

# Approaching God

Introduction: I don't know where I picked this picture up, but it is a collection, a series of elementary kids' notes to God. Let me show you a few of them.

Joyce wrote, "**Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.**" That just begs the question of whether she really does like her new brother, doesn't it?

Nan wrote, "**I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.**" Now, that's some ruthless honesty, isn't it?

Larry wrote, "**Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.**" That one speaks for itself.

Neil asked God, "**I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that ok?**" Yes, Neil and one day you'll want to do it too.

Charles wrote, "**I do not think anybody could be a better God. Well I just want you to know but I am not just saying that because you are God.**"

I always get a big kick out of hearing what kids would say to God or think about God because it is just fun to see the lens through which kids see God. Sometimes, you see that kids view God through a lens of mystery where they are just trying to understand who God is and why he does the things he does. Sometimes, you see that kids view God through a lens of manipulation where they are just trying to get what they want from God. Sometimes, you see that kids view God through a lens of authority where they are trying to understand God's standards and rules as an authority figure.

But always there's this lens that kids see God through. But it isn't just kids who have a lens through which they see God. We also have a lens, a filter, or a sort of grid that colors how we see and understand God.

*Illustration* – Just this past September, sociologist from Baylor University released the results of a study looking into America's different views of God. Part of the study was conducted by the Gallup organization. There were four views or four lenses that dominated the landscape.

One lens was the "**Authoritarian God.**" 31.4% of those surveyed saw God this way where he was "**angry at humanity's sins and engaged in every creature's life and world affairs.**"

Another lens was the "**Benevolent God.**" 23% of those surveyed saw God who was forgiving and accepting of anyone who would repent.

Another lens was the "**Critical God.**" 16% of those surveyed viewed God as having "**his judgmental eye on the world, but he's not going to intervene, either to punish or comfort.**"

And lastly, one lens was the "**Distant God.**" 24.4% of those surveyed viewed God as "**a cosmic force that launched the world, then left it spinning on its own.**"

We all have a lens that colors how we see and understand God. Sometimes, the Bible and faith inform that lens. Sometimes, our experience and upbringing shape our lens. And many times, it is mixture of both experience and faith, trauma and Scripture, parents and the Bible.

But whatever sort of lens or filter or gird which we see God through, that lens alters and shapes how you and I relate to God, how we approach God. If we have that authoritarian lens, we cower and hide from God. If we have that benevolent lens, we come to him, but sometimes, we slide into a very casual, very familial sort of coming to him. If we have that critical lens, we see the finger wagging and go do our own thing anyways. If we have that distant lens, we functionally dismiss him.

Your lens, my lens shapes how we relate to God and how we approach God. But whatever you may think about God, here's the amazing thing about God in the Bible: he invites us to come to him through Jesus. That's simply amazing.

God doesn't roll his eyes at us. God doesn't cross his arms in disgust. God doesn't hold us at arms length. God doesn't throw up his hands in apathy. But he threw open the doors through Jesus Christ and invites us to come to him.

You see, when Jesus Christ went to the cross and died on it, he did it to throw open the doors for people to come to God. He died for our sin and to remove that barrier of sin between God and us. And when we ask Christ to come into our lives to forgive us of our sin and to lead us in life, we've walked through those opened doors and into the power and presence of God.

Hebrews 10:19-20, and 22a says it this way: **“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...”** Jesus Christ has made a way for us to God. And so through faith Jesus Christ, God says, **“Come”** to us.

But in Ecclesiastes, Solomon warns us that as we continue to come to God, as we continue to draw near to God, we are to do so with caution because he's, well, God. He's not some cosmic, huggable teddy bear. He's God.

In the first 4 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon has shown how we are not the center of the universe, but how we are in God's universe. So reconnecting with God is the only way to satisfy that eternal rumbling in the stomach of our souls. And since we are in God's universe, God's the one who determines our times and seasons in life, either by effecting good seasons and times or by allowing those ugly seasons and times. And even when our experience of life is insane, God is mysteriously at work in that and will have the final say in all of the insanity as the judge of everything. God has the last word in everything.

And Solomon points to that kind of God, the kind of God in the Bible who tells us to come through Jesus. And he also cautions us about getting too casual, too familial, too cozy, too comfy in our approach of God because he's God. If you have your Bible with you, I'd like you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 5:1 to see how we should approach and come to God.

Guard Your Steps: READ ECCLESIASTES 5:1A. Solomon says to guard your steps when coming to the temple. For the Jews, the temple was the place where God's presence principally resided, and so to go to the temple was to go to meet with God himself. And Solomon says to approach God, to come into the presence of God means to be cautious, to guard our steps.

We are to guard your steps whenever we come to the presence of God as we live life before him. We're to avoid being careless or haphazard before God. We're to steer clear from doing the purely rote and routine in God's presence. We're to stand up against what our peers may pressure us to do and say or not do and not say in God's presence. We are to come to God with care and intentionality and purpose. Guard your steps in coming to God.

But it isn't just care and purpose that is being driven at. There is something more that we're being pointed to. Look at what else Solomon says in verse 7. Hop down there with me. READ ECCLESIASTES 5:7. Stand in

awe of God. Literally, that phrase is “**Fear God,**” not crouched in utter terror and fright. We’re to take a posture of worship before God where we come with awe, reverence and humility knowing our size and importance in relation to God.

**Illustration** – President Theodore Roosevelt was well known for his love of the outdoors. So much so, that he was instrumental in the creation of several national parks and monuments. And it is said that when President Teddy Roosevelt entertained diplomatic guests at the White House, he was fond of taking these politically powerful guests out to the back lawn at the end of the day. And he would just stand there gazing at the night sky. Eventually, all of his politically powerful guests would also be gazing up at the night sky alongside of Teddy Roosevelt.

You see, in the early 1900’s when Teddy Roosevelt was President, there weren’t the sheer mass of city lights to obscure the vast array of stars. So they would just stand there and stare at the magnificent display of God’s brilliant creation and they would be just overcome by the grandeur of it all.

Have you ever had that experience where you’ve been in the middle of nowhere and looked up and saw the vast array of stars and just been breathless? That’s what happened to them. So after a long moment, President Theodore Roosevelt, who was one of the most powerful men in the world, would say, “**Gentlemen, I believe we are small enough now. Let’s go to bed.**” If a starry night sky could inspire awe in the world’s most powerful people, then what sort of inspiration should the maker of that night sky do to us?

God is so much bigger and so much more impressive than the stars and the universe and the cosmos. He’s more powerful than any storm, tornado or Tsunami including hurricane Katrina. He’s more breathtaking and majestic than any sunset at the ocean you’ve ever witnessed. He’s smarter and wiser than Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawking as he made what they were trying to figure out. He’s more lavishly compassionate and good to the core than Mother Theresa as she was just trying to shadow what he is and does. He’s more pure than freshly fallen snow.

I mean he’s God. He’s God, so stand in awe of him. But this raises a really important question for us and that is how. How do you and I take a posture of standing in awe of God in life? How do we stand in awe of God? There are all sorts of ways we stand in awe of God, but Solomon points us to a few areas as to how we stand in awe of God.

Listen Intently: The first one is in the last part of verse 1. It has to do with listening. READ ECCLESIASTES 5:1. Come near to God to listen. Come near to God and listen. Listen intently.

To do otherwise is to act like a Jew who went to the temple just to be seen and to go through the religious obligations of a sacrifice, which is all wrong and too casual before God. That is, to do something other than approaching God to listen is to merely go through religious hoops and motions. It’s church calisthenics. So listen intently to God.

Now, he’s not saying to just hear what God is saying. You know, in one ear and out the other. Solomon is saying listen like our mothers said listen to us. You know, moms say to their kids, “**Listen to me.**” Don’t just hear the content of what is being said. She saying hear what is said and then do something about it.

That’s the force of what listening here. We’re not to just hear what God is saying. We’re to hear what God is saying and then do something about it. We listen to God by hearing what he says and then following it in life. Listen intently to God. But isn’t that incredibly hard with all of the other messages we hear?

**Illustration** – John Ortberg points out that we are bombarded by messages everyday from billboards, televisions, radios, flyers, faxes, emails and telemarketers. They tell us, “**Use me. Buy me. Eat me. Wear me.**”

**Try me. Drive me. Put me in your hair.”** There are zillions of hair care products and they all say, **“Buy me to wash it, condition it, mousse it, dry it, curl it, straighten it, wax it to get rid of it and Rogaine it to get it back.”**

We live in a blizzard of messages that bombard us everyday. But God has spoken plainly and clearly to us in the Bible. The Bible is God’s primary means to speak to us.

And so listening intently to God means regularly carving out time to read the Bible, to hear what God says and then praying through how you can live that out. Get up a bit early in the morning or turn off the television at night, sit down and read one chapter a day in the Bible.

As you are reading, listen to what God is saying. Anything that strikes you or rubs against your life, pray over how to bring that into your life or what changes you need to make. And if you’ve never read the Bible on your own, start in one of the gospels like Mark or John and after you’ve done a couple of the gospels, read Romans or James. But carve out time regularly to hear the message of God to live it out.

Stand in awe of God by listening intently. That’s Solomon’s first piece to standing in awe of God. He points out another way we stand in awe of God beginning in verse 2.

Pray Intentionally: And it has to do with the way we pray. Look at verse 2 with me. READ ECCLESIASTES 5:2-3. Solomon tells us to pick our words carefully when we pray and talk to God. Instead of quickly speaking without thought or speaking hastily, we’re to pause, take a breath and speak thoughtfully, pray intentionally to God who is higher than any king or president, more important than any guest we’ve met, and greater than any hero we may have.

And the point of that really weird analogy is that just as hard work and taxing business make us sleep and fall into the fantasies of dreams, so also the babbling prayer, the repetitive and rote talking to God, the unintentional prayer leads into the fantasy that we’re actually communicating anything important and substantive and meaningful to God.

So when you pray, choose your words carefully and thoughtfully. Pray intentionally. This is a warning not to go on autopilot when we pray and talk to God.

*Illustration* – I heard John Ortberg tell a true story about a church that had recently put all of their bulletins for services on computer. It was great because instead of having to type them up freshly every time they needed a certain service, they could just run them off on the computer.

There wasn’t a problem until there was a funeral service prepared for a woman named Mary and then another attendee died whose name was Edna. They did a “find” operation where they instructed the computer to find all the occurrences of Mary and to replace them with Edna. Easy enough right? Everything was fine until they were reciting the Apostles’ Creed together. Everybody recited, **“I believe in God Almighty and in Christ Jesus, His only son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Edna.”**

Don’t do that. Don’t plug in names using the same phrases. Definitely pray, but just don’t go on autopilot as you speak with God. Pray intentionally. Instead of just talking like crazy or saying whatever pops into your mind to God, choose your words carefully that are honest about who you are and who God is and what you’re dealing with and where you’re at in life.

Instead of just using the words you always use and repeating the same phrases and concepts over and over and over again, use new words to express the same concept and find new concerns to express.

Instead of just babbling to just check prayer off the day's checklist, sit in silence until you can really express yourself, your needs, your concerns and your praise to God.

Stand in awe of God by not only listening intently but also praying intentionally. Solomon has one last piece to how we stand in awe of God beginning in verse 4.

Keep Promises Deliberately: And it has to do with our promises to God. Look at verse 4 with me. READ ECCLESIASTES 5:4-6. Vows are essentially promises made to God. Vows were promises people made to God to do something, to give something or to say something.

Sometimes, they would offer the vow and make the promise to God as a deal for him to do something for them. Other times, they would offer the vow and make the promise to God as a way to thank him for everything he is and everything he was doing. Other times, they would offer the vow and make the promise to God as a sort of sacrifice to God.

Now, vows and promises to God weren't required nor were they expected. People volunteered their promises to God. People had the option to vow or not vow to God. But when God is promised, he expects it to be fulfilled. In God's eyes, promises to him are binding if they don't involve sin. Promises to God are to be fulfilled, no ifs, ands or buts about it.

And did you notice? That defaulting on a promise to God is akin to defaulting on a loan because he sends collectors to bug whether it is the conscience or someone who's in the know about the promise made until the promise is fulfilled.

To completely default on a promise to God is like defaulting on a loan because God forecloses on other things in life. That's how seriously God takes our promises to him.

Solomon is telling us that despite what circumstances we may make promises to God in, we are to keep our promises deliberately. Yes, sometimes it is better not to make a promise to God at all, and sometimes it was really rash, and sometimes it was downright stupid. But if we make a promise to God, we are to fulfill it.

Sometimes, we make promises to God in exchange for God doing something for us. You know, we try to somehow broker a deal with God. And as bad as an idea that is, if God does what you've asked him, if the situation turns out the way you asked God to do it, fulfill your promise if it doesn't involve sin.

Other times, we make promises to God to serve somewhere or to give money somewhere just to thank him for what he's been doing in our lives. Make good on that promise to do or to give as a thank you note to God.

And still other times, we make promises to God to say something to someone because we've had a stirring in our heart, a movement of God to do so. Fulfill that word, that promise you made to God.

Whatever the circumstances that surround the promises we've made to God, fulfill those promises. Promises to God may seem like a small thing, but an unfulfilled one can be our downfall.

**Illustration** – Let me use an analogy that I heard. I can't remember where I heard this, but if I could I'd tell you. Dizzy Dean was one of the greatest pitchers in the history of baseball. He pitched during the 1930's and early 1940's. He was the last pitcher to the National League to win 30 games and there was only one pitcher in the American League to get 30 wins since Dizzy Dean did it. I mean, he was an amazing pitcher until 1938. You see, in 1937 a batter hit a line drive off his toe and broke it. But it's only a toe, so what's the big deal, right?

Dizzy Dean came back too early from his toe injury and he ended up altering his pitching motion to compensate for his sore toe and he wore out his arm so badly that he never recovered. One toe, a small part to the whole of Dizzy Dean functionally ended his career for one of the greatest pitchers in history. A small thing, but it was his downfall, just like our unfulfilled promises to God can be.

So keep your promises to God deliberately. Do whatever you promised to do if it doesn't involve sin. Say whatever you promised to say. Give whatever you promised to give.

Conclusion: Stand in awe of God by listening intently, praying intentionally and keeping your promises deliberately.

***Illustration*** – In C.S. Lewis' book called *The Problem of Pain*, he wrote, “**We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘likes to see young people enjoying themselves’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all.’**”

Maybe we would prefer a grandfather in heaven who is very user-friendly, non-threatening and requires nothing but amuses us. Maybe we would really prefer that.

But God is not a grandfather in heaven. He is a Father in heaven, and so come to him through Jesus and when you come, stand in awe of him.