

Different:

God Is Different



People who are cold often like a hot drink.

Or so I'm told. I don't drink coffee, and I don't like milk, so I don't drink hot chocolate very often either. I only occasionally drink hot tea. But ski resorts and cities like Seattle and Portland and New York seem to be filled with shops that serve hot drinks. Drinks that are warmer than the outside air must make cold people feel better. That makes perfect sense.

All of this profundity filtered through my mind as I drove down Sanders Road in a suburb north of Chicago. I had just driven away from a client's office on a brutally cold night and was heading off to my hotel to spend a quiet evening doing something other than work. Leaving the company's complex, I had waited at the exit in my rental car while a bundled-up policeman, sporting a handheld beacon, directed traffic.

No doubt you have seen powerful searchlights that create burning columns of curiosity in the sky. They often surround stadiums during big sporting events or casinos that need just a few more people's savings. They're like the light to signal Batman but without the bat. Well, this policeman had a mini-version of one of those lights, but in red. He stuck it right in my eyes until it was safe to pull out of the complex. He didn't seem to mind that

after his "signal" to go, I couldn't see anything but an enormous burned-out circle everywhere I looked. But I hit the gas anyway and turned left onto the street.

As I accelerated down the road, slowly regaining sight in the huge burned-out circle in front of my car, I saw another policeman about a quarter of a mile in front of me. He too was standing in the median strip while directing traffic, but he was at a smaller gate and therefore did not have as much to do. At this point, my car's heater hadn't warmed up much, so I was still pretty cold, and the thought occurred to me that this guy must be unbearably cold. That is when the revelation poured over me: People who are cold often like a hot drink.

After passing this second policeman, I made a U-turn at the next turn lane and headed back down the same street I had just driven, intending to slow down briefly beside him, stick my head out my window, and say, "Good evening. It looks pretty cold out here. Would you like me to get you a cup of coffee or hot chocolate?" I thought this would be just what he needed. Never mind that he would be taking coffee from a stranger; I figured that when a man is really, really, ridiculously cold, as this man must have been, he will take a hot drink from a grizzly bear.

I thought of Christ, standing as King before all the nations of the world in judgment, separating the sheep on His right and the goats on His left, saying to those on His right, "I was thirsty, and you gave me drink...when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!"¹ If I am to understand this passage correctly, it appears when I give a thirsty man a drink, I give a thirsty Jesus a drink. I don't know if this man was thirsty, but I am quite certain he was cold, and I thought the principle still applied.

As I drove toward the policeman, I noted my surroundings in order to ensure my offer to him was made in safety. No cars were in front of me as far as I

could see, and no cars were behind me either. So the road was essentially empty except for me and this policeman. As I slowed, I simultaneously rolled down my window and started to say, "Good eve—" But before I could finish my invitation, I heard a piercing yell out of the darkness.

"DON'T STOP ON THE ROAD! WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?"

Not wanting to disobey a cop, I quickly accelerated past him, hearing, "What kind of idiot stops on a road?" as I rolled up the window.

Hmm.

That is what I thought to myself for a good five seconds. I realized I must be the kind of idiot who stops on a road. I admit I was a little taken aback, and I experienced a momentary lapse into self-righteousness: *Well, fine! If you're going to be like that, you can freeze to death for all I care.* But my indignation slowly thawed as I continued to drive.

So I initiated another U-turn and headed back toward my new, cold, grumpy friend. Because he had strongly discouraged me from stopping on the road on my previous attempt, I thought of a new approach. Directly across the road from this man was an entrance to another office complex. I decided to park there, put on my hazard lights, and brave the cold to make my offer face-to-face.

As soon as I got out of the car, the policeman started waving his arms around. I thought, *Surely he must be waving me toward him.* So I looked both ways for traffic and, seeing none for at least half a mile, began walking across the street. I heard another piercing yell out of the darkness.

"DO NOT CROSS THE STREET! IT'S NOT SAFE OUT HERE! GO BACK TO YOUR CAR!"

I could not see what was so dangerous about two men talking on an empty road at night. But he was a cop, so he must have known more about this

sort of thing than me. At that point, I deduced he was, in fact, waving me *away* from him, not toward him. So I dutifully returned to the side of my automobile, now intent on yelling my offer across the street. I thought he might respond better to communication of his kind.

The only problem was that a stream of traffic appeared on the road at that moment, and I could not say anything that could be heard for at least 30 seconds as the cars passed by. So I waited by my car in the cold, and he continued to wave his arms around and yell unintelligible things in my direction.

You might have left at this point, and you would have been smart to do so, but I did not. After all the cars had passed, and we were again alone on the road, I finally yelled across the street, "HI! I'M SORRY FOR THE CONFUSION. I JUST WANTED TO KNOW IF YOU WANTED—"

He apparently knew what I was going to say because he cut me off again.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU! GET AWAY FROM HERE! IT'S DANGEROUS! GET AWAY! YOU'RE BEING WATCHED BY A SECURITY CAMERA. GET AWAY!"

Perhaps he didn't know what I was going to say after all. Clearly, he didn't care. After a while, I concluded that our dialogue wasn't going to happen as planned. I thought of a number of other ways I could bring this guy coffee, but I finally gave up and drove off, content to quit trying to show him Christ's love and instead just to think about it, which is always the easier thing to do, right?

So what happened that night? One thing is for sure: The man stayed cold. And he deserved it, I say.

Wait—I'm just kidding. I think. I know the reason I first thought about stopping was this notion that Jesus was thirsty or cold or hungry and that I could do something about it, which seems to be a good enough reason



by itself. But I'm finding that something deeper is always going on when God is involved.

I assume Jesus was teaching me something about His kind of love. When I say I love others, He expects me to love them the same way I love Him. And I say I would do anything for Jesus, even give my life for Him. So does that mean I would give my life for this cop? This same man, the one I thought could freeze to death just because he wasn't kind to me? I'm not sure I would.

But in spite of my own fickle heart, I was still there, doing something I wouldn't normally do, thinking about someone else instead of living in my own little world the way I do most days. And I didn't see any other drivers stopping to talk to these cops either. So something out of the ordinary was going on that night, and this reminded me of some of the silliness you've already observed in my life.

Let's go back to something awkward: How about trying to stick a note in some young girl's bag? Or we could go with something embarrassing instead: How about sitting on a folding chair in front of a sign that says, "Ask anything about God" in front of a thousand snickering people? Or perhaps delusional is more your cup of coffee: How about believing I could master the practice of prayer, something history's greatest saints have wrestled with all of their lives, with three weeks and a little green sticky note?

These things seem awkward, embarrassing, and delusional, but they are also somewhat convicting, inspiring, and encouraging. Let's be honest; all of them make me (and you, whenever you do things like them) a little weird. But I'm also seeing something important in my pursuit of Christ, in my desperate attempt to shed the cloak of comfortable Christianity, in my cravings for more of God.

I've now realized God is different, and I suppose I've always suspected

this to some degree, which is why I have tried all these things that were weird and different. This concept—God is different—is almost not even worth saying. When I take the time to think about it, it is, of course, quite obvious. God is God, and we are not, so He must be different. He even spells this out for us in Scripture, where He says, “My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”² He is the light to our darkness, the big to our small, the hot to our cold.

In order to get a better understanding of this concept, let’s play a little game called IF I WERE GOD. The point of the game is to figure out what we would have done were we in God’s position and then see how close we can come to the real God’s decisions. We’ll start with the account of King Hezekiah.³

Hezekiah was one of the good kings in the Old Testament. He ascended to the throne of the southern kingdom of Judah at the age of 25, and he cleansed the temple, tore down all the altars built to foreign gods, and restored worship to a nation who had forsaken their God. “He trusted in the LORD...so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him...And the LORD was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered.”⁴

Fourteen years into his reign, Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrians, but God struck down Judah’s enemies, killing 185,000 in one night. The sight of God’s mighty hand, if not the stench of death, must have left a lifelong impression on Hezekiah. So he continued leading his people, and God blessed him so that he was held in great esteem by all the surrounding nations. When he fell deathly sick, God heard his prayer and healed him, even adding 15 years to his life.

But eventually, late in his life, Hezekiah became comfortable and proud, forgetting what his God had done for him. In an act of royal pride, he paraded a Babylonian envoy around his entire kingdom. As a consequence,



the prophet Isaiah came to him to tell him God would bring destruction on his house and that sons of his line would be carried off to Babylon and made into eunuchs. How did Hezekiah respond to this terrible news? "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?'"⁵

IF I WERE GOD, I would have gone ballistic. I would have struck him with boils or sent Babylon back to lead him off in chains, making a eunuch out of him in front of all his people. Sure, this guy had been a great king and had done all sorts of righteous things, but after I delivered him miraculously from the hand of his enemy, spared his life when he was on his deathbed, *and* gave him 15 more years of life, he starts showing off and looking out for number one?

But God is not like me at all; in fact, He waited a hundred years to carry out His judgment, and Hezekiah ultimately died in peace. So I didn't do so well on this round. Let's try another.

Scripture says that God considered King David, Israel's second and most revered king, to be "a man after his own heart."⁶ As you may know, David was chosen by God to be king even while he was a young shepherd. David made a name for himself, becoming a great warrior, and after running from King Saul for years, he was finally installed as the people's king. He defeated all of Israel's enemies, brought the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem, and pleased the Lord so much that God made a covenant with him to establish His eternal kingdom through David's line (a prophecy about the Messiah).

All was well with David until one year when he did not go out with his men to battle. Staying behind, he loitered in his palace, and he happened to see a beautiful woman bathing. He sent for her, slept with her, impregnated her, and had her husband murdered, finally taking her as his wife. When the prophet Nathan came to him and told him an allegory of his own

sin, David even cast judgment on himself unawares. Only when he was confronted with what he had done did he come clean, finally repenting to the Lord.

IF I WERE GOD, I don't know what I would have done to David, but I would have done something. Perhaps I would have struck him with a sickness, or maybe I would have sent enemies to attack him. Maybe if I had been in a really good mood, I would have had mercy on him altogether, hearing his cries of repentance and forgiving him for what he had done. After all, he was (or at least had been) the man after my own heart, right?

But God did something quite different: He spared David's life, and He instead took the life of this love child on the seventh day after his birth.⁷ What? Wait a minute! This innocent baby didn't do anything. Why did he bear the punishment his father deserved? This wasn't fair—what was God doing? Isn't He a just and loving God?

Or how about the time King David brought the ark of the covenant, Israel's most prized possession, to Jerusalem, the seat of the nation and the future site of God's temple? You may remember what happened. David and all Israel went up to Kiriath-jearim, where the ark was located, loaded it on a cart, and headed for home. The two drivers of the cart, Uzzah and Ahio, must have felt like this was a pretty important responsibility. This was the ark of their living God! They went along their merry way until all of a sudden, the oxen stumbled, and the ark began to slip. So Uzzah put out his hand to steady the ark and keep it from falling. Seems like a great thing, right?

IF I WERE GOD, I would reward this man for his quick mind and quicker hands, perhaps moving in David's heart to promote Uzzah or stand him before the people of Israel and tell them all how he had saved God's ark from crashing to the ground. But God did something else entirely. His anger burned against Uzzah, and He killed him that day because of Uzzah's presumptuous error in touching the ark.

I'm finding that this game isn't working out too well. If God is a good God, I would apparently be a terrible God. To be completely honest, though, my answers reveal that I actually think I would make a better God than God. After all, my responses seem like they would be fair in my own mind, and I don't know that I can say the same about God's. Perhaps you share my sentiments.

If you remember, we started with the realization that God is different from us, and we're seeing just how different He really is. He's way different, far beyond anything I'm really comfortable believing if I were to be totally honest. He does things that violate my sense of justice and desecrate my understanding of love. We can talk all day about craving God, but some of these accounts from the Bible beg the question, am I sure I want so much more of this God?

After all, this is the God who made a perfect man and put him in a garden with two trees, one that would bring life and one that would bring death.⁸ Wouldn't the garden have been better with just the one tree?

This is the God who created the heavens and the earth and man and called them good (He even called man "very good") and then a short time later decided He was sorry He had made them, ultimately deciding to flood the entire earth.⁹ If God knew this would happen, why not just make better people in the first place?

This is the God who hardened Pharaoh's heart, who raised up this leader in order to demonstrate His power, bringing plague after plague and ultimately death to him and his people.¹⁰ How was this fair to Pharaoh?

This is the God who planned and predestined the beatings, torture, and murder of His beloved Son.¹¹ Couldn't God's plan have been accomplished without the gut-wrenching agony and blood-spurting sport of Roman execution?

We shudder at the prospect of a God so terrifying and powerful, but this is also the God who loved the world so much that He sent His one and only Son to suffer and die that horrible death because of what it means for us.¹² Who are we that we merit this kind of sacrifice?

This is also the God who turned the fiercest enemy of the early church into its greatest missionary.¹³ Who was Paul that he was counted worthy of this mercy and honor?

This is also the God who “chose us in him before the foundation of the world,” saving us by His grace through our faith irrespective of anything we have ever done.¹⁴ Who are we to receive the glorious inheritance of Christ without doing anything to deserve it?

This is also the God who has gone to prepare a place for His followers, who is coming back again to do away with sin and death and tears, who will create a new heaven and a new earth, and who will dwell with His people forever.¹⁵ Who are we, such fragile and insignificant beings, that we should enjoy all of eternity with this amazing God?

This is also the God who takes it personally when we offer food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothes to the naked, companionship to the imprisoned, comfort to the sick, and perhaps even coffee to the cold. What kind of marvelous God is this who identifies with the weakest of humanity?

God *is* different. He’s much more terrifying than I had imagined but also so much more glorious and beautiful than I thought possible. I’ve spent too many years glossing over hard truths about God in favor of pleasant ones in an attempt to make Him more palatable to my taste or softer to the touch of others’ ears. In the process, I have developed inch-deep beliefs about a mile-high God.



I know this is hard to deal with intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, but the simplicity and cogency of Scripture bring us face-to-face with a God who takes our sin and His holiness really seriously. He takes love and mercy seriously too. If A.W. Tozer was correct when he said that “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” then we have no choice but to embrace the smooth wine and the hardtack of God’s descriptions of Himself.¹⁶ When we are tempted not to savor the wine or to spit out the hardtack, we must resist the urge to adjust our beliefs about God to suit our sensibilities.

It seems that when we encounter a hard truth about God, we either bend our understanding to Him or bend Him to our understanding.

For those of us who find we are guilty of bending God to our understanding, we would do well to take note of the well-worn, battle-tested, God-centered theology that John Piper intimates when he says, “When God is seen with edges (He is this, and He’s not that), I can know Him. This is Him; that’s not Him. This is worth dying for; that’s not worth dying for. Clear, precise [knowledge] about God, about Christ, about faith, about the cross, about the Holy Spirit awakens [our] passions.”¹⁷

We could think of Dr. Piper’s words in another way: We see true things about God in the full revelation of Scripture, and we begin to believe untrue things about God when we ignore some parts of His revelation in favor of others. The true things are worth dying for, and they’re worth living for. The untrue things are not.

I now understand I have spent too many years trying to polish God’s edges or ignore them altogether because believing in Him is easier when He doesn’t challenge my beliefs about Him than when He does. After all, if I believe in a God who does things I would never do, what does that say about me?

But I’m learning to see the goodness in God’s edges. When Dr. Piper says

clear, precise knowledge about God awakens our passions, I believe him because I recognize the glory and grandeur of worshipping a God whose ways and thoughts are higher than my own. And when I ask myself if I really want so much more of this God, the answer is yes, but my answer has more gravity than it did before because I now feel I have to mean it from somewhere deeper within my soul. Maybe this is because believing hard things about God costs more than believing easy things.

I'm learning that just because something is hard, that doesn't mean it's not true. Comfortable Christians do easy things while Christ-followers do hard things.¹⁸ Picking up our crosses daily is hard, loving our enemies is hard, turning the other cheek is hard, and embracing the holiness of God that envelopes the hardtack of His wrath and the sweet wine of His mercy is hard. The hard things require serious answers to our questions about this God we crave.

Thinking about these kinds of Christ-honoring, edge-affirming, hard things takes me back to the awkward, embarrassing, and delusional actions we talked about earlier, like sticking a note in some young girl's bag or sitting on a folding chair in the middle of a mall and asking people to give me their theological best shot. If you were to ask me what hard things I've done for God, I would probably point to those. And they were hard, and they were different, but they weren't the hardest kinds of things.

I suppose the hardest kinds of things are rarely external; they are almost always the exploration of what's inside us. I can face the fears of street witnessing with just a little courage and companionship from other Christian weirdoes, but it's far more terrifying to excavate the reasons why I spend most of the time in that chair making judgments of the people I meet. And even that doesn't sound so bad when compared to digging deeper and finding a belief that God may not save the people I'm talking to because He chose not to save them before they were even born.

We all must eventually answer this question: What happens when we

look deep inside? What if we find something about ourselves we don't want to discover? Even worse, what if we find out something about God we don't want to know?

These are tough questions with no easy answers, but my cravings for more of God tell me to keep digging. I'm finding that a soul saturated in Scripture will ultimately find the pure water of God's supreme difference deep beneath the surface, and this different kind of water, a living kind of water, satisfies.¹⁹

I don't know if these questions and thoughts scare you or bore you, but I invite you all the same to consider how different this living water, the kind of water that never makes you thirsty again, truly is. Our consideration should bring to mind all sorts of questions, and they're not the easy kind of questions we would probably prefer.

How badly do we want this kind of water? Are we willing to ask Jesus for it? Are we willing to do hard things like being weirdoes for Christ when He tells us to do things we'd rather not? Are we open to doing harder things like examining the parts of our hearts we've hidden for so long? Are we ready to do the hardest things like embracing the God of the Bible in all His glorious fury and tenderness?

I raise a toast to those of you who have decided to drink this different kind of water, believing all the while that it will not only satisfy our cravings for God but also change us in the process. As He goes about changing us, we will begin to more easily turn the other cheek when hit, show love in response to hate, and even show kindness to heat-starved, grumpy cops. He will grant us the courage to examine our own hearts against the purity of His Son. And He will give us the wisdom to rethink everything we believe about Him, using the sweeping wind of Scripture to blow away the chaff of our superficial faith.

After all, God is in the process of making us different, just like Him.²⁰