



**User's Guide
for
*Recovery From
Distorted Images of God***

by Juanita Ryan

*“What comes into our minds
when we think about God is
the most important thing about
us. ...The most portentous fact
about any man
[or woman] is not
what he at a given time
may say or do,
but what he
in his deep heart
conceives
God to be like.”*

A. W. Tozer

The Knowledge of the Holy

Course Outline

Welcome	4
Suggestions for Leaders	5
Session One: Introduction.....	8
Session Two: The Nature of Images	10
Session Three: Eight Common Distortions of God: Part I	12
Session Four: Eight Common Distortions of God: Part II	14
Session Five: Possible Origins of Distortions: Religious Systems and Teachings ..	16
Session Six: Possible Origins of Distortions: Family Systems and Dynamics	18
Session Seven: Saying ‘No’ to False Gods: Identifying Our Distortions	20
Session Eight: Saying ‘No’ to False Gods: Identifying Possible Origins.....	24
Session Nine: Saying ‘Maybe’ to God: Acknowledging our Powerlessness and Inviting God to Heal Us.....	26
Session Ten: Saying ‘Maybe Not’ and ‘Maybe’ to God: Taking Inventory of Resentments and Fears	28
Session Eleven: Saying ‘Yes’ to Receiving God’s Love: The Practice of Gratitude	32
Session Twelve: Saying ‘Yes’ to Resting and Living in God’s Love: The Practices of Surrender and Service	34

Welcome

Welcome to this 12 session course on Recovery from Distorted Images of God! I am so grateful for each of you who have decided to participate in this course.

Many of us live with private images of God that do not match our stated beliefs about God. We may intellectually believe in a God of love and grace, but find ourselves privately struggling with fears about God. These fears may leave us trying hard to earn God's approval, trying hard to avoid God's anger, or trying hard to "get it right".

Underneath our fears and our striving, there may be buried images of God as impossible to please, or punitive or abandoning. These distorted images of God are likely to have a more powerful impact on our emotions and behaviors than our theological ideas or doctrinal statements. The reason for this is that our private distorted images of God are emotionally laden pictures that are often rooted in conclusions we drew about God in a time of pain, or when we were children forming beliefs about ourselves and about God with little understanding of how to make sense out of times that felt frightening or distressing.

For this reason, our distorted images of God may be the source of some of our greatest suffering in life. It is this great suffering that this course seeks to address.

In the first half of this course, I describe what our distortions are like and how they can impact our life. Specifically I explore the nature and power of our private images, eight common distortions about God and possible origins of these distortions.

Then, in the second half of the course, I lay out a possible path towards healing and recovery. This includes first, identifying our distorted images so we can begin to say "no" to these distortions and turn away from these false gods. Second, it involves saying "maybe" to the God of love and grace made known to us in Jesus, and looking for ways to begin to actively turn toward God who is God. And finally, it includes exploring ways to say "yes" to receiving and resting in God's unfailing, steadfast, powerful, personal for us all.

Scripture is rich in imagery about God. We read in Scripture about God the Good Shepherd, God the Comforter, God the Prince of Peace, God the Mother Eagle, God the Forgiving Father, God the Creator of all, God the Giver of every good and perfect gift, God who came to us in Jesus.

This course makes use of this rich biblical imagery. Each session will end with a reading of a text from Scripture that offers a glimpse of God's goodness and power and grace. For some who have had Scriptures used against them, this might feel distressing at first. But what I have discovered is that biblical images have the ability to move past our defenses and to speak the truth of God's love and grace and goodness into our hearts' deepest longings.

I offer this material with prayers that what I have to share in this course will bring new hope and healing to your life. My prayer is that "the God of Hope will fill you with peace and joy as you come to trust God" more and more (Romans 15:13).

What This Course Is Not

It is important to have realistic expectations of this course. This course is designed to help participants explore private distortions about God, that may be rooted in painful life events, and that can act like weeds in the gardens of our hearts and minds--weeds that tend to choke out the good news of God's love and grace.

This course is not intended to be a course on theology. It is not intended to provide the "right answers" about who God is. Nor is it intended to be everything-the-Bible-says about God, or to respond to participants' questions about challenging biblical texts.

It is also important to emphasize that this course is not intended to provide a recovery program or to replace other important resources in recovery. If you are in a counseling relationship, or working with a spiritual director, my prayer is that this course will enrich that relationship. If you are involved in a twelve step group or support group, or working with a sponsor, it is my hope that this course will enrich that resource as well.

Suggestions for Using this Material on Your Own

If you are using this material on your own, I encourage you to find some way to discuss the content of each session with another person or with a small group. Although each person's recovery is different, everyone's recovery is empowered by the mutual support and encouragement that can only be found in a one-on-one or a group setting.

I also want to encourage you to ask someone you feel safe with, in addition to the person or persons you are discussing this material with, to be available to you for additional support and to be praying for you as you go through this course.

The course is designed to be processed and absorbed over time. It would be best to watch the twelve sessions over a six to twelve week time span, making sure you allow time for writing and reflection after each session.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, I en-

courage you to invite God to be your Teacher and Comforter and Healer before you watch each session and before you write after each session.

In addition to responses to the questions at the end of each session, you may want to journal other reflections you may have. The writing and discussing you do in response to each session will help you process and absorb the material in ways I pray will bring new hope and strength to your life.

Suggestions for Using this Material in a Group: Notes for Group Facilitators

If you are using this course as the basis of a small group discussion, you will want to plan twelve group sessions, probably over the course of twelve weeks time, viewing one video presentation each time you meet together.

Each video session is from 25 minutes to 38 minutes long. This allows you time to first, view a session together and then to allow participants 20 to 30 minutes to write and reflect on the session, using the questions that are provided at the end of each session (and which are also found in this Users' Guide). And, finally, it allows time to come together as a group for 30 minutes (or more, depending on how long a time you schedule for your group to meet each week) to share reflections and responses to the session and to the questions.

It is very important to allow time for participants to write and reflect on their own before spending time discussing the material as a group. Allowing time for individual reflection and writing can dramatically enrich the experience for each participant and can greatly enhance the time of sharing as a group.

For this reason, this User's Guide is set up in a workbook format. The questions that are suggested at the end of each session are included here with space provided for participants to write reflections. There is also a brief outline of each session with space provided to take notes.

Getting Started: Suggestions for the First Group Session

In the first session you will want to begin your time by welcoming the group and allowing time for introductions, making sure everyone in the group has met everyone and that everyone knows they are welcome.

You might also want to say a few words about the structure of your time together, including the length of the video, the time that will be allotted to write and reflect individually and the time that will be given to group discussion.

Be sure that everyone has a copy of this User's Guide. You might have participants print one out at home before the first meeting. You might also have paper and pens available in case some do not have their Guide with them.

It is important that you reassure participants that they are not required to share in the group discussion, and that whatever they write is theirs to keep and does not have to be shared with the group. You also want to make it clear that you welcome anything that they each may have to share from their reflections on the topic being discussed.

Before you begin the video session each time, you might want to offer a simple prayer, inviting God's Spirit to bring new truth and hope and healing to each one.

If your group is larger than eight participants, you might want to break the group into smaller groups for discussion, with a designated facilitator for each group.

It can be helpful to read the simple reminders listed here with the group as you begin your first session.

1. Realize that trust grows over time. If sharing in a group setting feels risky, realize that you do not have to share more than feels safe. However, what you have to share will enrich the discussion. So do participate in the discussion as much as you are able.
2. Do your best to listen attentively to other participants. You do not need to share the same perspectives or experiences in order to learn from each other.

er. In fact, our differences can enrich us and broaden our understanding.

When you share, try to stay focused on the topic at hand. And be aware of leaving plenty of time for others to share.

Group Guidelines

I strongly recommend taking a few moments to read the following guidelines out loud at the beginning of each session together.

1. Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.
2. We will provide time for each person present to talk if they feel comfortable doing so.
3. We will listen attentively and respectfully to each other and will refrain from giving advice.

Facilitating the Group Discussion

As a facilitator, you will want to welcome participants at the beginning of each session, show the video and then give the group time to do some individual writing and reflecting. Encourage participants to respond to the questions as they can and to take time to write whatever other thoughts and reflections they might have in response to the video presentation. You can give the group 20 to 30 minutes for this individual reflection time and then call the group back together for a time of discussion. Your role in facilitating the discussion is simply to invite people to share from their time of writing and reflecting. Feel free to share honestly from your own reflections as well. Try to end on time, closing with prayer--perhaps joining hands and praying The Lord's Prayer together.

Listening to Emotional Distress

Be aware that the topic being discussed is often rooted in deep emotional and spiritual pain for people. So listening to emotional pain will be part of the experience of being a leader and a participant in this group. The goal is to simply make room for

each other's expressions of distress, to honor these expressions--not by trying to "fix" or "minimize" the pain--but by acknowledging the pain that is being shared and by thanking the person for what they have shared.

1. Remember that you are not responsible to take the pain away. People in helping relationships often feel that they are being asked to make the other person feel better. When we are in distress, having others try to "make us feel better" actually serves to make us feel alone, minimized, and even disrespected.

2. Not only are you not responsible to take the pain away, one of the things people need most is an opportunity to face and to experience the pain in their life. They have usually spent years denying their pain and running from it. Healing can come when we are able to face our pain in the presence of someone who cares about us. Rather than trying to take the pain away, then, commit yourself to listening attentively as it is expressed.

3. Realize that some group members may not feel comfortable with other participants' expressions of sadness or distress. You may want to acknowledge that such emotions are uncomfortable, but you can remind the group that part of healing is to learn to feel and to allow others to feel.

4. Be very cautious about giving answers and advice. Advice and answers may make you feel better or feel competent, but they may also minimize peoples' problems and their painful feelings. Simple solutions rarely work, and they can easily communicate "You should be better now."

5. Be sure to communicate direct affirmation any time people talk about their painful emotions. It takes courage to talk about our pain because it creates anxiety for us. It is a great gift to be trusted by those who are struggling.

Responding to Spiritual Distress

The biblical texts we will reflect on in this course all speak of God's love and grace. It is likely that some people who will meditate on these texts will feel anxious or uncomfortable. Some might experience

the texts with skepticism or as too-good-to-be-true. Others may respond with: "Yes, but...". Or bring up other texts--texts that seem to present a frightening image of God. As a group facilitator, or as a fellow participant, you need to know that it will be helpful to resist any instinct you may have to try to defend the biblical text or the God that is presented in the Bible. There are appropriate places for arguments about such matters but, for present purposes, our goals are quite limited. The goal for this course is to help people, even for just a few moments, to take in the possibility that God really is a God of love and grace. To achieve this goal you do not need to have "answers" for more complicated questions.

What might be helpful:

1. It might be helpful to acknowledge that all of us resist at some level the image of God as loving because we have all experienced powerful people who were not loving.

2. It might be helpful to acknowledge that texts which seem to present God as unloving or violent exist in the biblical text and that they are the cause, for many of us, of spiritual distress and doubts.

3. It might be helpful to encourage participants to ask God to show them more about why these texts are in the Bible, and to invite God to continue to free them to experience God's grace, mercy and love more deeply.

4. It might be helpful to refer people with questions about difficult texts to the following web pages which provide some starting points for deeper study:

Texts abusers abuse:

http://www.recoveryfromabuse.com/?page_id=39

Overview of OT texts about violence:

http://www.recoveryfromabuse.com/?page_id=72

Overview of N.T. Gospels:

http://www.recoveryfromabuse.com/?page_id=73

Session One: Introduction

Outline:

1. We tend to live with private images of God and our private images of God are profoundly significant. They deeply effect every thing about us.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ...The most portentous fact about any man [or woman] is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.”

A.W. Tozer *The Knowledge of the Holy*

2. Pursuing healing for our distorted images of God can be emotionally challenging.

“Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what is is. Only after an ordeal of painful self probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God.”

A. W. Tozer from *The Knowledge of the Holy*

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What do you hope to get from this course?

2. What conflict are you aware of between what you intellectually believe to be true about God and what you privately fear to be true about God?

3. What was your experience as you listened to the reading from Psalm 3?

Session Two: The Nature of Images

Outline

1. Images:

not the same as ideas

powerful

may be hidden from awareness

2. The Practical Significance of God Images

can have a powerful hold on our feelings and behavior

can have a powerful impact on our spiritual well being

can have powerful impact on our self image

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. When you are feeling anxious, what is it like for you to talk with God about what you are needing and what you are feeling?

2. What spiritual or emotional distress are you aware of experiencing?

3. What was your response as you listened to the reading of the text from Isaiah?

Session Three: Common Distorted Images of God

Part I

Outline:

1. The God of Impossible Expectations versus the God of Compassion
2. The Emotionally Distant God versus the God of Empathy and Grace
3. The Inattentive God versus the God Who Knows us Intimately
4. The Abusive God versus the God Who Heals Us

Session Four: Common Distorted Images of God Part II

Outline:

1. The Unreliable God versus the Trustworthy God
2. The God who Abandons versus the God who Pursues Us
3. The God who Withholds versus the God who Provides
4. The God who is Weak or Passive versus the God who is All Powerful

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Which of these distortions do you relate to?
2. How do they effect your self understanding?
3. How do they effect your relationship with God?
4. What was your response to the reading from Isaiah 40?

Session Five: Possible Origins of Our Distortions Religious Systems and Teachings

Outline

1. Ways shame can be passed on by religious leaders and teachers:

Performing to gain God's approval.

Enforcing a "don't talk" rule.

Reading Scripture through a lens of fear and shame.

2. What gives religious leaders power to influence our images of God?

They often speak with authority.

We are drawn to religious systems that match our private images.

They often speak into our lives in times when we are vulnerable.

3. Jesus spoke truth and grace to the religious leaders of his time.

Session Six: Possible Origins of Our Distortions Family Systems and Dynamics

Outline

1. Family Systems can be Shame Based

Performance orientation

Living by the “don’t talk rule.”

Caught up in addiction, codependency, abuse or neglect

2. God in shame Based Family Systems

3. Non Religious Shame Based Family Systems

4. Relationship Dynamics in the Family

5. Our True Father

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What was your experience as you put yourself in this story as the returning son?

2. What was your experience as you put yourself in this story as the older son?

3. What does this story say to you about God?

Session Seven: Saying "No" to gods who are not God

Identifying our Distortions

Outline

1. Challenges to identifying our distorted images of God

1. Disbelief
2. Shame
3. Resistance
4. Fear

2. Identifying distorted images of God

1. We might begin to observe our general state of anxiety in relation to God.
2. We might also observe how we see ourselves and how we see others.

3. Writing Exercise I:

4. Writing Exercise 2:

Make a list of all the fearful thoughts or images or reactions you might have about God. Even if they are not pronounced in the moment. Just list whatever comes to mind.

Then list the words and phrases used to describe love in I Corinthians 13: 4-7. Love is Patient. Love is Kind.

Then write this list again, changing the language to God is patient, God is kind....

Finally, compare your list of fears about God with this list of words and phrases describing the God of love.

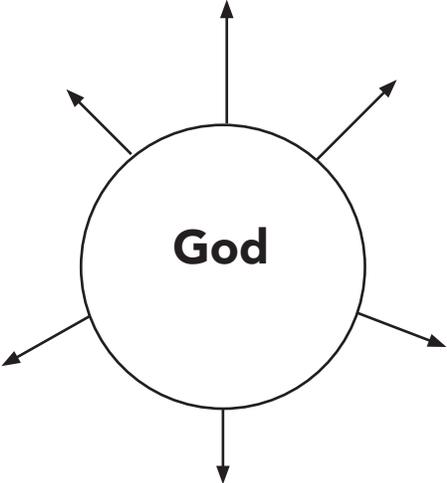
How do the two lists compare?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What distress are you aware of in your relationships with God?

2. What anxieties or insecurities are you aware of in your relationships with others?

3. Writing Exercise 1



Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What distress or fear or shame might have grown out of your experiences with religious teachings and religious systems? How might have these experiences contributed to your private distortions of God?
2. What distress or fears or shame might you be carrying with you from your experiences with important others in your life? How might have these experiences contributed to private distortions of God?
3. What problems and what benefits might you experience in beginning to say “No” to your private distorted images of God?
4. What was your experience of listening to the reading from Psalm 27?

Session 9: Saying "Maybe" to the God of Love and Grace Inviting God to Heal Us

Outline

1. Acknowledging that we are powerless over our spiritual brokenness

2. Inviting God to heal us

journaling

sitting in quiet with God

listening to God

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What might it be like to acknowledge your powerlessness over your spiritual brokenness?
2. What might it be like to invite God to heal you spiritually?
3. What might it be like to invite God to open your heart to see and know God's love for you and to wait for God to respond?
4. What was your response to the reading from Matthew 7?

Session 10: Saying "Maybe Not" and "Maybe" to God who is God

Outline

1. Facing our "Maybe Nots"

Taking inventory of our resentments

I am resentful at:	Because:	How I am effected (hurt)	Where am I being selfish, dishonest, self-seeking or afraid?

Taking inventory of our fears

I am afraid of:	Because:	This fear causes me to:	How am I relying on myself and how is self-reliance failing me?

2. Saying "Maybe" by meditating on biblical images

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Take some time to invite God to help you write inventory of any resentment you are aware of. What was this experience like?

I am resentful at:	Because:	How I am effected (hurt)	Where am I being selfish, dishonest, self-seeking or afraid?

2. Take some time to invite God to help you write inventory of any fears that you are aware of. What was this experience like?

I am afraid of:	Because:	This fear cause me to:	How am I relying on myself and how is self-reliance failing me?

3. What images of God from Scripture have been especially helpful to you?

4. What responses did you have to the reading of Ps 23?

Session 11: Saying “Yes” to God Receiving God’s Love

Outline

1. Receiving and responding to love: the practice of gratitude

Noticing

Slowing down and taking in the gifts

Saying “thank you”

2. Ways to say “thank you” to God

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Sit in a time of quiet for 10 minutes with your hands open. Ask God to help you open your heart as well, to receive the gifts being given to you today.

2. Spend some time expressing gratitude in any way you prefer, quietly in prayer, by writing a short list, by taking pictures, by writing a psalm of your own story of healing thus far.

3. What was your experience as you listened to the reading from Psalm 40?

Session 12 Saying "Yes" to the God of Love Surrender and Service

Outline

1. Saying Yes to the God of love: Surrendering to Love.

Image of being in a boat on a fast moving river

Resting with Jesus

Being a little child invited by Jesus to come to him for blessing

Being a seed falling into the ground

2. Saying yes to the God of love: living a life of loving service.

The story of the good samaritan

The story of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands with a child's lunch

The story of Jesus washing his disciples feet

3. Asking for the knowledge of God's will and the strength to carry it out.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which of the images of surrendering to God's love spoke to you the most? How does this image speak to you?

2. Which of the images of service spoke to you the most? How does this image speak to you?

3. What might it be like for you to pray for the knowledge of God's will and the strength to carry it out?

4. What was your response to the reading from John 13?

Resources

We encourage you to look at the other wonderful resources available at the web site of the National Association for Christian Recovery:

www.nacr.org

You can follow Junita Ryan's blog at:

www.juanitaryan.com

And you might want to look at the Bible study guides published by InterVarsity Press on this and related topics. These two are available at most online book retailers:

