

**“But God seems so distant  
and cold...”**

For most people God's in hiding. He's a mystery. He's "out there somewhere," but he's distant, detached and inaccessible.

Even Christians can think that too, like the Catholic lady I read about who thought God was "heavy and repressive." It created all kinds of problems for her. She lived a rigid lifestyle and she was full of guilt. This same lady was then taught a much more positive view of God as a "loving Father" who wanted her to be happy, and for years she was happy. But then she was hit by several tragedies, including the breakup of her marriage, and now she was angry at God for "betraying her." She stopped going to church, she couldn't pray and she nose-dived into depression. God was now distant and cold to her.

And she was a Christian! So imagine how difficult it must be for NON-Christians to form a positive image of God - and especially in a world where it seems God isn't interested in us, witness all the suffering and heartache going on, and the fact that he doesn't stop it, either. If he really is the all-powerful, all-loving God that Christians say he is, why doesn't he put an end to all the rottenness in this world? No wonder people think God is cold, cruel and heartless.

Religions created in his name haven't helped that image of God either, witness all the mayhem, cruelty and violence they've spawned. Who can blame people for becoming atheists?

Going to church may not help much either, especially in denominations that teach God only loves us if we behave, and that we'd better obey the church's teachings, or else. The impression given by such churches is that God doesn't even like us, let alone love us. All he's really interested in is our obedience to his set way of doing things, and that's that.

So how can God be love in a world so messed up and suffering, and in churches so strict on rules, rituals and obedience? No wonder God is a mystery, and he seems so distant and cold.

### **What's God really like, though?**

God unraveled the mystery of what he's like by coming to this Earth as Jesus Christ, and Christians are meant to be witnesses to that, **Acts 1:8**. It's in Jesus Christ that we see God as he really is. That's why it was so important to Jesus to ask his disciples in **Matthew 16:15**, "Who do you say I am?" Peter got the

answer right, too: “You’re the Christ, the Son of the living God (**verse 16**).” To look at Jesus was to look at God, or as Jesus said in **John 14:9** - “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” But this was the reason God came as Jesus, to reveal God as he really is, **John 17:6**.

But at what point did Jesus’ disciples really begin to understand that? It was when Jesus talked about himself from the Old Testament. To a couple of confused disciples on the Road to Emmaus, he went back into the Old Testament “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning himself* (**Luke 24:27**).” And their reaction? “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? (**verse 32**)” And while these two disciples were telling the others about this, Jesus suddenly appears among them and explains again that “This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is *written about me* in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures (**verse 44-45**)” - the only “Scripture” at that time, of course, being the Old Testament.

It was all back there in the Old Testament, then, that we first see what God was really like in Jesus Christ, as Jesus himself said in **John 5:39** that “*These are the Scriptures that testify about me.*” That was the purpose of the Old Testament, to reveal Jesus, because in revealing Jesus we see God as he really is too.

And where did Jesus begin his explanation of himself in the Old Testament? He began with Moses. It was in his dealings with the nation of Israel under Moses that we get our first real glimpse of Jesus. And we know it was Jesus dealing with the Israelites because Paul says it was him in **1 Corinthians 10:3-4**, that the one accompanying the Israelites on their travels “*was Christ,*” and this same Christ was also called “*God*” in **verse 5**. He was the great “*I AM*” of **Exodus 3:14**, the “*God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* (**verse 15**).”

Jesus was Almighty God, the same God that people today think is distant, cold, and heartless. So, was he distant, cold and heartless with the Israelites? No, he wasn’t, **Deuteronomy 7:6-9**. “The Lord your God has chosen you (Israelites) out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his *treasured possession*. The Lord did not set his *affection* on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples...but because the Lord *loved you*...Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the *faithful God*, keeping his *covenant of love* to a thousand generations...” The words “treasured, affection, love and faithful” are the very opposite to cold and heartless.

God was anything but distant and inaccessible too, **Exodus 25:8**. “*I will dwell among them,*” he said. He was so close to them, in fact, that other nations would say of the Israelites, “*Surely, this great nation is a wise and understanding*

people.’ What other nation is so great as to have their gods *near them* the way the Lord our God is *near us* whenever we pray to him? (Deuteronomy 4:6-7)” Christ was near to them, he dwelt with them, he accompanied them on their travels, and Israel was his treasured possession with whom he made a covenant of love because of his affection for them.

From Jesus’ dealings with Israel we clearly see what God is like. He loved those Israelites. But it’s in their reaction back to him that we really see his love, because most of the time they treated God horribly.

The Israelites were just like people today, who either resist God or ignore him. They rebelled, set up their own gods, killed the prophets sent to warn them, and they descended to depths of depravity so great that God eventually put an end to them as a nation. For century after century before that, though, God had been patient and merciful with them, and he’d even managed to maintain a relationship with them despite their awful behaviour.

But how was that possible? How could God maintain his “covenant of love” with these people when they’d proved again and again that they were incapable of loving him back? Never in all their history had they consistently obeyed him, trusted him or loved him in return, despite his obvious love and care for them. Back in Exodus 19 they’d solemnly sworn to keep up their end of the bargain, but they soon proved they couldn’t respond back to God with anything even remotely close to the love he had for them.

God, however, took care of that, by providing Israel with a priesthood and a system of sacrifices as their way of responding back to him. They couldn’t respond to God by themselves, so God provided a way for them, a means by which people who couldn’t obey him, and couldn’t trust him or love him in return, could still have a relationship with him.

The work of the priests, and the animals sacrificed on the Israelites’ behalf, were accepted by God as Israel’s response back to him. He forgave their sins, spared their lives and continued to care for them, and his covenant with them remained intact. And when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, the entire nation was cleansed of its sin, so that the Israelites’ relationship with God could be sealed for another year.

God, therefore, not only fulfilled his side of the covenant, he also gave the Israelites the means of fulfilling *their* side of it, as well. In other words, he provided both sides of the covenant, his side *and* theirs. From his side, he promised to bless them, love them and be faithful to them. From their side, however, they couldn’t offer anything in return; they were simply incapable of responding to God’s love. But God didn’t reject them. Instead, he provided them with sacrifices and a priesthood that he accepted on their behalf. Not only then

did God love them, he also provided them with their response back to him so that his relationship with them (even as helpless sinners) could continue.

But it wouldn't be enough. They still failed him. Why? Because of **Jeremiah 17:9**. Here's the reason the Israelites couldn't keep their end of the bargain; it's because "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure." With a heart like that, it's no wonder the Israelites were completely incapable of loving God in return. "Through your **own fault** you will lose the inheritance I gave you (**verse 4**)." There was something desperately wrong with them that couldn't be cured. Eventually it would cause them to lose their inheritance, so even though God had provided them with priests and sacrifices, it still wouldn't be enough. No animal sacrifice or High Priest entering the Holy of Holies would be able to cure the human heart, or prevent its inevitable doom.

Tucked away in all those sacrifices and priestly duties in Israel, however, was the solution to the incurably deceitful human heart that had caused Israel's total inability to respond to God's love in return. That's why Jesus went back to the Old Testament, because embedded in all his dealings with Israel was the one great solution to the problem. **It was him**. All those sacrifices and priestly duties he gave to Israel were actually pointing to him, because **he** would be the means by which the human heart could be healed. The one thing lacking, therefore, in humans being able to have a loving relationship with God would be taken care of. With a healed heart, humans could (at last) answer and respond to God's love with love in return.

The disciples understood this too, when Jesus pointed all this out to them in the Old Testament. They suddenly realized that Jesus' death on the cross had already been pictured in the Old Testament by the lamb sacrificed at the Passover. All the other pieces of the Old Testament jigsaw started falling into place too, like **Isaiah 53:3-7**. How clearly those verses now referred to Jesus: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed...and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." And the amazing part was, this was Jesus actually talking about himself in Isaiah 53. When Isaiah writes in **verse 10**, that "it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer," the "Lord" here was Jesus, so it was Jesus' will to have himself crushed.

Jesus, therefore, had already prepared the groundwork in the Old Testament for pointing to himself being the sacrifice and priesthood necessary for the healing of the human heart, "For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (**verse 12**)." In other words, he would be both the sacrifices and the priesthood pictured in the Old Testament. He'd not only be the sacrifice to

bear our sins, just like the sacrifices bore the sins of the Israelites, he'd also be the priesthood to intercede for us, just like the priests interceded on behalf of the Israelites. Jesus would also, therefore, be **our** response to God, just like the sacrifices and priesthood were the Israelites' means of response to God. Again, God has provided for us, this time in Jesus' sacrifice and priesthood, rather than animal sacrifices and imperfect human priests.

How much does God want a relationship with us, then? Enough to provide both sides of the **New** Covenant too, just like he provided both sides of the Old Covenant. Jesus is our sacrifice and priesthood, enabling **us** now to respond to God, just like the sacrifices and priesthood in Israel enabled them to respond to God. Only this time, we are **given the heart** to respond, a healed human heart, **Galatians 4:6** - "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son **into our hearts**, the Spirit who calls out 'Abba, Father.'" And in **Hebrews 8:10** - "I will put my laws in their minds and write them **on their hearts**. I will be their God, and they will be my people." The relationship between God and humans can now flourish, where he truly is our God and we truly are his people, in close, loving relationship together.

And in the same way that God provided both sides of that relationship in the Old Covenant, he provides both sides of that relationship in the New. Jesus has not only provided us with a clear demonstration of his love for us in his death, he's also provided us with his Spirit to enable us to love God in return. Because of Christ, therefore, we know our relationship with God is intact, because Jesus not only provides us with his Spirit to intercede for us, he himself "**lives to intercede**" for us too, **Hebrews 7:25**. We have a high priest "**who meets our need (verse 26),**" and "**is able to save completely those who come to God through him (verse 25).**"

In other words, he's got *our* side of our relationship with God covered, too. He **gives** us our love for God, just as he gave the sacrifices to Old Testament Israel as their means of responding back to God. And as *our* High Priest who intercedes *for us* now, Jesus prays the prayers we cannot pray and expresses the love and gratitude to God we cannot express. Our relationship with God, therefore, does not depend on anything we do. God has provided for us in Jesus Christ all that we need to maintain our relationship with him, just like he provided the sacrifices and priesthood to maintain Israel's relationship with him.

How Jesus does this as our High Priest may be beyond our grasp, but he's provided us a picture in the Old Testament of what he's done (and does) for us, and all we need do is accept it and live in the freedom of knowing our relationship with God is intact and growing because of Jesus Christ.

So, for people who find God confusing, or who think he's distant and heartless, Jesus' solution in his day was to open up the Old Testament and show people what it revealed about him, because in him we see God as he truly is.