

# YOUR GOD IS STILL TOO SMALL

## *Introduction*

When you think of God, what do you envision? Is he an old man, sitting in a rocker, looking down on earth with an occasional wagging finger over some particularly egregious sin? Is he some supercomputer making calculations and keeping tabs on the universe? Do you consider him a her? Is God such an unknown that you envision nothing? Maybe instead of envisioning God, you envision his traits. Is he kind? Loving? Does he have a short fuse? Is he moody or easily angered? What is your role and relationship with God? Do you ignore him? Do you fear him? Is your relationship strained? Is he your harbor in the storms of life? Is he the kind and loving parent who is “always there” for you?

In 1952, the British clergyman J. B. Phillips published the Christian classic *Your God is Too Small*. This masterpiece was penned both to grow Christian believers and to aid the skeptic. Three decades ago, the book impressed me as a young man. It still impresses me today. The book is relatively short, and it covers subjects in an abbreviated fashion, yet it is not unsound in its brevity. It is a worthy read, fit for contemplation to give a fuller consideration of its major points.

Phillips wrote at a time when the world was upside down. Just seven years earlier, the world finished a devastating world war, and the post-war cleanup unveiled attempted genocide of the Jewish people that bordered on the unbelievable. Science had provided the war with the annihilation and residual radiation from two exploded atomic bombs. Propelling the world into the nuclear age, splitting the atom changed the profile of war and armed conflict in ways that threatened every nation and even humanity itself.

In the midst of this time, Phillips found that the average person’s mental horizons had “expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries.” Many people, he found, had not “found a God big enough for modern needs.”<sup>1</sup> Phillips’s concerns included those who went to church and worshipped, adhering to the Christian faith, and also extended to those people who had no room for faith, at least as they saw among those attending church. Phillips wrote to educate, to instill faith, and to encourage people living in a new age and world to better understand God.

Sixty years later, the world has changed even more, and scientific knowledge has grown exponentially. While Phillips’s book still speaks loudly to readers today, the state of the world and the church cries out for some additional material. Had he not passed away in 1983, he surely would be the one to write a sequel. Without

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his deft insight and pen, it falls upon those of us with lesser status and ability to venture forth in his tradition and write the next volume in his manner of thought. It is in tribute to him, and standing on his broad shoulders, that we offer this volume. Science has advanced, the world has gotten smaller, and we find that all too often in the beliefs of many, God is *still* too small.

In this book, we begin in the introduction by reviewing the material of Phillips's volume. This serves as an abbreviated reminder for those who have read his book. For those who have not yet read his classic, this is simply an appetizer until they have a chance to feast upon its marvelous insights. Phillips divided his book into two sections. In the first section, he took a "Destructive" approach to his subject, trying to educate people on views of God he deemed "too small." Phillips set out seventeen different "small" and inadequate conceptions of God. Some of these inadequate views are mental impressions and beliefs about God. Others are more practical effects of belief where people's lives reflect a core belief of God in ways that are too small. The second part of the book was "Constructive." In this section, he built stage by stage a reasoned understanding of God, one both understandable in light of knowledge and one consistent with the teachings of Scripture.

## **DESTRUCTIVE IDEAS OF GOD**

Phillips applied shorthand labels to the inadequate ideas of God that he found frequently in the minds and lives of others. These labels help our understanding of the beliefs as well as our ability to remember them. We will review each one.

### *1. "The Resident Policeman."*

These people equate God with their consciences. God is the equivalent of a moral policeman residing in the mind of each person. When that voice inside of them affirms or causes guilt over something, these people consider that to be God. Phillips pointed out how conscience can certainly give some insight into the moral world in which we live; yet, making conscience God is both wrong and dangerous. Common sense shows that no one's conscience is an infallible guide. In fact, what might truly violate one person's conscience might find easy affirmation in another's, depending upon one's upbringing, *etc.* In one's own lifetime, conscience frequently changes on some matters. Does that mean that God changed or that morality changed? Of course not! It is part of maturing and learning. The conscience can also be altered by brainwashing, poor education, and other indoctrinations. Atrocities like the WWII German attempted annihilation of Jews show the easy perversion of the conscience.

2. *“The Parental Hangover.”*

Here, Phillips wrote of the tendency of people to understand God by relating him to their earthly fathers, a dangerous and “small” view of God in two different ways. First, for those who have tyrannical, indulgent, or unjust fathers, this causes an image of God as a fearful being who is both unapproachable and difficult to worship. Phillips quickly disabused the notion that God is any such Father. The Biblical analogy of God as Father is meant to stir up a realization that God has an intimate love for and interest in his people, just as a good father does for his son. Phillips’s second concern was rooted in the teaching of some secular psychologists that a Christian belief in God is rooted in a regressive desire to be a dependent child clinging to some idea of a parent. This is not what Jesus meant by telling his disciples to become like little children. He wanted them to repudiate the sham, the compromise, and the cynicism of adulthood. It was not an instruction to romp around in spiritual diapers.

3. *“The Grand Old Man.”*

Phillips traced this view to childhood, where one’s superiors are always “old.” He reasoned that from this notion came the view of God as some old gentleman in heaven. Damage from this view is the tendency to view God as not simply old, but also old-fashioned, with inadequate energy and contemporary awareness to operate satisfactorily in the complexities of present or future. It creates the ultimate generation gap! Once this view is placed front and center, the absurdity of it becomes obvious. God is the Ancient of Days, but he is in no way out of date. We worship a God of history, of the atomic age, and of any age to come. God makes contemporary seem out of date!

4. *“The Meek and Mild God.”*

With an accusation that Jesus as “mild” came from the need to rhyme the word “child” in song or verse, Phillips contrasted “mild” with a true reflection on Jesus. If someone who is “mild” lets “sleeping dogs lie,” avoids “trouble whenever possible,” has a placid temperament, and “is a bit of a nonentity, both uninspired and uninspiring,” then Jesus was far from mild! Jesus cleaned the temple, overturning the moneychangers’ tables. He confronted the power brokers of his day. He made choices that placed him in very precarious positions and ultimately walked knowingly into his own death. Phillips believed that calling Jesus “meek and mild” allowed “mild” to color people’s perceptions of what it meant for Jesus to be “meek.”

Christ might well be called “meek,” in the sense of being selfless and humble and utterly devoted to what He considered right, whatever the personal cost; but “mild,” never!<sup>2</sup>

Phillips pointed out how children who grow up with this picture of Jesus can reach a point where they feel they have “outgrown him” and find him a childish concept not worthy of an adult mind. In a related way, the adult might also consider God as some sentimental, milquetoast, “whose emotional equipment is less developed than his own.” This God, who is known to be “love,” then cheapens one’s view of love if love is viewed as similarly “mild.”

5. *“Absolute Perfection.”*

Although Phillip’s language does not easily transport into our era here, the concept certainly does. Phillips calls this wrong concept of God, “the God of one-hundred percent.” Phillips is not concerned that we think God is perfect. His concern is thinking that God requires perfection of us. This leads to guilt and misery as one fails to appreciate that God is at work in us to bring us closer to perfection, but perfection is not achieved in this life.

6. *“Heavenly Bosom.”*

This concept of God makes religious faith a form of “psychological escapism.” Phillips pointed to the life that deliberately seeks a hideaway in the bosom of God until the storm and stress of life pass, as one of emotional immaturity and childish regression.

Those who are actually, though unconsciously, looking for a father- or mother-substitute can, by constant practice, readily imagine just such a convenient and comfortable god. They may call him “Jesus” and even write nice little hymns about him, but he is not the Jesus of the Gospels, who certainly would have discouraged any sentimental flying to his bosom and often told men to go out and do most difficult and arduous things.<sup>3</sup>

He contrasted that with mature believers who find God as their strength and refuge in times of difficulty. The mature believer can find strength and refreshment in God so they are equipped and ready to go out into a world of distress and handle difficulties with the enablement of God.

7. *“God-in-a-Box.”*

God-in-a-Box was Phillips’s expression for hard-core denominationalism. People who exhibit a spirit of “churchiness” in a way that says,

If...you will jump through our particular hoop or sign on our particular dotted line then we will introduce you to God. But if not, there’s no God for you.<sup>4</sup>

The concern was that people outside the churches would see this attitude and it would set them off from God. Phillips carefully delineated the propriety of people’s taste and temperament taking them to different churches, from those who claim an exclusive on God, asserting that he could be found nowhere else.

8. *“God as Managing Director.”*

With this idea, Phillips takes to task those who hold a view of God that they might think is “very lofty and splendid, but which proves paradoxically enough on examination to be yet another of the ‘too small’ ideas.” This is the idea that the God behind such a vast and deep universe could not possibly “be interested in the lives of the minute specks of consciousness which exist on this insignificant planet.” This is the person who comments, “I cannot imagine such a tremendous God.” Phillips points out that this does not prove that God is incapable of such care. It really proves simply that the mind of man is not capable of such! This person is modeling God upon what we know of man. Such a view of God is way too small. How dare we assume that he is a simple magnification of human characteristics!

9. *“Second-hand God.”*

Phillips recognized that many base their view of God on what they pick up in life as sensible about divinity, *i.e.*, what seems fair, right, good, true, *etc.* This sensing and musing about God is only as good as our observations and knowledge. Of course, every reasonable person recognizes that inherent biases, sentimentalities, and faulty ideas are in all people. That makes any such person’s second-hand view of God subject to the same limitations and faults. This is a God who is too small.

Phillips then details three ways that writers of fiction can influence people who hold this second-hand view of God. First, some writers ignore God and religious issues. This produces a reflection of life in the writing with strong

character development and thrilling plot lines. We meet charming people who seem to handle any problem with grace and dignity. We also meet evil people exuding lust, greed, cruelty, and more, without a hint of guilt or negative repercussions. All of these people live these lives with no reference to God, judgment, reward, or any role that God may play in the world. A second way fiction writers can play a role in imparting a faulty second-hand view of God is by willfully misrepresenting religion, Christians, and the church. The idea that every minister is corrupt and that believers are either hypocrites or saps is found regularly in many works of fiction. The third way Phillips finds fiction disturbing is in its representations that faith centers on the manipulation of Providence. Because the author gets to play the role of God in the composition, one can see manipulations of circumstances that are mysterious, outrageous, just or unjust. It leaves the audience seeing all as a simple twist of fate, rather than something in which God has a role.

10. *“Perennial Grievance.”*

This view of God finds him a disappointment. Whether one had unanswered prayer or suffered an undeserved disaster, the idea that God was trusted, but let one down is the undercurrent for the “Perennial Grievance” image of God. Phillips adds that these people,

...are wanting a world in which good is rewarded and evil punished—as in a well-run kindergarten.<sup>5</sup>

Phillips terms this view as an inadequate one for God “in the highest degree.” Who could *really* worship or serve one they begrudged? At its core, this view fails to account for the way God works. Of course, God disappoints the man who uses God as a convenience or prop for man’s plans. But, God never disappoints the person whose desire is cooperating with God’s plans and purposes. God’s plans and purposes unfold in a world where he allows free choice. There are centuries of billions of people choosing to please themselves rather than the Designer, and this selfishness has infected the whole world, and all in it. God withholds his hand and allows his plan of free will to work out until the curtain falls and full and final justice comes.

11. *“Jesus as a Pale Galilean.”*

Phillips draws this label from the poem “Hymn to Proserpine” by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909). The poem expresses the lament of a Roman

chagrined over the passing of the classical world at the hands of a rising Christianity:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean,  
The world has grown grey from Thy Breath.

For these people, God is an entirely negative force, a killjoy who supplies his people with prohibitions rather than vitality and courage. People are stunted, pale and weak rather than growing with color and vitality of life. Phillips finds this problem fostered by a manipulative use of isolated Biblical texts or by a morbid conscience finding some spiritual masochistic joy in being nothing but a “broken and emptied vessel for the Master’s use made meet.” This view of God is not large enough to see that anything he allows to be broken, he rebuilds into something more suitable for his use, imbued with joy and vitality, living life to its fullest!

12. *“Projected Image.”*

Drawing his label from the way a movie is projecting a thumbnail size filmstrip onto a massive screen, Phillips references people who see God simply as a magnification of their own ideas, values, and emotions. What psychologists call “projection” when it occurs among people, Phillips found occurring among people and their view of God. He noted how the harsh and puritanical society taught a hard and puritanical god. The laid back and lax society taught a god more like Santa Claus, with presents at the ready. Any view of God that is simply a projection of oneself may seem “right,” but winds up being a worship of oneself, not of God. While this may help in the self-esteem category, it falls woefully short when God is needed for assisting in a moral victory or some other way where self falls short.

13. *“God in a Hurry.”*

Phillips presented the final five views in an abbreviated fashion under the category of “Assorted” views of God that are too small. The first was “God in a Hurry.” Here, Phillips contrasted the religious fervor that frequently drives people to immediacy at the expense of tension and anxiety rather than remembering that Jesus was never slave to a clock, God is never in a hurry, and the poise of Christ has a lesson to teach. God must never be confused with a whirling dervish or frenzied person.

14. *“God for the Elite.”*

Phillips noted how the human characteristic of creating classes of people can permeate the church and produce a small view of God. If we think that God has a special place for the super-spiritual among us, as if there is some special class of mystic or mega-holy, then we fail to see that God makes all his children brothers and sisters of equal standing. God’s goal is not to produce a special class of people who sit in a study contemplating mystic visions. God has a downright and practical goal of growing each person into a fruitful branch of the tree.

15. *“God of Bethel.”*

These people carry this label because they are more comfortable with a God of the Old Testament rather than a God of the new. It is a view of God that is too small because it reduces him to a contractual partner, with religion as the contract. As long as people obey certain rules, then God will be faithful to look after them and their interests. This makes God and life a cut and dried formula. If I do thus and so, then God will do this; if I do something different, then God will alter his action accordingly. Phillips notes that there is more to God than was taught in the Old Testament. Jesus was (and is) God. He shows us a bigger God than we tend to see in the Old Testament only. It is not that God changed, but it is that God was more fully revealed!

16. *“God without Godhead.”*

This more modern conception of God is often deemed “enlightened.” It depersonalizes God and he becomes “the Ultimate Bundle of Highest Values.” This makes God simply whatever we think are virtues and the highest values, just raised to the *n*th degree.

17. *“God by Any Other Name.”*

Phillips adds a last category of those who place great value (“worship”) in things other than God. Whether money, power, security, relationships, success, or something similar, these people have a misguided worship instinct!

Having deconstructed these seventeen ideas of God that are each too small, Phillips spends the second part of the book reconstructing a Biblical image of God. As Lipscomb University professor John York is fond of saying to his theological

students, “It is not adequate to deconstruct our wrong ideas. We *must* join that to a construction of valid ideas.”

## CONSTRUCTIVE IDEAS OF GOD

Phillips wrote this section not simply quoting Scripture and saying, “Thus says the Lord,” but by weaving together common sense arguments to the ideas given in Scripture. For example, Phillips began by walking through the appeal of God being “unfocused” on people and the world. It seems to fit with the limitations of the human mind. Certainly *we*, if we were God, would not be able to focus on each person fully and deliberately. This becomes a dilemma for modern man. How can God be the infinite greatness he must be to be God, and yet still focus on us? The vastness of the universe tends to depersonalize God into a vague abstraction.

Yet that is not the internal experience of a person. Internally, one senses consciousness and a realness that goes beyond the atoms and molecules of existence. There is an appreciation of beauty (with a touch of melancholy added); there is an attraction to goodness, and there is a caring for “truth.” These traits give a further clue to reality of existence and the reality of what God entails.

For people to envision God in these ways is difficult. We cannot visualize *values*; we visualize *things*. We can see *something* that is beautiful, but cannot visualize the concept of “beauty.” We can see a thing that is truthful, but not “truth” as a value. We visualize good things or good deeds, but do not “see” goodness. For mankind to see God, who is beauty, truth, and good, is no simple matter! It occurs principally because God became a real man.

As a man, God showed himself in ways we would never see otherwise. God (Jesus) was not a super-mystic holy man who seemed ethereal and otherworldly. Nor was Jesus the same run-of-the-mill person we find on the street. He was a real man, but one of truth, goodness, and beauty (not beauty of appearance, but of character). Jesus exhibited the actions that correspond to those traits:

- He challenged the current values of those around him.
- He probed for people’s motives over simple focus on their actions.
- He insisted on real human values in the ways we treat each other.
- He endorsed the search for truth.
- He endorsed a love for all people.
- He suffered conflict with stale and false religion.
- He called people to God.

Phillips went on to contrast what is wrong with the world with the solutions offered in Christ. He set forth the need to overcome sin's guilt, and found in the work (sacrifice) the sufficient and just solution to excuse true moral guilt. The continuing work of Christ and his followers to combat the pain, disease, evil, and injustices of this world is one that lasts a lifetime. It is a job that requires a full God, as a small one will never be up to the task.

In his second part, Phillips does an admirable job of developing a reasonable and Biblical view of God, the world, and the life of a believer. He did not go into any great depth, but he put forward the basic ideas that are worthy of greater reflection and contemplation. They set forward God as great and grand, a God who is not simply a port where we hide in a storm, but a God who teaches us how to endure the storms around us with confidence and joy in his ability to quell those storms in his good time.

Our goal in this “semi-sequel” to Phillips will be targeted in a different fashion. Rather than divide the series into two parts, one deconstructing modern misconceptions of God and one constructing more Biblical concepts, we will organize our efforts differently. We will consider, in individual chapters, the ways the modern world can mold an incorrect view of an inadequate God, and then consider what we must do to confront that false view. We will consider astrophysics, cellular biology, computer technology, social networking, and the modern challenges of faith. Please join our journey as we grow in our understanding of God and say to ourselves and others *Your God is Still Too Small!*

#### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> Phillips, J. B., *Your God is Too Small*, (Touchstone Edition 2004), at 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, at 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, at 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, at 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, at 50.