

“John Bishop helps you see God for who He is, not who you imagined Him to be.”

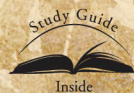
—KERRY SHOOK, founding pastor of Woodlands Church, Houston, TX

GOD DISTORTED

**How Your Earthly Father
Affects Your Perception of God
and Why It Matters**

John Bishop

Foreword by Ruth Graham



Praise for
God Distorted

“John Bishop tears away those misconceptions, distorted views, and protective walls we have in the way of a dynamic relationship with God. By highlighting how significantly the relationship with our earthly father distorts our view of our heavenly Father, *God Distorted* leads readers on a path of healing and better understanding of God the Father.”

—MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *The Circle Maker*

“John Bishop writes from his personal life and his years as a pastor to describe the incredible importance of accepting our Father’s love into the deep places of our lives. So many of our challenges come back to how we view God, and John clears the way for us to see God in all of his power, love, and fame. This is a powerful book and a great resource.”

—JUD WILHITE, author of *Pursued* and senior pastor
of Central Christian Church, Las Vegas

“A. W. Tozer asserted, ‘What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.’ *God Distorted* helps us discover and replace the warped perceptions with God’s perfections. Writing with great vulnerability out of his personal journey, John guides us to letting go the ‘daddy damaged’ idols so we can experience the joy that comes with knowing the heavenly Father with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Working through the book will renew love of the Father, joy in Jesus, and peace through the Spirit.”

—GERRY BRESHEARS, professor of theology, Western Seminary, Portland

“John Bishop has written a book that will bring healing, encouragement, and restoration to anyone who’s wrestled to reconcile their earthly father with our heavenly Father. This is a book that will breathe hope and life into your world.”

—MARGARET FEINBERG (www.margaretfainberg.com),
author of *Wonderstruck* and *Scouting the Divine*

“*God Distorted* provides insight to a hurting generation. John is very transparent in this book, and if we had more Christian leaders this transparent talking about some of these

things, we would have a better church, community, and nation. We must acknowledge, accept, and work on these problems we carry within us. We must allow God to change us, and then we can help change others. I was with Pastor John Bishop and spoke at his church on Father's Day, and following the service we had a very quick lunch—the reason being that he needed to rush off so he could spend time with his son. That was John's priority, and it made a strong impression on me."

—NICKY CRUZ, evangelist and author

"The message of *God Distorted* is simple but profound: No matter how good or bad your earthly father was, you haven't truly found home until you're in the arms of your heavenly Father. John Bishop's message is one of hope, healing, and restoration."

—JIM DALY, president, Focus on the Family and author
of *ReFocus: Living a Life that Reflects God's Heart*

"John Bishop is passionate about helping us let go of our distorted image of God and embrace Him as our perfect Father. John's transparency about his experience as a son, a father, and a pastor will encourage you as you seek to replace broken paradigms with biblical faith."

—STEVEN FURTICK, lead pastor, Elevation Church, Charlotte,
and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Greater*

"*God Distorted* challenges your view of God. John Bishop helps you see God for who He is, not who you imagined Him to be."

—KERRY SHOOK, founding pastor of Woodlands Church, Houston,
and coauthor of the national bestsellers *One Month to Live*
and *Love at Last Sight*

"Everyone has a view of God, a perception of who He is and what He wants in our lives. Some see Him as a loving creator; others may see Him as a detached deity. In *God Distorted*, John Bishop helps readers peel back the layers of their past and discover the foundation of their perception of God—their experience with their earthly father. And through open, honest, and powerful examples, John helps readers discover what it takes to overcome the distortions and instead gain a clear image of God."

—ED YOUNG, pastor, Fellowship Church, Dallas/Fort Worth,
and author of *Outrageous*, *Contagious Joy*

GOD DISTORTED

How Your Earthly Father
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and Why It Matters

John Bishop

Foreword by Ruth Graham



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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

—JOHN 1:12, NIV

To David, my father. I wish I could know you, and I wish you could know me. We would have had so many memories, but on February 17, 1967, that all changed when you died. I forgive you, and I am sorry for all of the anger. What we missed out on, I have tried to give to my kids. My biggest hope is that you are in heaven and that we can catch up someday. Through all of the pain, I have discovered God's promises and presence. He promised to be the Father to the fatherless and has been to me.



To David, my only son. I love you so much. I believe in you, David. You were named after the grandpa you never knew, but you have a heart like King David. I am proud of you in more ways than I can explain. My heart is so full of joy and promise when I think of you. David, thanks for loving me even in the moments I didn't know how to be a dad. You have always loved me for who I am, in spite of who I am not.



To Katie, my lovely and beautiful daughter. Your conviction to strive for prayer and holiness is inspiring. Being a daddy in your life has not only been easy but also encouraging. You are always joyful, always prayerful; you always try to make the best right choice, and you have always shown me the grace I don't deserve. Never stop dreaming and being fully sold out to Jesus.



To Hannah-Jo, my baby girl. When I took you to Grandpa's grave for the first time and you walked over to hug me, is a moment that will be etched in my heart forever. You are so driven by purpose and are contagiously generous. I love that

you make me smile so much and you have such a heart for doing what is right—to love God and speak His truth unashamedly to this generation.



To Pop. God provided, but I was blinded. I am sorry for not seeing your sacrifice and not saying thank you more. You were the best a kid could ask for in a grandpa and a dad. You did more for me than words can explain. The day you asked Jesus into your heart birthed a dream to start a church to reach people who didn't go to church. Pop, I simply want to say thanks for never making me feel like a burden, although I know I was. Thanks for being there, for loving me, and for being a great example as a husband. I will see you soon enough!



To the perfect Father, Yahweh. You are my God, You are my protector, You are the lifter of my head when I am tired or confused, and You are the lamp to my feet when I don't know which direction to walk in. By Your grace You allowed the pain in my life that both defined and redefined me, and now You are redeeming the pain to help so many who have a distorted view of You. I love You and welcome You to love me more, and more, and more.

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FOREWORD

By Ruth Graham

Author of *In Every Pew Sits a Broken Heart*

I love God and I know He loves me. But in my life I have had a difficult time knowing He was always available to me. I thought He was off busy with someone else, caring for them—as my own father was.

Despite having an amazing man as my daddy, I have a closet called “fatherlessness” in my life. The closet door was shut and tightly locked. I passed by the door each day but was not really sure what was inside. At times it made me uneasy, sad, angry, insecure, and a host of other unhealthy things, but I was unwilling to open it. I was afraid of what I would find in there and afraid of the pain I would feel to face it directly. To most folks, it looked as if I came from the perfect Christian family with the perfect father. But the closet was there and very real. Every once in a while something would slip out from behind the door, but I cleaned it up and stuffed it back in before anyone saw it. Maybe they wouldn’t notice the energy I used to keep it closed. Maybe I didn’t know myself. But I do know I was weary and sad. In discouragement, I wanted to quit living this way, but I knew I couldn’t and wouldn’t. But did I have to continue feeling like I didn’t belong?

There are many causes of fatherlessness. Death. Divorce. Abandonment. Abuse. Absence. I knew all about absence. My father, the Reverend Billy Graham, was gone so much as he traveled the globe preaching the Gospel. To my young heart it felt like abandonment. It wasn’t. He was a unique man at a unique time in history doing what God had called him to do. But at home there was a little girl who desperately wanted her daddy. A girl whose little heart ached to have his attention and the security of his arms. When I needed him most, he seemed to be the farthest away. (Please understand I am not disparaging my father. He is my hero. But I am being real.) And I saw God that way as well. I had a distorted view of God.

The book you hold in your hands, written by my friend John Bishop, was a key for

me to unlock the door and examine the contents of my closet. He has helped me sort things out and clean them up—although this will be a lifelong process. It was a comfort to know that John understands. He has done this himself. He knows the pain, the pitfalls, the emotions, and the weariness because he has his own closet of fatherlessness. He lets us peer into his closet and into the process of coming to grips with his loss.

John has given to all of us practical tools to help us identify our “stuff,” examine it, deal with it, and then get rid of it. As you read the book and do the exercises in the back, my prayer for you is that you will be able to do the same. I pray there will be an “aha!” moment for you as you discover the symptoms of your fatherlessness and the cause; that you will be able to identify the longing of your heart and slowly you will recognize the true image of the God who is pursuing you. I pray you will see His heart and hear His voice more clearly, falling in love with the One who knows you best and loves you most.

Find the comfort, the joy, and the freedom to be yourself because you have the true image of God your heavenly Father. I pray you will finally be able to let go of the distorted view of God and realize your true potential as His beloved child.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Carly Major: Carly, I want to express my deepest appreciation for all of the work you have poured into this project. Behind a good book and author, there is a team that makes it so much better than it would have been without help. Your ability to think, write, edit, and help on this project is an unspeakable gift to me and to a generation of people that needs God. Hopefully this book will help them in their journey of finding the greatest and only perfect Father. You won't know until heaven the full impact of your sacrifices. Thank you.

Teresa Petker: Teresa, simply, you make me look better than I am. This book is another example of your taking the vision and burden that God puts on my heart (just like preparing a message every weekend) and completely and sacrificially giving whatever you can to make it better. You see it, take it, and enhance it. Jesus said it best that the servants here will be the greatest there. Thank you for your hours upon hours of research to find the perfect quote to make each chapter so much better. I am thanking God that with your help, one of the deepest and most personal messages in my heart can become a resource for so many people. My prayer is they will find God as their perfect Father. Thank you.

David Kopp: I'm not sure what you saw in our initial meeting (maybe it was the sushi?), but I'm so glad you were willing to take a risk on me. I absolutely love working with the whole team at WaterBrook Multnomah. Thank you!

Susan Tjaden: Susan, thank you for making us feel like this book was the only project you were working on. Thank you for "getting" me as an author, for protecting my voice in the edits, and for believing in the message. Thank you most of all for always remembering to ask about my son; it matters more than you know, to both him and me. Beyond the work, we have become friends.

The sales and marketing team at WaterBrook Multnomah: Thank you for the prayers, for listening to the story, and for shedding tears with us. Your encouragement has been priceless. I am praying for God's favor in every conversation.

Echo Bennett: So much of what you do is unseen by all but your audience of One. Thank you for being vulnerable with your story and for the hours spent on the workbook. Your investment matters, Echo, and lives will be changed for all of eternity.

Stephanie, Sheila, Marlette, and all the Living Hope staff: Thank you for everything done behind the scenes to support the writing team. Thank you for releasing me and for encouraging me to get this message out there. I am so thankful to our staff for creating an environment where it's okay to not be okay, which has been me at times.

Mama: Raising two boys without a father is not the way it should be, and I know it wasn't easy, so thank you. Thanks for having the courage to say no that fateful day when my dad wanted to take me with him, which would be his last day on this earth. I can hardly comprehend how different things might have been. I love you.

Michelle: You did what you always have done: you dreamed with me, you encouraged me, you read and prayed for the project, and you loved me on "those days." Also, you have given me both space and grace to get this done. Thanks, love.

You, the reader: I want to say thank you up-front. Simply, you are the reason this book was written. I am praying for you as you take this journey with me. It takes courage to confront the past and pursue a better relationship with God. Thank you for taking a step that will give you hope and a better future.

INTRODUCTION

I am broken, just like many of you who by God's grace are reading this book about dads, children, and God. As much as I knew my earthly dads (yes, plural), I have learned to know God even better. By no stretch of the imagination or résumé am I an expert on parenting, or on the role of fathers in the lives of their children, or on the character of God as the perfect Father. However, having had four very different earthly fathers, being the father of three very different kids, and serving as a pastor for over twenty years, I at least have a broad, varied, and hopefully helpful perspective in being both child and father. I was the child dreaming of the perfect father, and I finally found him in the God who I now know was always there.

Writing this book has been an experience full of irony that isn't lost on me. Take today, for example. This morning I got a Father's Day card from my daughter Katie and son-in-law Jordan. I am sitting here staring at a card that says so much and ends with "I love you, Daddy. Forever and always—Katie Lee." But just moments ago I hung up the phone with my son, David, who is currently incarcerated at our local county jail. He had to end our call abruptly because he was being put in lockdown. Talk about emotional whiplash! *Honestly, God. Really?*

To hear David's voice and his words, "Dad, I love you and will call you when I can." Yeah, those words break the heart of a daddy. That's when the irony hurts. Who am I to write about fathers when I am mad at myself as a dad, aggravated by the residual issues from the fathers I had, and frustrated with God and others? I know David has made wrong choices. Lots of them. I get it in my head, but I really have a hard time being okay with it in my heart. But then God lets me know that this is exactly why He wants me to write this book. He has me right where I need to be, learning exactly what I need to learn, in order to share what He wants me to share.

In life—not just as a pastor, but as a dad—I have heard more stories than I can count about brokenness, pain, anger, resentment, and insecurity that are directly related to dysfunctional father relationships. I have plenty of my own! I don't have all the

answers, but I have learned some things that have helped me both cope and become better at being a dad.

I can't explain every situation, but I can empathize with most. Whether you are fifteen or seventy-five, you are still the child of your dad. The wounds of a dad, admitted or not, can bring so much pain and confusion to the heart of a child.

I cannot change your past, but I am praying about your today and am hoping that the words in this book will help you walk toward a new future. Have you been broken and hurt? I have too. Have you felt controlled, abandoned, ignored, or rejected? I have too. I get it. I don't necessarily know more than anyone else, but I am willing to share with you my journey to healing, in the hopes it may benefit you in some way.

I am a child who was abused, abandoned, and left. I am a father who is trying to be a better father. But most importantly, I am a child of God who has learned to be healed and be a healer of others.

Why This Book? Why Now? Why Me?

It is my life's passion to help people meet the God who loves them so much He died for them. But often we have to begin by tearing down a wall of preconceived ideas and distorted images of God that have been created by the images projected by our earthly fathers.

I am a confessed accidental pastor who somehow by God's grace has been blessed to be part of a church that has seen over eight thousand people baptized in eight years and has seen tens of thousands changed by grace and for the glory of only God. We are in a part of America where people don't really want to go to church. In my life personally and in our lives corporately, God has been distorted into something that isn't right.

The God distortion needs to be changed. It needs to be different for our generation—a generation that has been broken by dad issues and needs to be restored and reclaimed by God. Fathers—and the lack of them—have in many cases tainted our view of God and prevented relationship with Him. I have dedicated my life as a pastor to knowing God and making Him known. I don't care what struggle you have or what God looks like in your mind, but I can say without hesitation that the God I have come to know is the answer to the deepest longing of your heart.

My intent is not to make fathers feel or look bad, but to help us as children identify the fears and insecurities we still carry as scars from our childhood. I have been chal-

lenged as a father while writing this book, and I am now determined—passionate, even—to do better as a result of what I have learned.

What Is This Book?

This book is split into three parts. In the first part, we identify eight different types of fathers. You are probably going to recognize yourself and your family members somewhere in here. It's not always easy reading about what goes on in the home, how children develop emotionally and relationally, and what impact that has on their God-image. Some of the stories are extreme examples, and you may see your father as a milder version of the one described. Or you may even see Dad as a combination of more than one description.

In part 2, we begin a journey of discovering who our heavenly Father truly is, as defined in God's Word. What aspect of His character specifically speaks to the wounds of our past? What does God promise that can heal the deep fears that drive our dysfunctional behaviors and steal our joy? This is where you meet a God who loves you more than anyone ever has, could, or will, in spite of the things you might hate about yourself.

Part 3 is where we get practical. It is my sincere hope that here you will experience healing and then bring restoration to the lives of those around you. Maybe you feel constantly discouraged by the Enemy and want to fight back. Perhaps you struggle to live differently, even as a child of God. When you learn, pray, and perhaps cry, and when hope is rebirthed in your heart, maybe you will see the need to forgive someone for hurting you. This section addresses all of these issues, and more, giving you all the tools you need to do better than you have before.

Following part 3 is a study guide to help you work through the fears that distort your view of God. That will be the opportunity for you to pray, read the Bible, and allow God to speak healing into your heart.

I pray that you will, by the end of these pages, see God more clearly and understand His unconditional love and acceptance of you, right as you are today.

Part 1

OUR PERCEPTION

Understanding Different
Daddy Types

Image Distorted

The most dangerous untruths are truths slightly distorted.

—GEORG C. LICHTENBERG

As a child I often imagined what it would be like to be raised by the perfect dad. He would be always encouraging, always there, always patient, always trying to make me laugh, and be with me when I cried. I imagined a dad who believed in and supported my dreams and was my biggest cheerleader. When I got hurt, he would be the first person I'd go to for comfort and guidance. He would never be too busy but would always be available to say just the right thing at just the right time. He would be a dad I could trust 100 percent.

I remember watching different dads on television shows, like Andy Taylor giving great advice to his son, Opie, on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Then there was Cliff Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*—arguably the most popular TV dad—who was played by Bill Cosby in the '80s and '90s. How could you not love Cliff Huxtable? He was so funny and his family seemed to be perfect. He was a doctor, his wife was a lawyer, but still *family* was the most important thing. Cliff was the kind of dad anyone would want. He was perfect.

But Andy and Cliff aren't real. Writers made them up. I never had a dad like that. I'm betting you didn't either.

Real Dads

If you were to describe what a real dad is like—or more importantly, what your own dad was really like—chances are he would bear little resemblance to Cliff (unless you were

really fortunate!). Cliff is more make-believe than believable, more heavenly than human.

Our perceptions of what a father is really like are colored by our experiences. Some of us might describe our dad as demanding or abusive or distracted. Some might say he was controlling or impossible to please. Some of us didn't even have a father in the house. But thankfully, a few lucky ones would describe Dad as a kind, caring, loving man.

No matter what was normal in your house, there are some reasonable expectations of what a father is—or should be. I think we can safely say he's a male parent. He might not be a birth parent; rather he might be a stepfather or an adoptive father or some other male figure who is in some way responsible for your care.

A dictionary might define *father* simply as “a man who provides and protects.” Yet in reality he is so much more. What the dictionary cannot possibly explain is the emotional impact a father has on a child. According to sociologist Dr. David Popenoe, “Fathers are far more than just ‘second adults’ in the home.” He said that involved fathers “bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring.”¹

A father is not just a sperm donor or a physical provider; he is the one who speaks significance into our lives. He teaches us to love and how to treat people right. He affirms our existence and helps us grow toward our potential. Or at least, that's the way it should be.

I know people who have incredibly blessed relationships with their fathers. But sadly, in my experience, they are the minority. Mostly I hear stories of people who feel abandoned, devalued, criticized, and unable to measure up. I have heard stories of horrible abuse and of dads who were there but never really “there.” Yet, as important as a dad is, many children in America and throughout Western civilization are living without a father, or they bear the scars of an abusive, demanding, uninvolved father. The statistics are frightening:

- 63 percent of youth suicide victims are from fatherless homes.
- 90 percent of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.
- 80 percent of rapists with anger problems come from fatherless homes.
- 71 percent of all high-school dropouts come from fatherless homes.
- Children living in two-parent households with a poor relationship with their father are 68 percent more likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs, compared to all teens in two-parent households.

- Children with fathers who are involved are 40 percent less likely to repeat a grade in school.
- Adolescent girls raised in two-parent homes with involved fathers are significantly less likely to be sexually active than girls raised without involved fathers.²

These statistics point to an epidemic rather than just a problem, and they cannot be ignored. No group of people is immune to the effects—not the church or even the White House. In a recent online article titled “Why Do So Many Politicians Have Daddy Issues?” author Barron YoungSmith made an interesting point about the correlation between politicians and dysfunctional fathers:

American politics is overflowing with stories of absent fathers, alcoholic fathers, neglectful fathers, and untimely deceased ones. Indeed, one of the more interesting questions raised by [Paul] Ryan’s biography is: Why do so many of our politicians have daddy issues?

The list is surprisingly long. Take Ronald Reagan, who was haunted by a moment when he discovered his alcoholic father on the front porch “drunk, dead to the world,” his hair filled with snow. The 11-year-old Reagan had to drag him indoors. Or Bill Clinton, whose biological father drowned in a car crash, and who remembered standing up to his alcoholic stepfather and demanding that he never beat Clinton’s mother again. Gerald Ford’s father, an alcoholic, was found guilty of extreme cruelty to his family, and refused to pay child support when Ford’s mother left him. George W. Bush’s relationship with his father was less lurid, but infamously resentful: He spent his entire life, including his presidency, careening between attempts to live up to H.W.’s impossible expectations and efforts to garishly repudiate them. And it hardly bears recounting that President Obama built his political persona around a search for his absent dad.

The author proposes a number of reasons why such a childhood would propel a man into politics. Some may have developed a high sensitivity to the emotions of others and have strong coping mechanisms, while others probably had to take on a leadership role very early in life. He finished with this thought:

Of course, there is the hunger for attention and the gaping psychological need to be loved. It's often been observed that electoral politics is so demanding and unpleasant that no normal person would endure the indignities required to become a successful politician. In that sense, anyone who is willing to fundraise, glad-hand, and defend their smallest gaffes for months must derive some additional psychological benefit from politicking. Many of the people willing to keep going must be, in some sense, broken inside and driven to salve their emotional pain by courting the adulation of voters.³

Father Effects

Good or bad, present or passive, Dad defines us. He shapes what we become, how we think, how we act, how we feel about ourselves, and how we respond to others. Our first emotions and feelings are formed so much by his words.

Your relationship with your own father defines you far more than you realize. It shapes you in almost every conceivable way—how you treat people, how you handle money, how you treat your children or spouse, and even how you view yourself.

In the book *The Transformation of a Man's Heart*, contributor Gordon Dalbey stated, "When a man abdicates his calling as a father, the world suffers the effects. The father not only defines a boy's past...but also stands at the gateway to his destiny." Dalbey told this story:

Julian Lennon, son of the late Beatles pop idol John Lennon, is a classic example. In his early twenties, Julian made his musical debut with a best-selling album. Then, to everyone's shock, he suddenly stopped recording altogether. Seven years later, when he finally released a second album, he talked with a reporter about struggling to find his calling.

Julian's mother and father had divorced when he was five, and after that he saw his father, John, perhaps a dozen times. "He walked out the bloody door and was never around," Julian snapped. "I'd admire him on TV—listen to his words and opinions. But for someone who was praised for peace and love and wasn't able to keep that at home, that's hypocrisy."

As the reporter notes, "Julian became a self-taught musician. His father never gave him a music lesson." In the son's words, "We sat down once and

maybe he played five chords—that was that... The only thing he ever taught me was how not to be a father.”

His hate for his father blinded Julian Lennon to his own calling, and the world suffered the loss of his talent for seven years.⁴

Thinking About Father God

The ways your father behaved toward you—what he said to you, how he treated you, everything he did and didn't do—had an impact on you in some way. Depending on how you were treated, mistreated, or just plain ignored, you have come up with your own ideas of what a father is like. Because of this, I am quite certain that how you see and perceive your heavenly Father, God, has also been impacted—distorted even—by your relationship with your earthly dad.

When I became a Christ-follower, I struggled a bit with the Trinity. Mind you, I had no issues with Jesus or the Holy Spirit, but I struggled to see God as “Father.” Having only my personal experience as a reference point, I wondered if God would be like a bigger version of my dad. Would He leave me when I failed? Punish me for not measuring up? For years I wrestled with the concept of God as Father.

Then sometime later I read a quote from the brilliant theologian A. W. Tozer that literally changed my life. He said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”⁵ Why? Because how we see God determines how we relate to God, and how we relate to God determines everything else about us. After hearing those words, and determining them to be true, I realized I would never become all I was intended to be until I could see God for who He is, not whom I imagined Him to be.

Stop here for a minute. Try it—think about God right now. What comes into your mind? What feelings or images come to you? What does He “look” like to you? How do you think He feels about you? Be honest here—don't give some churchy answer that you think you're supposed to give if that's not what you really feel deep inside.

So now let me ask, when you think of your *earthly* father, what is the first thing that comes into your mind? Provider? Teacher? Generous? Funny? Or, perhaps like me, you think of abandonment, abuse, or neglect? Maybe you think passive or uninterested? Controlling and judgmental? Some of you will be thinking of a dad who expected more than you could ever give or more than you could ever be. I have friends—successful

businessmen and church leaders—who to this day are still trying to please that kind of father. Perhaps your father loved you but never disciplined you. Or maybe your dad was loving and amazing!

Regardless of your answer, I think that whatever comes to mind when you think about your father, there is a good chance that you attribute similar characteristics to your image of your heavenly Father. Simply put, your image of God has been formed and shaped by the father figures in your life, as explained by mental-health nurse Juanita Ryan:

Long before we were old enough to think in words, we thought in pictures or images. These images are loaded with emotion. From the first days of life we began storing memories of our emotional experiences. Images of our mother's face when she was distressed and when she was pleased, or of our father's face when he was angry or when he was laughing—all are stored in our memory. These images became linked with the soothing we felt or with the increased fear we felt in interacting with these important faces and voices. All of our experiences, from our earliest days, have been stored in our minds, some of them as emotionally laden images. These emotionally laden images of parents or of other early caretakers form the basic foundation of our expectations in relationships with all other people, including God.⁶

So many of us have drawn a picture of Dad in our minds, and that image has been transferred to how we see and relate to God. But guess what? That image of God is inaccurate. And if there's one thing I want you to hear me say, it's that *God is not a bigger version of your earthly father.*

Looking Through a Distorted Lens

The distortion of how we see God ultimately comes from what the Bible refers to as our Enemy or the devil: Satan. Satan is a liar who wants to distort, discredit, and deceive you about God the Father. Satan isn't just a liar but “the father of lies” (John 8:44), and his number-one goal is to deceive you by making God out to be less than He is. Deception, in fact, is the primary tool Satan uses to misdirect your attention away from a God who is massively in love with you and died in your place so that you have the opportunity to live with Him in heaven forever.

If Satan can distort your image of God, he can destroy your life. You will be unable to relate to the father heart of God, and you will never experience the intimacy, love, and complete acceptance that await you. Through his misdirection, you'll miss the best relationship possible this side of heaven.

Too often we believe the lies, and in doing so, we miss the full nature, character, and goodness of God. We won't approach God as the perfect Father that He is, but instead try to gain His love through performance, thinking we are bad and He is mad at us. So many who already know Jesus spend time worrying they will lose their salvation (which they never *earned* to start with). That is one of Satan's biggest lies! Others see God as a policeman, or as passively uninvolved, unconcerned, and too busy running the universe to possibly care about the details of their lives.

You May Have Given Up on God, but He Hasn't Given Up on You

Some of you would say you have no desire for a relationship with God. Your image of God may be so distorted you have nixed the possibility of forming any kind of connection with Him. I hope you will continue to read. The ultimate goal of this book is not that our minds would be informed but that our hearts would be transformed. It is my hope that your image of God would be clearer and brighter tomorrow than it is today and that your relationship with Him would be stronger.

If you are reading this book but couldn't care less about God, the truth is, there is a part of you that really does care; and although you have stopped thinking about engaging in a relationship with Him, He has never stopped pursuing you. God has revealed Himself through His creation, and you can see evidence of Him all around. He has also revealed Himself in each of our hearts. The Bible tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end."

God Is God, Not Your Earthly Dad

I'm going to say this over and over again: God is not a bigger version of your earthly father. These words may bring tears to your eyes because you so want this to be true. You have resisted God because you wanted nothing to do with a heavenly Father who could

possibly be a bigger version of the dad you experienced as a child. Neither did I. After I came to Christ and heard about God being a father to me, I wanted to turn in my salvation at the neighborhood Goodwill store. I did not want another father, and certainly not if He was the kind of father I'd already had. (I'll tell you more about my dad experiences in the next chapter, and then you'll understand why I felt this way.)

I had to know God was different, so I spent countless hours studying, thinking, talking with professors, and asking pastors and friends about the character of God the Father. I was soon convinced that our heavenly Father is like no father I had ever known! We will talk much more in a later chapter about the perfect father, but for now please open your mind and heart to the possibility of a Father unlike your own...a Father unlike any other.

I love this verse: "See how very much our Father loves us, *for he calls us his children*, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don't recognize that we are God's children because they don't know him" (1 John 3:1).

I pray that through the pages of this book, the distorted image you have of God can be realigned with the truth, and that you can walk in the full joy and understanding of what it means to be a child of the most high God. It is only when we face reality that we can change things. It is only through brokenness we can truly be made whole. Sometimes, in order to move forward toward healing, we have to go backward a little first. We may have to reopen a wound so it can heal properly.

I am so glad that God recycles our pain. He really does use for good the things that Satan means for harm (see Genesis 50:20). I found this to be so true in my own life. In the next chapter, you'll read my own dad story. I hope my story, my life, and the things I have learned can bring hope to you and to anyone who may be hurt, broken, or stuck because of father wounds.



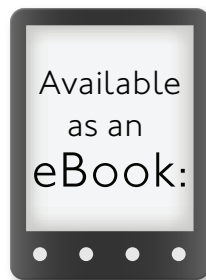
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