

None Like Him

*10 Ways God Is Different from Us
(and Why That's a Good Thing)*

Jen Wilkin

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*None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different from Us
(and Why That's a Good Thing)*

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Contents

Introduction: On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman	9
1 Infinite	15
<i>The God of No Limits</i>	
2 Incomprehensible.....	31
<i>The God of Infinite Mystery</i>	
3 Self-Existent	43
<i>The God of Infinite Creativity</i>	
4 Self-Sufficient	57
<i>The God of Infinite Provision</i>	
5 Eternal	69
<i>The God of Infinite Days</i>	
6 Immutable	83
<i>The God of Infinite Sameness</i>	
7 Omnipresent.....	93
<i>The God of Infinite Place</i>	
8 Omniscient.....	107
<i>The God of Infinite Knowledge</i>	

9	Omnipotent.....	123
	<i>The God of Infinite Power</i>	
10	Sovereign.....	139
	<i>The God of Infinite Rule</i>	
	Conclusion: Fearful and Wonderful	153
	Notes	159
	Scripture Index.....	161

Introduction

On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to
be praised.

Proverbs 31:30

If you had told me five years ago that I would one day write a book for Christian women that led off with a quote from Proverbs 31, I probably would have punched you in the face. Arguably no chapter in Scripture is more over-referenced when it comes to addressing women, but stick with me as we teeter on the brink of cloying triteness. For the purpose of the business at hand, I think Proverbs 31:30 deserves a second look—for what it says about women, and more, for what it says about God.

In my mother's house hang two small, oval portraits of a man and a woman dating back to the late 1700s. They are David and Nancy Coy of Homer, New York, my great-grandmother's

On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman

great-grandparents on my mother's side. We refer to them affectionately as "the ancestors," upstanding citizens of Congregationalist and Presbyterian stock, whose very frowns seem intent on keeping civilization from faltering. I take from their frozen expressions that life was not easy for them. Nancy, in particular, wears the look of a woman who doesn't get the joke. One suspects that if the artist had broadened his scope to include her torso, we would find her hands death-gripping a worn copy of the KJV. Like the portraits of other women of her time period, she is the very embodiment of the image we conjure when we hear the phrase "God-fearing woman." To call someone that today would sound archaic, maybe even tongue-in-cheek, but in Nancy's day it would have been recognized as high praise, a direct reference to Proverbs 31:30.

Today if we wanted to praise a woman as godly we would probably say something like, "She is so in love with Jesus," or, "She has such a deep walk with the Lord." The stereotypical portrait of this woman would be a soft-focus stock photo involving a field, filtered sunlight, out-flung arms, and a beatific smile, a little like a still shot of Julie Andrews from that opening scene in *The Sound of Music*. It's not a bad way to picture godliness, but it is quite a contrast to Nancy. And it leaves me wondering, in deference to Nancy, if there isn't some room for us modern women to ask what has happened to our idea of being a "God-fearing woman." I'm not suggesting Nancy knew a better version. I'm actually wondering if a more accurate conception of a God-fearing woman lives somewhere between a solemn scowl and a saccharine smile.

A somewhat less-than-shocking confession at this point: If I had to choose a verse from the Bible that has impacted me the most, it wouldn't be found in chapter 31 of Proverbs. It

would be Psalm 111:10. I came across it during my early twenties, a time during which I sensed I desperately needed to grow in wisdom but lacked a clear idea of where to start. Should I study theology? Get a mentor? Memorize Scripture? My faith at that time was primarily shaped by a feeling: my deep love of God. But I knew I needed wisdom about how to follow the God I said I loved. And one day in my reading, there was Psalm 111:10 answering my question of where to begin in a most unexpected way:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

I had to read it several times to let it sink in. The wisdom I longed for started *where*? Of all the possible origin points for wisdom, *fear* of the Lord was not one I would have come up with on my own. This was not a verse that made me want to cue the music, fling out my arms, and twirl in a field. The God of my church upbringing was a snuggly Daddy-God, one who I pictured to be much like my gentle and deeply affectionate earthly father. The concept of fearing God was foreign to me. How could the path to wisdom have as its starting point the fear of the Lord? Scanning the verse, my eyes kept trying to replace the word *fear* with *love*. Shouldn't the *love* of the Lord be the beginning of wisdom? How could the Bible say in one breath that perfect love casts out fear and then turn around and say that fear was the first step toward wisdom?

My conception of God was that he was approachable and accessible, the God that the Lord's Prayer endearingly refers to as "Our Father." And he is that. He is mercifully and gloriously that Father. But what the fear of the Lord acknowledges is that he is not *only* that. He is also "in heaven," with a name that is hallowed above all others. He is both a God who is near to us

On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman

and a God who transcends. The fear of the Lord comprehends the fact that the Father we are taught to call “ours” is also the Lord of the universe, enthroned between the cherubim, doing as he pleases among the nations.

Not all of us grew up with a snuggly earthly dad, much less a concept of an approachable Daddy-God. Despite knowing the grace of salvation, many of us still suspect that God (like Nancy) is perpetually scowling reproachfully in our direction. But the Bible paints for us a picture of a God who neither scowls nor coddles, a God who is both “Our Father” and “in heaven” in perfect balance. Finding that balance requires gaining a good working definition for how Psalm 111:10 uses the word *fear*. And for that, we can turn to the book of Hebrews.

The author of Hebrews takes care to distinguish between the fear of God’s consuming wrath and the fear of God’s holiness. Both may cause us to tremble, but only the second causes us to worship and repent. Because of Christ, you and I do not come cowering to fearsome, thundering Mount Sinai; instead we come expectantly to glorious, approachable Mount Zion (Heb. 12:18–24). We are exhorted to respond to this God by offering him “acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (vv. 28–29). Worshipful reverence and awe, not cowering dread, define a right fear of the Lord.

The worshipful reverence and awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

When we fear the Lord rightly, we do so not as those who are terrified of him. Christ, our Mediator, assures us that we may approach the throne of God with confidence. We do not tremble as the demons do; they rightly fear the wrath of God. Rather, we tremble as those who understand that God’s wrath

On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman

toward us is satisfied at the cross. When we fear God rightly, we recognize him for who he truly is: a God of no limits, and therefore, utterly unlike anyone or anything we know. This is the start of becoming wise.

But consider the inverted message of Psalm 111:10. Not only is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom, *the fear of man is the beginning of folly*. This is the dual exhortation of Proverbs 31:30 that we need so desperately to understand:

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain [the fear of man is
the beginning of folly]
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised [the
fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom].

When we lose sight of the majesty of God, we invariably fill the gap in our vision with the fable of the majesty of someone else. We revere a spouse or a leader. We worship our children or a friend. We even give reverence and awe to ourselves. And this is complete folly. Not only is it unwise to give our worship to someone other than God, it is the very definition of irrationality. And it's an exhausting business.

So this is a book that hopes to reclaim the idea of the “God-fearing woman” from yellowed portraits in antique oval frames, as well as from the soft-filtered script-adorned frames of Instagram. In the pages that follow, I want us to consider the majesty of a limitless God. I want us to meditate on his perfections so that they become to us the most rational object of our reverence and awe. And along the way, I want us to stare down our tendency to ask others and even ourselves to be what only God is.

Life is too short and too precious to spend fearing the wrong things in the wrong ways. I propose we learn holy fear for a God like no other. Only then will our fear of man be

On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman

put to flight, our self-adulation be laid to rest, and our hearts be turned toward worship. I want us to become *God-fearing* women in the truest sense of the word, to take our stand in gladness at the foot of Mount Zion, offering true worship to our Father in heaven. And in so doing, we'll make a beginning at becoming wise.

Infinite

The God of No Limits

Lord, we adore thy vast designs,
Th' obscure abyss of Providence,
Too deep to sound with mortal lines,
Too dark to view with feeble sense.

Isaac Watts

On the day I was born, the doctor who delivered me inscribed my birth records with a firm hand: seven pounds, eleven ounces, twenty-one inches. It was the first legally attested evidence that I was not God.

I would contribute ample proof to that effect in the ensuing years, but during the earliest moments of my life on February 4, 1969, well before I formed my first rebellious thought, uttered my first defiant syllable, or took my first disobedient step, the chasm between who God is and who I am had

None Like Him

already been firmly established by the simple fact that I was measurable.

Any discussion of how God is not like us must begin with an acknowledgment that we are measurable and he is not. God is infinite, unbound by limits. He defies measurement of any kind. His limitlessness underlies all of his attributes; his power, knowledge, love, and mercy are not merely great, but they are infinitely so, measurelessly so. No one can place any aspect of who God is on a scale or against a yardstick.

This makes the task of writing a book about his attributes particularly daunting. One of my favorite hymns speaks to the measurelessness of just one of God's attributes: his love. The hymnwriter reflects on the futility of trying to capture it:

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.¹

I'm a feeble scribe working with scant ink and a very small scroll. And my task is to share at least a few meager insights about ten of God's attributes. Ten. I have never been more aware of my limits. But I want to do my part in this ongoing effort to describe the Indescribable. Faithful writers have done so for me. Stephen Charnock, Arthur Pink, A. W. Tozer, and R. C. Sproul have all explored the limitless character of God to my great benefit, and to lengths that I am not competent to go. But I hope in these pages to take the lofty view of God these writers have illuminated and ask a critical question:

“How should the knowledge that God is _____ change the way I live?” What measurable change should occur as a result of meditating on God’s immeasurable attributes, as described in the Bible?

Why We Love to Measure

We limited humans are lovers of measurement; we number and count, quantify and track. If you were to look in your pantry, every carton would display the weight of its contents. Every food label would tell you the number of calories, fat grams, and carbs for a particular item. Your gas gauge tells you how much gas is in your tank. Your clock tells you how much time you have until dinner. Your budget tells you how much you can spend. Your social media account measures your circle of friends. We are happily surrounded on all sides by systems of measurement.

Our compulsion to measure is not a recent development. Ancient peoples tracked the movements of the heavens; their tools of measurement are still visible in canyon carvings and monolith rings. They measured tides and seasons, the passing of time. Measurement is the millennia-old obsession of the limited human, who, perceiving his own limits, seeks to transcend them by quantifying his world. That-which-we-can-measure we think we can to some degree control.

One of my favorite movies is *Hoosiers* (1986). It tells the story of a small-town basketball team from Hickory, Indiana, that finds greatness under the leadership of their coach, Norman Dale. The end of the movie is not hard to predict, and the '80s synthesizer music in the score is a trial for the nerves. There's also a scene in which Gene Hackman and Barbara Hershey earn the undisputable title of “Most Awkward On-Screen Kiss in the

None Like Him

History of Filmmaking.” But at the 1:34 mark, the movie hits a note of brilliance.

Having reached the 1951 state finals, Coach Dale’s team of small-town farm boys gets their first look at where the championship game will be played: a giant gymnasium, easily ten times the size of the small-town high school gyms they have played in all season long. As the players’ eyes widen at the scene, Dale pulls out a tape measure. He asks a boy to measure and report the distance from the backboard to the free throw line. Fifteen feet. He asks two players to measure the distance from the floor to the net. Ten feet.

Smiling slightly, Dale notes, “I think you’ll find it’s the exact same measurements as our gym back in Hickory.”

The scene is brilliant because it illustrates a universal truth: being able to take the measure of something is reassuring. It imparts to us a level of comfort and a sense of control.

We humans attempt to measure not just our environments but also our fellow humans. When we make a new acquaintance, or consider the viability of a political candidate, or interview someone for a job, we assess their strengths and weaknesses. We “take the measure” of their character and abilities, so to speak. We attempt to quantify their attributes, to judge how worthy they are of our trust or support and to keep our expectations realistic.

We also take the measure of self and others for the sake of comparison. Questions like, “Am I smart?” or “Am I rich?” or “Am I moral?” are answered with, “Relative to whom?” We choose our human yardsticks with care, often assuring ourselves that we will measure favorably by surrounding ourselves with people whose own shortcomings make us stand tall by comparison. We tell ourselves that compared to *X*, we are indeed quite

smart, rich, or moral. But unless our measure of comparison is smarter, richer, and more moral than we are, we will preserve the myth of our own ascendancy. We will believe ourselves to be without rival. And that's where a measureless God begins to upend our sense of personal awesomeness.

Our Immeasurable, Measuring God

To the human mind, preoccupied with quantifying creation and its inhabitants, seeking control by measurement and validation by comparison, the Godhead presents a conundrum. The God of the Bible is infinite—immeasurable, unquantifiable, uncontainable, unbound, utterly without limit. We cannot take the full measure of him no matter how hard we may try. We cannot confine him to a physical or mental boundary. We cannot control him, and we can never stack up favorably beside him. Job's companion Zophar expresses our dilemma:

Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
Its measure is longer than the earth
and broader than the sea. (Job 11:7–9)

David praises the infinitude of God's greatness:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable. (Ps. 145:3)

Solomon, too, acknowledges the limitlessness of God:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! (1 Kings 8:27)

None Like Him

Paradoxically, he who is immeasurable is himself the measure of all things. Note this beautiful contrast in Isaiah 40:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?
Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD,
or what man shows him his counsel? (Isa. 40:12–13)

Put succinctly, who has measured everything? God has. Who has measured God? No one.

In striking paradox, God immeasurable concerns himself with measurements for arks and tabernacles, temples and cities. God unbound sets boundaries for oceans. He catalogs hairs on heads. He numbers stars and grains of sand. Our limitless God specifies the length of our limbs and the circumference of our crania. He measures our very days in handbreadths, lovingly and with intent. And all that he measures is perfect in measurement. All that he binds is perfectly boundaried. Yet he himself is infinitely detailed—limitless, measureless, unbounded.

The God of No Limits

What Zophar spoke, what David and Solomon worshiped, what Isaiah comprehended is this: God has no rivals. Not only that, but he measures and decrees the boundaries by which his creation will abide. Our whole lives as Christ-followers are to be given over to the identification and celebration of the limits God has ordained for us. He lovingly teaches them to us through his Word, through trials, through discipline. He humbles us through

these means to remind us that we are not him, nor is anyone or anything else we know.

There is none like our God. The God of the Bible is incomparable, infinitely above his creation. To say that anyone or anything is like him is to try to express the unlimited in limited terms. Any comparison will fall short. Just as the authors of Scripture searched for adequate human language to apply to heavenly visions, we find ourselves ill equipped to express God's perfections. But we must still endeavor to try. Like the Israelites with their sandals still damp from the sand of the Red Sea shoreline, we feel the weight of the question that hangs in midair:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?
(Ex. 15:11)

The psalmist, too, marvels:

Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth? (Ps. 113:5–6)

The answer, of course, is no one. Creation, existing within the limits of time and space, cannot rival, much less fully articulate, the splendors of a limitless God. Yet from our earliest moments, rivalry has been our intent.

Becoming Like God

As soon as my first child could crawl, he began exploring the limits of his world. What was he allowed to touch? What was

None Like Him

off-limits? Any parent can tell you that if you place a small child in an empty room with twenty objects, nineteen of which he is allowed to touch and one he is not, an interesting phenomenon will take place. At first he may play contentedly with what is allowed, but before long he will turn his eyes toward the forbidden item. Soon he will begin moving closer to it, perhaps extending a hand toward it but not actually touching it. A gently worded warning may cause him to shift his gaze to his parent and reconsider his course, but eventually, barring physical intervention by that parent, he will almost certainly lay hands on the one object out of twenty he knows is not meant for him.

I remember trying to conceal my laughter when this process played out before me. The moral tug-of-war within my child was on full display, and it was comical both for its artless honesty and its familiarity. We do not outgrow the desire to test limits. With age, we may learn enough self-control not to put our drool-covered fingers in electrical outlets or write our names on the wall in permanent marker, but we still carry in us the same compulsion to do that which we ought not to do, to reach for that which we ought not to touch. We are line-crossers, boundary-breakers, fence-jumpers, carrying inside us a warped belief that our heavenly parent wants to withhold from us something that is needful or pleasurable. Even as we enjoy his good gifts, we feel a hyperawareness of the boundaries he has set, and we question their validity. Though he gives us nineteen gifts and warns us away from one danger, we suspect that what is withheld is not dangerous but desirable.

We see this exact pattern in the opening pages of the Bible. Lovingly placed in an environment designed for their safety and delight, our parents Adam and Eve mistook being created in the image of God as license to become like God. It was not enough

to bear his image within the limits of human existence. No, only becoming like him would do. The Creator was holding out on them. But a crafty voice suggested that limitlessness was within reach:

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”
(Gen. 3:4–5)

So the finite reached to pluck the infinite from a low-hanging bough, and human history began its corrosive pattern of God-rivalry, pitting and eroding every peak and crevice of creation with the relentless repetitions of that first grasping, the long-armed reach of the human aspiring to the divine.

Reflect or Rival?

So it has been ever since: human beings created to *bear the image of God* instead aspire to *become like God*. Designed to reflect his glory, we choose instead to rival it. We do so by reaching for those attributes that are true only of God, those suited only to a limitless being. Rather than worship and trust in the omniscience of God, we desire to be all-knowing ourselves. Rather than celebrate and revere his omnipotence, we seek ultimate power in our own spheres of influence. Rather than rest in the immutability of God, we point to our own calcified sin patterns and declare ourselves unchanging and unchangeable. Like our father Adam and our mother Eve, we long for that which is intended only for God, rejecting our God-given limits and craving the limitlessness we foolishly believe we are capable of wielding and entitled to possess. Even as the redeemed, we crave the forbidden fruit of rivalry.

None Like Him

Theologians make two lists when they describe who God is. One list contains traits that are true only of God. The other contains traits that are true of God but that can also become true of us. Here is an example of such a list:

Only God Is	God Is (and We Can Be)
Infinite	Holy
Incomprehensible	Loving
Self-Existent	Just
Self-Sufficient	Good
Eternal	Merciful
Immutable	Gracious
Omnipresent	Longsuffering
Omniscient	Wise
Omnipotent	Jealous (for his glory)
	Faithful
	Righteous
	Truthful

Every trait on both lists is limitlessly true of God. Once the Holy Spirit dwells in us, the list on the right can become true of us. It is a list we grow into as we walk in obedience to the commands of God. When we talk about being “conformed to the image of Christ,” this is the list we are describing. It shows us how to *reflect* who God is as Christ did.

The problem I want to examine in the pages of this book has to do with how we humans treat the list on the left. Though this list can be true only of God, we want it to be true of us. It reveals how we try to *rival* God. We want this list to be true of us more than we want the list on the right to be. To see the truth of this, ask yourself two questions:

1. How many people spend their day plotting how to achieve limitless *love* for others?
2. How many people spend their day plotting how to achieve limitless *power* over others?

Though we know that the list on the right is for our good and for God's glory, we gravitate toward the list on the left—a list that is not good for us, nor does pursuing it bring glory to God. It actually seeks to steal glory from him. It is a list that whispers, as the Serpent whispered to Eve, “You shall be like God.” It is the natural inclination of the sinful heart to crave this list, but as those who have been given a new heart with new desires, we must learn to crave the list on the right. The list on the right represents the abundant life Jesus came to give to us.

So this book will concern itself with the list of attributes that are true only of God. We will examine how we give our time and our efforts to chasing it, seeking to cast off the limits of our birthright as finite humans. And we will learn to trust this list to an infinite God.

We must recover the truth that was obscured by the Serpent: rather than being like God in his unlimited divinity, we are to be like God in our limited humanity. We are capable of bearing his image as we were intended only when we embrace our limits. Image-bearing means becoming fully human, not becoming divine. It means reflecting as a limited being the perfections of a limitless God.

Our limits teach us the fear of the Lord. They are reminders that keep us from falsely believing that we can be like God. When I reach the limit of my strength, I worship the One whose strength never flags. When I reach the limit of my reason, I worship the One whose reason is beyond searching out.

So it makes sense that our self-worship would so often take

None Like Him

the form of convincing ourselves that we are (or ought to be) limitless. But we don't just want limitlessness for ourselves—we tend to want it for others as well.

Why Honeymoons Never Last

It happens sooner or later in every relationship: someone will let you down. We have a term for the earliest stages of a relationship: the “honeymoon phase”—that rosy time period when everything but disappointment seems possible. We love the honeymoon phase because it requires no effort. The other person in the relationship has shown himself completely worthy of our love and trust, and we can't believe we spent so much time tolerating lesser relationships when this kind of connection was possible. It is a pleasure to lavish the other person with our affection. It will always be thus.

But then something happens—an unreturned phone call, an opinion we were not aware of, an annoying habit we had not noticed, a character flaw that hid, a weakness of some kind. A limit. We learn that our hero or our lover or our best friend does not possess limitless lovability. They are weighed and found wanting. And disappointment follows. We are faced with a dilemma: Will we try to force them back onto the pedestal they occupied during the honeymoon phase, or will we allow them to be, as the saying goes, “only human”?

I'm guessing this relationship cycle is familiar to you. We all experience it. Some of us had a father we thought was a superhero until we reached early adulthood. Some of us have had a close friend we thought was completely trustworthy, until she wasn't. Some of us have had pastors or spouses or political leaders whom we believed could never disappoint us—only to learn that they, too, had limits. It is no coincidence that we commonly

Infinite

— | | —
speak of this kind of letdown as the toppling of an idol. When we ask another human to be unlimitedly trustworthy in any area, we are asking someone who is “only human” to be God.

This is why the Great Commandment takes such care to instruct us how to love those who are “only human.” It tells a limited human to love God and others as limitlessly as possible. But to love self and others as limitlessly as possible, we must learn to die daily to our propensity to measure and compare our limits.

Or, perhaps more accurately, we will have to learn to measure as God measures, to count as God counts.

He counts our sorrows. They are not infinite. They are measurable: countable, contained, recorded:

You have *kept count* of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book? (Ps. 56:8)

He measures our sins, yet his immeasurable grace exceeds them. Mercifully, our sins are finite in number, the product of finite beings:

But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.
(Rom. 5:20)

He does not count our sins against us, because of Christ:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the man against whom the Lord *will not count*
his sin. (Rom. 4:7–8)

And because of Christ, God urges us to learn to count others as Christ counted us:

None Like Him

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility *count others more significant* than yourselves. (Phil. 2:3)

He calls us to reevaluate the measures of our human successes:

But whatever gain I had, *I counted as loss* for the sake of Christ. Indeed, *I count everything as loss* because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Phil. 3:7–8)

And he changes the measure of our adversity from curse to blessing:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. (James 1:2)

Could it be that this process of growing in the fear of the Lord is a simple matter of relearning how to count? By learning to worship God in his immeasurability, by learning to take the measure of ourselves, our sin, our circumstances, and others accurately, we might at last come to say with David, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. Surely I have a delightful inheritance.” It’s in that frame of mind that rivalry ceases and reflection commences.

Our birth records announce that we are limited. Our limitations are by design. Whether we spend the remainder of our lives denying or embracing this basic truth makes all the difference in how we will love God and others. I pray that, in the pages to come, a limited portrayal of a limitless God would move us toward greater dependence on our infinitely dependable God.

Note: At the end of each chapter you will find verses, questions, and a prayer prompt to help you remember and apply what you have read. Consider keeping a journal in which you copy or paraphrase each of the verses for meditation, noting what

Infinite

each adds to your understanding of the attribute covered in the chapter. Then journal your answers to the questions, as well as a prayer of response.

Verses for Meditation

1 Kings 8:27

Psalms 119:96

Isaiah 40:12–13

Job 11:7–9

Psalms 145:3

Romans 11:33

Questions for Reflection

1. What is your emotional response to the knowledge that God cannot be measured?
2. How have you attempted to “take the measure” of God? What limits have you placed (or wanted to place) on his character or will?
3. What God-given limitation or boundary do you most want to rebel against? How is that boundary for your good? For God’s glory?

None Like Him

4. What person in your life needs you to accept his or her limits? What person in your life needs to accept yours? How might you set loving boundaries in that relationship?

Pray

Write a prayer to the Lord asking him to show you ways you have tried to “take his measure.” Ask him to show you how your own limitedness can bring glory to him. Ask God to show you ways you have thought of him as having limits on who he is or what he can do. Praise him for his limitlessness.