

# God

## DISCOVERING THE DIVINE

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# How to Use This Study Guide

FIVE PERSONAL OR SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS

**SESSION 1:** *What Is God Like?*

**SESSION 2:** *How Can I Heal My Image of God?*

**SESSION 3:** *What Does God Want From Me?*

**SESSION 4:** *How Am I Found By God?*

**SESSION 5:** *How Do I Move From Fear to Faith?*

*This guide is designed to be used easily by individuals or by a group.*

**AS AN INDIVIDUAL** Set aside some quiet time to read through each section of the guide. Underline or jot down (in the margins or in a journal) any thoughts that strike you as particularly important for you. Choose one or two of the suggested reflection questions and write down your thoughts.

**AS A GROUP** Whether you are meeting in person or over the internet, *feel free to adapt the following general guidelines to your specific setting and participants' needs.*

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**Gather** » Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves.

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**Read** » Ask the participants to read the material being covered before you gather (perhaps using the suggestions for individuals given above). Now, invite each member to share what struck them as most important in the text.

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**Discuss and pray** » Encourage participants to choose a question or prompt from the text that speaks to them. Allow time for participants to share their responses with the group, and to pray about them, if desired.

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**Finish** » At the end of each session, ask participants to share something they learned from the session. Close with prayer.

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he moment you ask the question “How can I find God?” is the very moment you have been found by God. The problem is that we do not believe it is true, so we go searching, as though God is in hiding somewhere and needs to be found. Finding God is really just about awakening to the truth that God has found you.

Addressing God in a meditation, Henri Nouwen writes, “Your heart is open to receive anyone with total, unrestricted love. For anyone who wants to come to you, there is room.”<sup>1</sup> Nouwen wants us to realize that finding God involves keeping ourselves open to the precious divinity revealed to us. We are not to ignore God when he makes himself known to us, Nouwen is saying to us. We are to act when God’s precious presence comes into view for us. The Scriptures back him up in this claim.

For instance, there is a parable in Scripture in which Jesus tells about a treasure hidden in a field. A man goes out to plow his field. The passage is very short, just one verse, so it lends itself to richly imaginative reading: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Matthew 13:44). I like to picture this story in my mind using imaginative liberty in line with Nouwen’s writings. Historians of the ancient Middle East remind us that it wasn’t uncommon for people to bury their savings for protection. But sometimes people would be forced to leave their land with their treasure still buried, unknown to the public. It’s difficult to verify, but there was apparently a law that if you owned a plot of land and found a treasure buried there, then it was yours to keep. So if you were a sharecropper, it would be wise to keep your eyes open for a buried treasure. I imagine the farmer as a sharecropper plowing in another man’s field. *Clink*, his plow hits something. The man stops, begins digging around, and guess what? There’s a treasure chest there! He breaks open the latch. Unbelievable! Inside are gold coins, all stacked up.

The man looks around to see if anyone is watching, because he doesn’t own the field. He’s very shrewd. So he covers it back up and reburies it. As

the parable goes, “When a man found it, he hid it again.” The man decides to sell everything he has in order to buy the field because of the value of the treasure he found. Now he’s overjoyed, because the treasure is his.

One way to look at this parable is to say that we’re the man. We stumble upon the treasure, which is the love of God in Jesus. We go and we sell everything we have—all our personal wishes and dreams—to follow Jesus.

But there is another, deeper way of seeing the parable. What if the man plowing in the field is God? And what if you are the treasure? “Come on!” you say. “That’s not the way it is supposed to go.” Well, elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus tells another story about a man who went and scattered seed in a field. And the man in the story was God. Another story in Luke tells of a man who left ninety-nine sheep and went to look for the one lost one. Who was that shepherd? It was God in Jesus. Still another story tells of a woman who lost her valuable coin. She swept all over the house and turned everything upside down to find it because it meant so much to her. Who was the woman in the parable? It was God in Jesus.

What if you’re the treasure in the field and God came along to dig you up out of the dirt, to buy that field, to bring you back home, to polish you up, and to use you for the purposes for which you were designed? Is it hard to think of yourself as such a treasure? Well, it isn’t hard for Jesus to think of you that way.

Nouwen says that God is offering a way to find a home designed specifically for us. This is the path to find God. It is not a path of our searching to find a hidden God. God has already done the search. For us, it is the path of awakening to the presence of the One who gave everything, namely, his Son, to bring us home.

**HENRI NOUWEN** was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into dozens of languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed on page 32, all of which are available at [www.henrinouwen.org](http://www.henrinouwen.org).

# What Is God Like?

SPEAKING “HEART TO HEART” TO GOD, NOUWEN WRITES, “YOU WANT TO DRAW ALL PEOPLE TO YOURSELF AND OFFER THEM A HOME WHERE EVERY HUMAN DESIRE IS MET, EVERY HUMAN LONGING COMES TO REST AND EVERY HUMAN NEED IS SATISFIED.”<sup>2</sup>

I once had a conversation with a friend who suggested that atheists have more in common with Jesus than do many Christians. I asked, “Is this because there are many atheists who are good and kind to others, and many Christians who are cruel and judgmental?”

The problem with this comparison, however, is that Christianity is not a moralistic religion. Some people find the grace of Christ in the midst of moral despair, and it takes a long time for one’s character to transform. There may be more in common between Jesus and some atheists with regard to morality, but not with regard to worldview and faith. Nouwen would say Christianity is not about morality, but about unconditional love.

Clearly, I was building my counterargument in my head, until my friend surprised me with his answer to my question. He said, “No. The reason atheists have more in common with Jesus than most Christians is that atheists and Jesus both reject the kind of god that does not exist—an always angry and unloving god.” Suddenly, I was compelled. He went on to make the case that many Christians functionally believe (or act as though) God is harsh and judgmental. This explains why they behave in harsh and judgmental ways toward others, because they’re projecting their image of God into the world in which they live. And both atheists and Jesus reject such a notion of God. A harsh and judgmental God is not what we are seeking in our quest, Nouwen would say, but a compassionate and caring Friend.

The point is that we must not assume that because we profess our faith in the God of the Bible and Christianity, we are not still influenced by

counter images to the One True God we are seeking to know, love, trust and follow. Therefore, it is wise and helpful to our spiritual lives to take time to consider the character of God—what God is like and what God is *not* like.

### **For Reflection**

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1. What makes for a “good” Christian? Can someone be a “good” atheist?
2. What are the three most meaningful attributes of God for you?
3. What are some negative images of God that the world has thrust upon us?

### **For Action**

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*Take time each day this week to pray for the atheists in your life and in the world. Pray for God’s blessing and favor on them.*



NOUWEN SAYS, “THE TRULY GOOD NEWS IS THAT GOD IS NOT A DISTANT GOD, A GOD TO BE FEARED AND AVOIDED, A GOD OF REVENGE, BUT A GOD WHO IS MOVED BY OUR PAINS AND PARTICIPATES IN THE FULLNESS OF THE HUMAN STRUGGLE....God is a compassionate God. This means, first of all, that he is a God who has chosen to be God-with-us....As soon as we call God ‘God-with-us,’ we enter into a new relationship of intimacy with him. By calling him Immanuel, we recognize that he has committed himself to live in solidarity with us, to share our joys and pains, to defend and protect us, and to suffer all of life with us. The God-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom, and even, more intimately, our helper, our shepherd, our love. We will never really know God as a compassionate God if we do not understand with our heart and mind that ‘he lived among us’ (John 1:14).”<sup>3</sup>

Henri Nouwen grew up in a joyous home in the Netherlands with two loving and supportive parents and all the freedom to enjoy a happy

childhood while developing a large imagination for life and God. Nouwen acknowledged that this upbringing for which he was grateful, allowed him to more easily imagine God as a kind, loving, and generous God than people who grew up with more challenging families of origin. Nevertheless, Nouwen faced spiritual challenges that affected his image of God, causing him to need to find healing himself. Ultimately, Nouwen came to see in the deepest of ways that Jesus offered us the face of God. Jesus helps us to see what God is truly like, namely that God is near and that God is love.

First, to say that God is near is a statement of both proximity and empathy. God, in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, has come to be with us. In John 20:21-22, when the risen Christ appeared to the disciples, he said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

God is near to us in proximity through the Spirit, and God is near to us in his love. The entire story of the Scriptures is the story of a God who is in constant pursuit of humanity, from the moment when Adam and Eve hid themselves in shame in the Garden to the climax of the narrative when God comes as Immanuel, “God-with-us,” in Jesus. Then in Revelation, John writes, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Revelation 21:3). God is near to us because God loves us.

That is the message that Nouwen came to realize and wished to share with a world that so often considers itself unloved. Even for those of us who believe that God is near, sometimes we experience God as distant, and we feel God’s absence. These are times when it is helpful to remember what we truly believe about God, so that we can endure the valleys of our experiences and learn the spiritual lessons that we can only learn in the valleys.

### **For Reflection**

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1. If someone were to ask you, “What is God like?” how would you answer?
2. Thinking back to when you were a teenager, how has your image of God changed since then?

3. In what ways have you experienced both the absence and the presence of God in your life?

### **For Action**

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*This week, pay attention to messages about God that you hear and see in media, entertainment, culture, conversation and throughout your daily activities. Make a list of some images of God that you picked up, whether subtly or overtly, and consider how you might offer a corrective to those images in light of the character of Jesus.*



“KNOWING GOD’S HEART MEANS CONSISTENTLY, RADICALLY, AND VERY CONCRETELY TO ANNOUNCE AND REVEAL THAT GOD IS LOVE AND ONLY LOVE, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begin to invade the human soul this is not something that comes from God. This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits,” Nouwen writes.<sup>4</sup>

One of the great paintings that was helpful for Nouwen in forming his robust image of God was Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. In his book of the same name, Nouwen drew attention to the distinct characteristics of each of the father’s hands. One was feminine, one masculine. This helped Nouwen to see God as both loving Mother and Father: “He holds, and she caresses. He confirms, and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present.”<sup>5</sup> This image allowed Nouwen to form a fuller image of God, whereby the strength and compassion of God could be held together in paradox.

Drawing from the Letter of 1 John, Nouwen also talks about the unconditional love of God as “God’s first love”—that before we loved, God “first loved us” (1 John 4:19). This is in contrast to all the “second loves”—people who try to love us but fail, leaving us disappointed or sometimes even hurt. Nouwen suggests that the second loves—the imperfect love of our parents, teachers, friends, coaches, and neighbors—are

only able to be a partial reflection of the “first love,” the unconditional love of God that is never fading or shifting or fleeting. This means that though we need the love of people in our lives, we can accept their limitations, too, for we can only find our deepest need for love in the heart of Jesus.

### **For Reflection**

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1. Is it difficult or easy for you to imagine God as both perfect Mother and Father? Why?
2. If God is loving and compassionate, how can God also be strong and powerful?
3. How can the idea of “first” and “second” loves help you in the most important relationships in your life?

### **For Action**

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*In a journal, looking back on pivotal seasons in your life, spend some time reflecting on the ways in which God has been like a compassionate mother and/or a guiding father to you.*