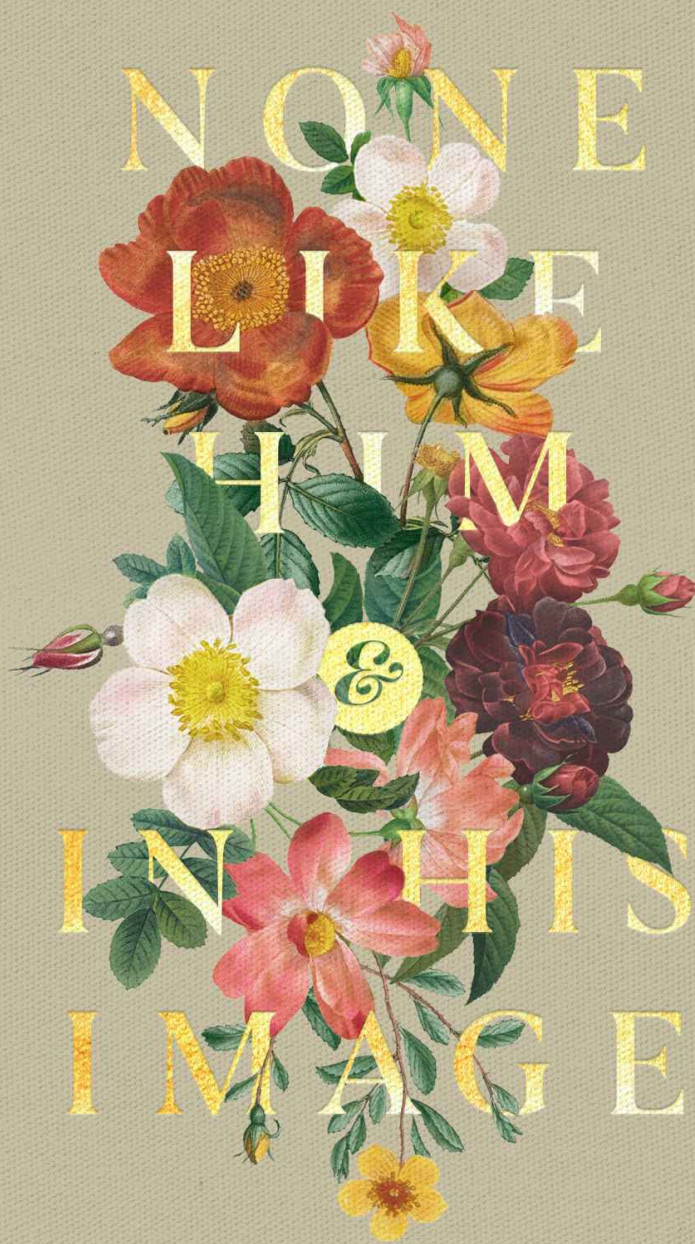


Jen Wilkin

ADVANCE READER COPY
NOT FOR RESALE



BEHOLDING THE CHARACTER OF GOD

ADVANCE READER COPY—SUBJECT TO EDITORIAL CHANGES

Endorsements to come

NONE LIKE HIM
&
IN HIS IMAGE

Jen Wilkin

NONE
LIKE
HIM

&

IN HIS
IMAGE

BEHOLDING THE CHARACTER OF GOD

 CROSSWAY®

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

None Like Him and In His Image: Beholding the Character of God

© 2026 by Jennifer Wilkin

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different from Us (and Why That's a Good Thing), copyright 2016 by Jennifer Wilkin. Published by Crossway.

In His Image: 10 Ways God Calls Us to Reflect His Character, copyright 2018 by Jennifer Wilkin. Published by Crossway.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Cover design:

First printing 2026

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the *King James Version* of the Bible. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NET are from The NET Bible® copyright © 2003 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. www.netbible.com. All rights reserved. Quoted by permission.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture references marked NKJV are from The New *King James Version*. Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-8749-0471-5

ePub ISBN: 979-8-8749-0473-9

PDF ISBN: 979-8-8749-0472-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

INSERT CIP INFORMATION HERE

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

XX	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Dedication?

Contents

Preface to the Gift Edition *ix*

NONE LIKE HIM: 10 WAYS GOD IS DIFFERENT FROM US (AND WHY THAT'S A GOOD THING)

	Introduction: On Becoming a God-Fearing Woman	3
1	Infinite: The God of No Limits	9
2	Incomprehensible: The God of Infinite Mystery	25
3	Self-Existent: The God of Infinite Creativity	35
4	Self-Sufficient: The God of Infinite Provision	47
5	Eternal: The God of Infinite Days	57
6	Immutable: The God of Infinite Sameness	69
7	Omnipresent: The God of Infinite Place	79
8	Omniscient: The God of Infinite Knowledge	91
9	Omnipotent: The God of Infinite Power	105
10	Sovereign: The God of Infinite Rule	119
	Conclusion: Fearful and Wonderful	131

IN HIS IMAGE: 10 WAYS GOD CALLS US
TO REFLECT HIS CHARACTER

	Introduction: Asking the Better Question	139
1	God Most Holy	147
2	God Most Loving	159
3	God Most Good	171
4	God Most Just	181
5	God Most Merciful	195
6	God Most Gracious	209
7	God Most Faithful	221
8	God Most Patient	233
9	God Most Truthful	245
10	God Most Wise	257
	Conclusion: Engraved with His Image	269
	Notes	277
	General Index	281
	Scripture Index	283

Preface to the Gift Edition

I AM DELIGHTED to present to you this combined volume of *None Like Him* and *In His Image*. I wrote these two books based on lessons I taught to a group of sixteen women at Sugar Creek Baptist Church in 2002, when I was just beginning to realize that my own ignorance of God's attributes might be indicative of a broader problem. I wrote them because I needed them and because, in the years since that first study, I had seen firsthand how meditating on God's attributes revolutionizes how we read Scripture. I'm beside myself with excitement to see them brought together in one volume. They belong together, and they are united at last.

Allow me to begin by stating the obvious: The Bible is a book about God. I would imagine you agree with this statement. For as long as I have owned a Bible, I certainly have, but I didn't always read it as such. I tended to read it primarily as a book about me, written to solve the daily riddles of life. In my teaching ministry, I have sought to reorient the view of my students toward reading for God-discovery first and self-discovery second. This is no simple switch. Many of us, myself included, possess an underdeveloped vocabulary for what is true about God. Hence, these two books, which together can serve as helpful tools for anyone wanting to enrich his or her understanding of the Bible. As an advocate for Bible literacy, I pray they will aid you in that good work.

But more than that, I pray they will serve as a means to deepen your love for our knowable, wondrous, worship-worthy God. We want to know God because we want to love him as we ought. We learn for the sake of relationship, not simply for the sake of knowing. In the same way that we seek to know another human person to deepen that relationship—a friend, a spouse, a parent, a child—we seek to know the divine person of God to deepen that relationship. God is a personal God. His personhood is simultaneously *unlike* ours and *like* ours. Both his *otherness* and his *likeness* should shape and fuel our relationship with him.

One of the earliest disagreements Jeff and I faced in our marriage had to do with the critical issue of seasonings. I was raised in a family for which the pepper shaker sat on the dinner table as a decorative item. Salt was the star of the show. Jeff was raised in a family that put pepper on every single thing they ate. Salt was, at best, an afterthought. Consequently, we newlyweds found ourselves locked in an irreconcilable debate about which shaker the pepper belonged in: Was it the one with more holes or less? I won't dazzle you with the ironclad logic that lies behind my correct answer to this question, but I will confess to you that three decades of marriage have taught me to appreciate pepper on a meal. The matching set of shakers exists for a reason: salt and pepper belong together, and both enhance a meal.

The same is true of God's incommunicable and communicable attributes, the two general categories often used for describing his character. When I first began learning about the attributes of God, I realized I had been missing half of the descriptors commonly explored in the historic doctrine of God. His incommunicable attributes—his *otherness*, those that are true of him alone—had never been presented to me as objects for meditation. Yes, I knew he was omniscient and omnipresent, but I had never spent any length of time considering the theological implications of these truths, much less the practical ones. Discovering them was like finding a saltshaker

at the feast table of the Scriptures. That spiritual meal began to take on depth and richness as I learned a transcendent, awe-inspiring view of God.

But there was also the matter of the half of God's attributes I was already familiar with: His communicable traits, those that are true of him and can also be true of us. Here again, I was in for a surprise. If anything, I learned that familiarity had bred not contempt but boredom. I had heard again and again that God was loving and just, merciful and gracious. I knew that I should be those things as well. But I had not lingered. I had not meditated on the love or mercy of God. I thought of these attributes as how God was like me, leveling them to their human expressions. I had, in a sense, used God's communicable attributes to make him smaller in my eyes instead of bigger, more human and less divine. Truly meditating on them gave me an upward calling to bear his image as I was created to do.

Like those two ubiquitous shakers on our kitchen tables, we need both the knowledge that God is *unlike us* and that he is *like us*. We need to see him as set apart and other, and we need to see him as alike and similar. Our understanding of God's nature shapes everything about us. It shapes how we worship, how we see the world, how we respond to our circumstances, and how we relate to others. If we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we must first know him as he truly is. The combined pages of *None Like Him* and *In His Image* are dedicated to helping us grasp that knowledge.

As you read, I pray that your understanding of God deepens and your love for him grows. There is nothing more soul-satisfying than knowing God—truly, deeply knowing him—and there is nothing more life-altering than allowing that knowledge to transform us into his likeness. I pray that your heart will be filled with awe at the greatness of God, and that you will be moved to greater faithfulness in reflecting his character to the world around you. And I pray that these two volumes would be not a terminus but a beginning of

your pursuit of the knowledge of God. Spend your life gaining the knowledge of the Holy One. Our glorious God has condescended to make himself knowable and to make himself known. What an inexpressible gift it is to plumb the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

None Like Him

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

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 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 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 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 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 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 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)

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 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.

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)
Sovereign	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 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 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, others, and God 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:

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, 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 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

Psalm 119:96

Isaiah 40:12–13

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?

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.

Incomprehensible: The God of Infinite Mystery

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.*

PSALM 145:3

ANYONE WHO GREW UP in a small town can identify with the truism that “familiarity breeds contempt.” My hometown, while not terribly small, fits the model—we are fairly stunned when any of us makes good. I call it Small Town Syndrome. When you know a boy’s mama and daddy, the church he went to, and the house he grew up in, and when you attend school with him from kindergarten through twelfth grade, you feel able to quantify the limits of his potential with a fair level of accuracy. You know who will probably never amount to much, and when someone breaks out of your expectation, the shock is enough to fuel local gossip for years to come.

A friend of mine grew up in the same small town as a now-famous Hollywood actor. When I asked if there were any early indications of greatness, my friend said she recalled little about him other than that

he was handsome and widely regarded by the local girls as a “terrible kisser.” (Now every time I see him kiss a woman on the silver screen, the romance of the moment is ruined as I search for any signs of revulsion on the face of his “kissee.”)

I suspect that all successful people have those in their past who regard their success with a vague sense of contempt, having “known them when.” And we can all relate in some measure to the experience of being discredited or undervalued by the people closest to us. Consider another target of Small Town Syndrome:

[Jesus] went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” (Mark 6:1–4)

The people of Nazareth thought they knew Jesus. And in their familiarity, they held his teaching in contempt. They could not allow that he was anything more than they knew him to be. They believed their knowledge of who he was to be complete and accurate, and therefore found him easy to dismiss. They saw him as only a man, one whose measure they could take.

Knowing in Part

In the previous chapter we considered that God cannot be measured. Because we intend to learn more about God in this book, we must address how his limitlessness affects his knowability. Knowing

who God is matters to us. It changes not only the way we think about him, but the way we think about ourselves. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of self always go hand in hand. In fact, there is no true knowledge of self apart from the knowledge of God. We cannot understand our human limitedness rightly until we see it compared to the limitlessness of God. By learning truth about him, we learn truth about ourselves. But how much do we know of him? Because he is limitless, the knowledge of who he is stretches to infinity.

God is incomprehensible. This does not mean that he is unknowable, but that he is unable to be fully known. It is the joyful duty, the delightful task of his children to spend their lives, both this one and the next, discovering who he is. According to Jesus, knowing God is the fundamental aim of life: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). We take pleasure in working to grow in our knowledge of him.

The truth of who God is surrounds us. Romans 1 tells us that all people have some knowledge of God just by looking around at creation. The Grand Canyon paints the contours of his character in broad brush strokes; majesty, eternity, omnipotence all announce themselves to the naked eye. But the believer, indwelt with the Holy Spirit, receives even deeper knowledge of God, found within the pages of the Bible. The Scriptures sketch his character with a fine-tipped pen for those who have eyes to see, elaborating across sixty-six books the story of who he is, what he has done, and what he will yet do.

But even with these declarations, God cannot be fully known by humans. Christians have meditated on the nature and character of God for thousands of years. Volumes have been written about God, but their sum does not contain the fullness of his attributes. The human mind in its finiteness cannot fully comprehend or express an

infinite God. Even the most intellectually gifted theologian will barely scratch the surface of understanding who God is. He is fully known only to himself.

Put another way, the only expert on God is God.

Sufficient Knowledge

But fear not: though God is not able to be fully known, he is able to be *sufficiently* known. What we can know about him from creation and the Bible is sufficient for our salvation and our sanctification. Not only that, but it is more than sufficient in quantity to keep us in regular contemplation and reflection until we see him face-to-face. Were we able to know him completely, we would dismiss him. Because he is not able to be fully known, familiarity can never breed contempt.

During this life, we will not reach the end of our contemplation of God. Though we know him in part, we love him deeply. What we cannot know about him would only serve to increase our love for him were he to reveal it to us. No doubt we will spend eternity enjoying an ever-increasing revelation of the things we do not yet know about God. Because he is infinitely good, the things that we do not know about God are only good things.

We cannot say the same thing of each other. If you were able to learn everything you don't know about me, you would learn both good and bad. We all have skeletons in our closets. In a sense, God has a closet filled with infinite secrets about himself, but it contains only priceless treasures, no skeletons. The secret attributes of God, should we come to learn them, would bring us nothing but pleasure and assurance. The infinite unknown of God holds no faith-shattering duplicity, just a multiplicity of perfections waiting to be discovered across eternity.

Here again we see the vast difference between God and his creatures. Because God is infinite, he is incomprehensible, unable to

be fully known. Because humans are finite, we are able to be fully known. And the implications of our knowability should change the way we live.

Toppling the Myth of Human Incomprehensibility

The first time I took a personality test was in college. It was the Myers-Briggs, a well-researched measuring tool that groups respondents into sixteen personality types based on their answers to ninety-four questions. I couldn't wait to get the results, and if you've ever taken a personality test I'm guessing you felt the same way. We love those tests because they tell us about our favorite subject: ourselves.

The results of my test were clear, placing me in a category that probably would not have surprised anyone who knew me. How I felt about the results was less clear. On the one hand, I loved gaining insight into how my preferences and judgments shaped my responses to the world around me. On the other hand, I was a little deflated to learn how predictable I was. How could a set of unremarkable questions so easily sort me into the correct bin? And why were there so few bins? Come to think of it, why were there bins at all? My perception of my own uniqueness, my "specialness," felt a little dented. Not only that, but the test assessed not just my strengths but also my weaknesses. I felt exposed. If the test could diagnose my shortcomings that readily, it seemed likely that everyone I knew could as well.

The premise of the Meyers-Briggs, and of all other personality tests, is that behaviors and preferences can be generalized. They find order in what we perceive to be random combinations of preferences and judgments. And they challenge our treasured belief that we are complex creatures. I believe they also point out how unlike God we are in a way we find unsettling: We humans want to think we are incomprehensible—unable to be fully understood—but we're not.

We are knowable. Completely.

But not by a personality test or by another person. Other people can gain insight into our strengths and weaknesses, our virtues and vices, by means of observation or by a tool like the Meyers-Briggs, but they can't know us fully. One reason this is true is because we are masters at concealment, even from those we love and trust. We excel at showing our finer qualities while carefully tucking away our shortcomings. And because other people have a limited interest in plumbing the depths of our character, we can get away with it. "Man looks on the outward appearance," and is content to do so, being so typically intent on his own hidden issues that he has little time to concern himself with the hidden issues of his neighbor.

No, our neighbor cannot fully know us, but far more concerning is that we do not and cannot fully know ourselves. One of the most frightening truths the Bible implores us to acknowledge is that we do not know our own hearts. Reflecting on this, the psalmist asks, "Who can discern his [own] errors?" (Ps. 19:12). The prophet Jeremiah warns that our hearts are characterized above all else by an internal, pervasive treachery that thwarts self-knowledge:

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

We don't know our own hearts. I am keenly aware of this truth every time I hear a sermon on the subject of sin. As the preacher warms to his topic about sin *X*, I begin compiling a mental list of all the people I know who need to hear this message and repent. I cull through lists of those who have offended me with sin *X*, plotting about how I can off-handedly relate the wisdom of this sermon to them and give sight to the blind. But how rarely, how belatedly does it occur to me that the message was for me? So unaware am I of my own sinful tendencies that I come to the sermon to sit in judgment on others, rather than to

submit myself to judgment. So ignorant am I of my own bondage to sin *X* that I completely miss the word of correction being graciously extended—*to me*.

Knowable and Known

I want to believe I am the special case, the exception to every rule, the possessor of an extenuating circumstance that others are not aware of. When correction is offered to me, I tell myself that it is offered in error. If people really knew me, they would know that they are wrong to find fault. And my deceitful heart is happy to perpetuate this lie all the days of my life. Thank God, he allows no such thing. He graciously holds up the mirror of his Word, and my heart is laid bare. I am reminded that I am fully knowable, fully known.

God is not only an expert on God. He is also an expert on me.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.
 You search out my path and my lying down
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is high; I cannot attain it. (Ps. 139:1–6)

He knows me fully—every thought and every intention, every perception and every judgment, every response to the world around me, no personality test required. He understands my biggest strengths and my besetting sins. Even the temptations I face are so known to him that he calls them “common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). Apprehending

with complete accuracy the best and the worst of me, he is neither impressed nor horrified. He accepts me as I am because of Christ. Nothing is hidden before the One who formed my inmost being, and because I am fully known, I am fully free to love the God I know only in part. Though I do not know him fully, what little I do know is cause for the deepest love the human heart can produce.

And out of this love, I learn to trade the myth of human incomprehensibility for the mercy of human knowability. I learn to trust the expertise of God.

Divine Expertise

No, I am not an expert on my neighbor. Only God is. It may feel good to be quick to diagnose my neighbor's faults and prescribe a course of treatment, but my desperately wicked heart deceives me with the lie that I have any skill to do so. Recognizing this should help me walk in compassion toward those around me. Rather than assuming I understand their motives and their difficulties, I can assume that neither I nor they can fully diagnose the problem. But God can. And then I can be quick to intercede for them instead of to judge. If I am fully known and not rejected by God, how much more ought I to extend grace to my neighbor, whom I know only in part?

No, I am not an expert on myself. Only God is. His Word gives a true diagnosis of my state, expertly shepherding my thoughts and intentions toward the path of life. Recognizing this should help me remain keenly aware of my propensity to believe my own self-promoting version of who I am. I must remember that the sermon has a word of correction for me before I look to apply it to someone else.

And no, I am not an expert on God. Only God is. Such knowledge should cause me to worship. The depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God should bring me to my knees. His unsearchable judgments and inscrutable ways should inspire right reverence. And the glorious fact that he makes himself known in ways my finite un-

derstanding can grasp should cause me to celebrate, to devote my life to the joyful duty of discovering what he has made known of himself.

He reveals himself to those who seek him, and in seeing who he is, we see ourselves more clearly.

One day we will see God more clearly than earthly reason now allows and more extensively than his works and words currently reveal him. Though now we know in part, one day we will know fully, even as we have been fully known (1 Cor. 13:12). We will still be finite creatures seeking to comprehend the infinite, but we will at last be able to see him without the murkiness of sin blurring our vision. We will have eternity to progressively explore his perfections. And because to know him is to love him, our ever-expanding vision will elicit ever-expanding love. Like a Christmas morning with always another present to unwrap, eternity will increasingly disclose his hidden glories to the eyes of our hearts. And until then, let us pursue with eagerness what we can know of him in this life. I pray the chapters that follow will help us do just that.

Verses for Meditation

Job 11:7–9

Psalm 145:3

Psalm 147:5

Romans 11:33–35

Questions for Reflection

1. How does the knowledge that God cannot be fully known make you feel? List some positive feelings and some negative feelings. Explain your answers.

