misconceptions about God keep me from the benefits of truly knowing him. Our church in Santa Cruz, California, was experiencing tremendous expansion. As with any growing organization, there were growing pains. The response to God's Word was overflowing our seating capacity. Our resources were stretched to their breaking point. The pressure to provide solutions was overwhelming. I felt neck-deep in capital campaign meetings, day-to-day church management, and preparing messages for the ever-expanding crowds on weekends. The weekdays were a blur of activity. To be honest, I struggled with depression as I felt the increasing demands and pressures of the church's growth. I appeared publicly to be enthusiastic and successful, but inwardly I experienced many moments of despair.

If that wasn't enough, our construction plans were delayed by city ordinances and financial challenges. It seemed like so much was going wrong behind the scenes—little glitches and huge obstacles. Most people were unaware of the extent of the problems, but I couldn't help thinking that God would have taken care of all these heavy matters if only I had done something better. I believed that the entire weight of the church's ministry rested on my shoulders. I falsely assumed that the problems were the result of mistakes I had made or of inadequacies in my leadership.

I “knew” much of what you are about to read in this book. I believed and understood certain clear ideas about God. I had even experienced the spiritual effect of these principles in my life. But, there's a difference between understanding God's attributes intellectually and letting them affect the way you live your life. The truth needed to sink in. Like all of us, I was a “work in progress,” and God was (and is) far

from finished with me. I still had certain misconceptions about him that needed to be clarified. The circumstances I was in, just like the circumstances you are in, were simply another opportunity for God to teach me something deeper about himself. That seems so obvious now, but being in that situation had me demoralized, tentative, doubtful, and exhausted.

One day, it all came to a head. I sat alone in my office with an overwhelming sense that everything was depending on me. I was exhausted and discouraged, and I honestly wondered if I could continue. While crying out to God for some relief, I glanced down and noticed a gift that had been anonymously placed on my desk by a church member—a frame containing the text from Zephaniah 3:17, a somewhat obscure Old Testament verse. Through tears, I read the words and felt the voice of God speaking directly to me.

The LORD your God is with you,  
he is mighty to save.  
He will take great delight in you,  
he will quiet you with his love,  
he will rejoice over you with singing.

It suddenly seemed as though God were right there in the room with me. I sensed his power, and it convinced me that he could bring complete resolution to the things that were pressing down on me. Best of all, I could feel his absolute pleasure and delight in me—regardless of how I performed in that situation. He reached right past my inadequate offering and my insecure efforts and embraced me. I could picture him rejoicing and singing over me like a mother who can't believe she gets to be the mother. Somehow, as that awareness of God's delight filled me, the work I was doing or the obstacles I was facing didn't seem all that important after all. As God lifted the weight off my shoulders, I

shamelessly smiled as I realized I wasn't supposed to try to carry it in the first place.

Looking back, I now realize that my pre-Christian ideas about God were still very much with me. I had seen God as someone who dispensed rewards to those who were good and crushing discipline for those who were bad. When things were not going well, I assumed I had done something wrong. My misperceptions of God had produced a very driven person who struggled with being a workaholic for the first decade of his ministry. Rooted deeply in any driven achiever is the sense that who you are is determined by what you do. As this verse washed over my heart and soul, God's Spirit used the words to recalibrate my view of him—to separate my performance from my identity. Like a lightbulb coming on inside my head, I made the connection that God's love and delight had absolutely nothing to do with my work or my performance.

I began a new era in my relationship with Christ. In that instant, I realized in a fresh way that God is on my side . . . that he really delights in me. For the first time in a long while, I was able to separate my performance from what God thought of me. I was free to do what I could and to simply trust him for the rest. And it all started with that subtle change in my perception of God. His Word removed some spiritual filters that had obstructed my view of him.

In the weeks and months that followed, I plunged myself deep into this new picture of God. I explored passage after passage in Scripture describing a heavenly Father who not only loves me, but cares deeply about every little nuance of my life. With great concern, he watches over all my comings and goings. He may not always intervene the way I want him to, but he's always present and involved.

A strange thing happened as a result of that experience. The more I learned the truth about God, the more I felt our relationship strengthen.

And it was all because I was uncovering my misperceptions and discovering who he really is. I saw glimpses of God's character so satisfying that they have kept me coming back for more. I also discovered how easy it is to slip into the old misperceptions. They are deeply entrenched in our thought patterns. We may get out of those holes with God's help, but if we don't watch where we step, we can easily fall back in. When that happens, it's usually because we've forgotten something about God's character—or we discover we haven't learned it yet.

My friendship with Denise began to flourish when we discovered the truth about each other. What would it be like if you applied that same dynamic to your relationship with God? Deep inside, you already long to know him intimately. Can you imagine a God who knows you intimately and loves you beyond what you can comprehend? Can you imagine the transforming impact that would have on your life?

## **A Change of Perception**

In the chapters of this book, I want to help you develop an image of God as he longs to be seen. He has taken several millennia, inspired hundreds of pages of Scripture, and gone through a traumatic incarnation to paint an accurate portrait of himself. He obviously cares what we think about him. He wants us to see him clearly, attribute by amazing attribute.

Along the way, we will dismantle the common misconceptions about God that keep us from getting as close as he longs for us to be. You will have numerous opportunities to identify your own misconceptions and exchange them for the view God has given us of himself. But I want to go beyond what you can know about God's qualities to offer you tools you can use to implement those attributes in your daily life. It's one

thing for us to reach a rational conclusion that God is good. It's entirely different to let that truth begin to affect the way we make decisions, invest in relationships, interpret events, and look to the future. Every one of God's attributes has that potential. I had the thrill of seeing God change me—heart, soul, and mind—as I gradually applied the truth of who he is to the way I live. If you will join me on this journey, I promise to share with you the lessons I've learned, the mistakes I've made, and the helps I've discovered in my walk with God. This is the beginning of an exciting adventure!

It's time to delete the photo effects that have distorted our picture of God. Let him unveil an amazing portrait of himself. Seeing God as he longs to be seen will change you forever.