

Personality Profile

from *Reaching for the Invisible God* by Philip Yancey

Certain “personality traits” of God make any relationship with him a daunting challenge. Books of theology tend to use inert words—omniscient, impassible, imperturbable—to describe God’s personality, but the Bible tells of a God who is anything but inert. This God enters history, sides with the underdog, argues with people (sometimes letting them win), and may either exert or consciously curb his power. In the Bible life with God reads more like a mystery story, or a romance, than a theology text. What I find in its pages differs markedly from what I expect, and what most people expect, in getting to know God. The following aspects of God’s personality may surprise and perplex someone seeking a personal relationship.

God Is Shy

By that, I do not mean bashful or timid, like a junior high boy at a party. God may speak in a voice like thunder, and when he shows up in person, humans fall terrified to the ground. Rather, God is shy to intervene. Considering the many things that must displease him on this planet, God exercises incredible—at times maddening—self-restraint.

The Bible presents the goal of creation as a time of Sabbath rest when God and all his creatures can enjoy peace and harmony. History keeps disturbing that rest, however, with loud and jangling interruptions. In the Old Testament, especially, God overcomes his shyness when evil or suffering escalates to a point of crisis. Sometimes God intervenes with a direct personal appearance, sometimes through natural phenomena, most often by tapping an individual to convey words on God’s behalf.

Compared to the sacred writings of other religions, though, the Bible offers few scenes of linkage between the seen and unseen worlds. We tend to focus on the miracles and the dramatic appearances such as to Moses in a burning bush and to the prophets in dreams and visions. Yet these are tucked in between periods from which we have no record of the unseen world making an appearance. Usually the intervention comes only after many cries and prayers, delayed by decades or even centuries. God is not impetuous, but shy to act.

Why this quality? I cannot speak for God, of course, but the answer must in part reflect the “problem” of an invisible Being relating to people in a material world. If indeed an unseen world exists parallel to this one, as the Bible insists, we lack the sensors to detect it. I have never met a Christian with Elisha’s ability to see chariots of fire. Even when we develop a correspondence with the unseen world, we do so by faith that the book of Hebrews defines as being “certain of what we do not see.”

God faces almost the opposite situation. Unlike us, God has an all-encompassing point of view that takes in the world we see as well as other realms hidden to us. Moreover, God sees all our history at once, as a ball of yarn compared to the short, consecutive scraps of thread we experience. Unconstrained by a body, God exists in every place at once. (We should count it fortunate that God is spirit, for an infinite *material* being would fill all spaces, leaving no room for anything else.)

The same barrier that keeps us from God keeps God from us, though in an entirely different way. Every time God chooses to manifest himself in our world, he must accept limitations. He “con-descends” (literally, descends to be with) to our point of view.

Moses saw a burning bush that bedazzled him, changing the course of his life and of history. Out of flames of fire he heard the voice of God speaking. Yet God experienced that same burning bush as an accommodation, a limitation. The bush appeared before Moses in the Sinai wilderness, but not in China and not in Latin America. Thus began

what critics call the “scandal of particularity.” Why would God choose Israel out of all the available tribes? Why would God incarnate himself in the person of Jesus and settle in a backwater province of Palestine? God had little choice, to put it crudely, if he wished to communicate in a way humans could understand. To impinge on our world, God must subject himself to the rules of time and space. Any correspondence between invisible and visible worlds, between God and human being, works two ways, affecting both parties.

An analogy: conceivably we humans may one day master whale language, so that we can lower an underwater transmitter and communicate through squeaks and clicks in a way that whales understand. In doing so, we will interpret ourselves downwards, in a self-limiting way comprehensible to whales. They will not receive the full essence of what it means to be a human being; we can only “talk” about fish and plankton and oceans, not about laptop computers and skyscrapers and major league baseball. That analogy gives a small picture of what it must be like for an all-powerful, all-knowing God to communicate with human beings.

In short, God must set the pace of communication, so that we can only know God as he chooses to make himself known. The unequal partnership between the invisible God and material human beings guarantees that much will remain shrouded in mystery. God can know all of us; we never know all of God. As God himself told Jeremiah, “Am I only a God nearby and not a God far away?”

The Bible does contain clear hints about one reason God restrains himself from interfering more directly, more often: God holds back out of mercy, for our benefit. The apostle Peter answers scoffers who doubt God’s control over history with these words, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

As I look back on God’s spectacular interventions in the Old Testament—Noah’s flood, the tower of Babel, the ten plagues of Egypt, the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions—I feel mostly gratitude for this quality of divine shyness. In the words of John Updike, “The sensation of silence cannot be helped: a loud and evident God would be a bully, an insecure tyrant, an all-crushing datum instead of, as He is, a bottom-less encouragement to our faltering and frightened being.”

God Hides

According to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, “The Bible knows of God’s hiding His face, of times when the contact between Heaven and earth seems to be interrupted. God seems to withdraw Himself utterly from the earth and no longer to participate in its existence. The space of history is then full of noise, but as it were, empty of divine breath.” Do we live in such a time now, I sometimes wonder: full of noise but empty of God? And why would God flash his presence brightly one moment and not the next, like a firefly too quick to catch?

Isaiah said it bluntly: “Truly you are a God who hides himself.” In a meditation on this verse, Belden C. Lane remarks that he used to fret about how his children played hide-and-seek. His son would bellow out “Ready!” when he had found a good hiding place, which of course instantly gave him away. Lane, the father, kept reviewing the point of the game—“You’re supposed to hide, not give your position away!”—until one day it dawned on him that from his son’s perspective *he* had missed the point of the game. The fun comes in being found, after all. Who wants to be left alone, undiscovered? “God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away,” said Meister Eckhart. Perhaps God also feels pleasure in being found?

Lane’s daughter used another, more subtle technique. She would pretend to run and hide, then sneak back to her father’s side while he was still counting with his eyes shut tight. Though he could hear her excited breathing as she stood inches away from him, he never gave her away. Instead he would feign delight as he opened his eyes to

announce, “Ready or not, here I come!” only to see his daughter touch home base before he even began the search. Land reflects,

She was cheating, of course; and, though I don’t know why, I always let her get away with it. Was it because I longed so much for those few moments when we stood close together, pretending not to hear nor to be heard—caught up in a game that for an instant dissolved the distance between parent and child, that set us free to touch and seek and find each other? It was a simple, almost negligible act of grace, my not letting on that I knew she was there. Yet I suspect that in that one act I may have mirrored God for my child better than in any other way I could. Still to this day, it seems, God is for me a seven-year-old daughter, slipping back across the grass, holding her breath in check, wanting once again to surprise me with a presence closer than I could ever have expected. “Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself,” the prophet once declared. A playfulness as well as a dark mystery lies richly intertwined in that grand and complex truth.

Does God play hard to get for the sake of discovery? Again, I cannot speak for God. The Bible sometimes portrays God as the initiator, Hound of Heaven in pursuit. Yet just when we think we have God, we suddenly feel like Isaiah searching for the One who absconds, *Deus absconditus*. Now you see God, now you don’t.

We do know that in his relationships with people God places a premium on faith, which can only be exercised in circumstances that allow for doubt—circumstances such as God’s hiddenness. Jesus answered those who questioned God’s shyness and reticence with these words: “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” He added this somber warning, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” And later the apostle John wrote, “This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.”

If God merely wanted to make his existence known to every person on earth, God would not hide. However, the direct presence of God would inevitably overwhelm our freedom, with sight replacing faith. God wants instead a different kind of knowledge, a personal knowledge that requires a commitment from the one who seeks to know him.

My own understanding of God’s hiddenness traces back not to the childhood game of hide-and-seek but rather to my first visit to a natural history museum. I gawked at the huge stuffed grizzly bears and the woolly mammoths and the yellowed skeletons of whales and dinosaurs hanging from the ceiling. One exhibit, however, kept beckoning me: a display of animal camouflage. When I first walked past it, I saw side-by-side scenes of winter and summer foliage. Only when I returned and stared intently did I notice the animals hiding in the diorama: a ferret chasing a snowshoe hare in the winter scene, praying mantises, birds, and moths in the summer. A placard detailed how many animals were hidden, and I spent half the day lingering there, trying to locate them all.

Elsewhere I have told of what finally brought me to God: not the Bible or Christian literature or anyone’s sermons. I turned to God primarily because of my discovery of goodness and grace in the world: through nature, through classical music, through romantic love. Enjoying the gifts, I began to seek the giver; full of gratitude, I needed Someone to thank. Like the animals in the diorama, God had been there all the while, waiting to be noticed. Though I still had no proof, only clues, the clues led me to exercise faith.

One year I left a New Year’s Eve party shortly before midnight to get a jump on traffic. We had driven for two hours to attend the party in Colorado Springs and hoped to make it a few miles out from town before tipsy revelers joined the traffic stream. Unknown to me at the time, some hardy mountaineers have a tradition every New Year’s Eve. They stuff backpacks full of fireworks and hike through the snow and dark to the summit of Pike’s Peak. As I was driving along, suddenly, at the stroke of midnight, red, blue, and

yellow fireworks came shooting off the mountain. There was no sound because of the distance. The bits of light made up huge, gorgeous flowers that floated slowly and silently in the sky, illuminating behind them Pike's Peak itself, a snowy monument that filled our line of vision and dwarfed everything else in sight. It had been there all along, the mountain, but we had no eyes to see it.

"Surely the Lord was in this place, and I was not aware of it," Jacob declared. If we miss God's presence in the world, could it be that we have looked in the wrong places, or perhaps looked without seeing at the grace before our eyes?

God Is Gentle

I know no better way to convey this truth than by contrast. Mark 9 gives a vivid description of possession by an evil spirit, in the words of a distraught father who describes to Jesus his son's affliction:

Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not. . . . It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.

Recognizing Jesus, the spirit immediately flung the boy into one of his fits. I can easily picture this scene, for I have seen someone in the throes of a *grand mal* epileptic seizure—brain cells misfiring, muscles locked in premature rigor mortis, jaw violently clenched.

Contrast that scene with possession by the Holy Spirit. "Quench not the Spirit," Paul warns in one place; "grieve not the holy Spirit of God," he says in another. God humbles himself so deeply that he puts himself somehow at our mercy. Whereas an evil spirit throws a person into fire or water, creating a grotesque caricature of a human being, a sovereign God takes up residence in that same person and says, "Don't hurt me." You can only grieve, or hurt, someone who has emotions, who cares deeply.

I see the same gentleness and refusal to coerce in the life of God's Son. In dealing with people, he states the consequences of a choice, then hands the decision back to the other party. Jesus showed a fathomless respect for human freedom: even as people killed him he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Parents know the precarious balance between guiding and manipulating their children. It may be true that "Father knows best" and Mother knows even better. But the goal of parenthood is not to produce clones who replicate the lives of their parents, rather to produce mature adults who make their own choices. Some parents achieve the goal better than others. Our heavenly Father, it seems, "errs" on the side of human freedom, subjecting himself to our choices and working from within his creation rather than acting on it from outside.

This pattern may shed light on God's other personality traits. Why is God shy? Why does God hide? Why so gentle? God recognizes that *we* are the ones on the journey, not himself. The journey does not transpire like a treasure hunt, such that if we follow the instructions and look hard enough we will find the treasure. No, the journey itself is the goal. The very quest for God, our determined pursuit, changes us in the ways that matter most. The silence and darkness we encounter, the temptations, and even the sufferings can all contribute to God's stated goal of shaping us into persons more like he intended—more like his Son.

Coercion has never succeeded very well in remaking people, which is why few doctrinaire Marxists and fewer still doctrinaire Nazis remain in the world. Even Utopians have had to agree that human change occurs best from the inside out. That may explain why, as John V. Taylor says,

. . . [God's] ceaselessly repeated word to every detail of his creation is: "Choose! I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life. Stay as you are and drop out; change, however painfully, and move towards life." Whenever I learn a little more of the processes of creation I am amazed afresh at the unbelievable daring of the Creator Spirit who seems to gamble all the past gains on a new initiative, inciting his creatures to such crazy adventure and risk.

God's Presence Varies

"How faint the whisper we hear of him," said Job during the long period of God's silence. By the end of the book, he could have amended that to "How loud the roar we hear of him!" Within the pages of one book the same person experiences an overwhelming sense of God's presence and also God's absence.

I have mentioned believers such as Martin Marty and Frederick Buechner who report no unmistakable signs of God's presence. I could as easily have recounted the opposite pattern: Augustine's vision, or George Fox's or Julian of Norwich's, or any number of the visitations recorded in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The Bible reveals the same fluid pattern: Rather than hold up a model of presence for all to strive for, it presents a God who sometimes withdraws and sometimes comes close. In Solomon's day God descended regularly on the temple; in Hezekiah's day he quietly withdrew; in Jonah's day he pursued the prophet like a bloodhound.

Julian of Norwich experienced both the presence and absence of God in quick succession. Her seventh revelation tells of times of being "fulfilled with the everlasting sureness," which lasted but a little while, when she found herself "in heaviness, and weariness of my life, and irksomeness of myself, that scarcely I could have patience to live." Her spiritual moods rose and fell in seesaw fashion about twenty times, she said. I have learned one absolute principle in calculating God's presence or absence, and that is that I cannot. God, invisible, sovereign, who according to the psalmist "does whatever pleases him," sets the terms of relationship. As the theologian Karl Barth insisted so fiercely, God is *free*: free to reveal himself or conceal himself, to intervene or not intervene, to work within nature or outside it, to rule over the world or even to be despised and rejected by the world, to display himself or limit himself. Our own human freedom derives from a God who cherishes freedom.

I cannot control such a God. At best I can put myself in the frame to meet him. I can confess sin, remove hindrances, purify my life, wait expectantly and—perhaps hardest of all—seek solitude and silence. I offer no guaranteed method to obtain God's presence, for God alone governs that. Solitude and silence merely supply the state most conducive to attending to the still small voice of God. There is, however, a sure way to promote God's absence. C. S. Lewis sets it out clearly:

Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation. If you must read books, select them very carefully. But you'd be safer to stick to the papers. You'll find the advertisements helpful; especially those with a sexy or a snobbish appeal.

Lewis adds that he cannot give advice on pursuing God, having never had that experience. "It was the other way round; He was the hunter (or so it seemed to me) and I was the deer....But it is significant that this long-evaded encounter happened at a time when I was making a serious effort to obey my conscience."