

# Looking for God

By Nancy Ortberg

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### Jell-O

I spent a great deal of time at my grandmother's house when I was growing up. She lived only three or four miles from my house, and when I got to be around eight or nine, I often rode my bike to visit her. I helped her rake leaves, tend to the many fruit trees in her backyard, and keep my great-grandmother company playing cards. Sometimes I even helped Grandma in the kitchen.

She had a busy stove, and about five or six bright, shiny copper molds hung on the wall above it. From time to time, Grandma would pull down the rooster or the rabbit or the four-leaf clover mold and pour a colorful warm gelatin liquid into it. She would ask me to open the refrigerator door, and then she would slowly walk the mold over from the stove top and slide it onto a refrigerator shelf. The next day at Sunday dinner, she would turn that molded Jell-O out onto a platter and garnish it with whipped cream. It was quite a sight.

Molds are fine for Jell-O.

But not for people.

What is it about so much of the Christian religion that insists people all be alike? Why do I so often feel as if they have their mold and they want me to fit into it? Do we somehow feel safer when others are just like us?

In John 21, we read about one of the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. After fishing all night, Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, and a couple of other disciples had come up empty-handed. As they rowed their boat to shore in the morning, they saw Jesus standing there, although no one recognized Him. He called out to them, telling them to throw their nets out on the right side of the boat and that they would find the fish they were looking for if they did so.

When their nets were so filled with fish that they couldn't even haul them all in, Peter started to make the connection. This was Jesus—He had done this for them before. Peter was slow, but he was catching on. Close to shore, Peter jumped out of the boat so he could reach Jesus sooner.

Jesus had started a fire on the shore, and was cooking a fish and bread breakfast for them. (Why don't we ever hear sermons about men cooking? We always hear about "what would Jesus do?" Why isn't this one included? I am not kidding . . . Okay, back to the story.)

After the disciples brought in their fish haul and ate the breakfast Jesus cooked for them, Peter and Jesus decided to take a walk along the shore. Most likely, this was the first extended conversation Peter and Jesus had since Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus used this conversation with His impulsive disciple to do a couple of things: clarify Peter's call and inform him about his death.

First, Jesus reinstated Peter. Peter would still have been struggling with the fact that he had denied even knowing Jesus following His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Here on the shore, in the rhythm of those three denials, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter responded positively, and each time Jesus followed by saying, "Then feed my sheep." Actually, the third time, Peter got a bit impatient with Jesus and said something along the lines of "Why do you keep asking me? You know I love you." To which Jesus quietly replied, "Then feed my sheep."

Knowing that He would physically be leaving the earth soon, Jesus was eager to clarify Peter's calling. He made it repetitively clear that He wanted Peter to shepherd God's people. In addition to that, in verses 18 and 19, Jesus gave Peter a glimpse of his own death: " 'When you are old . . . someone else will . . . lead you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God."

Then Jesus added one more "Follow me."

Most of us think that if we could just hear directly from God it would be easier to follow Him.

Really?

You gotta love Peter's response. After hearing directly from God, Peter noticed that John the disciple was following behind them, so he turned to Jesus and said, "What about him?"

*What about him?*

Peter had heard directly from God and as he paused to consider, he said, okay, that's what's behind door number one. I'd like to see what's behind door number two before I give my final answer. Not sure if this is a deal yet.

Peter wondered if maybe he'd rather have John's story. He wanted to do a little comparison shopping before he committed. What's so bad about that?

Well, you should hear Jesus' reply.

Jesus did not calmly reason with Peter. He was not sweet and nice. He did not try to reach a reasonable compromise with Peter. He was angry, and his response was terse.

"If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

*What is that to you?*

Ouch.

It's quite telling that Jesus' response to Peter's desire to live another calling, another life, was heated.

Sometimes when I am giving a talk, I ask people to look quickly at the person on their left, then the person on their right. I say, "Do either of those people look anything like you?" Of course the answer is no. "Then why," I ask, "do you look to those people to try to figure out who you are supposed to be?"

But we all do it. And when we do, we compare the life of God right out of us.

The reason molds work so well for Jell-O is that gelatin is a substance without a form of its own. But people aren't like that, or at least we shouldn't be. Molds are rigid, predetermined boundaries that create shape but leave no room for movement.

Great for Jell-O, disastrous for people.

A few years back, I was asked to speak at a church retreat. I was scheduled to speak once on Friday night and twice on Saturday. After I gave the first morning talk on Saturday, the gentleman who had organized the retreat approached me.

“We have a woman from our congregation here this weekend whose story is quite compelling and seems to fit well into your topics. Do you mind if she got up just before your next talk and shared for about six or seven minutes?”

He went on to tell me some of the details of her story, and I agreed that her story fit perfectly. I told him I would be delighted to have her begin the session.

Somebody forgot to tell me the woman was Ketty Palau. As in Luis Palau’s sister. Luis Palau, as in “the Billy Graham of South America.”

Anyway . . .

Ever been in a room where the person speaking is so electric that it feels like the hair on the back of your neck is standing up? That you almost forget to breathe because you are so caught up in the energy of the message?

Well, that’s what happened.

And I was so happy for her.

Except for the part that I wasn’t.

I imagined everyone in the crowd holding up placards with big 10s plastered on them. Then, picturing myself getting up to speak after her, I imagined those signs plastered with 6.2s and 3.4s.

There was *no* way that I was going to get up and follow her. She was really good. She was brilliant, charismatic, and captivating. I was pretty sure that I was getting sick and needed to go back to my room to lie down.

Now you may be thinking that this was an immature response on my part, and I will give you that. However, you need to know that I have been a Christian long enough to know this is how it works: You’re supposed to sin on the inside where no one else can see you.

So while all of those dark thoughts were swirling around inside of me, I made sure that on the outside I was attentive, nodding, and taking notes. I appeared as captivated as the rest of the people in the room. But inside, I had entered the world of comparison, and I was losing.

To my credit, I knew that something was desperately wrong with me.

Again.

So with the very few minutes left between the time when Ketty would finish and I would start, I began an inner dialogue with God. I thought it might be a good idea to try to get my heart in a better place before I spoke.

I imagined God whispering to me, *So, what, you want to be the only woman in the history of the Kingdom of God who can speak?*

Long silence.

*Hmmmm. Well, I certainly wouldn't have put it that way, but since you did, well yes, sure, okay, if you say so.*

Another long silence. This time I didn't hear God saying anything. I sensed He was waiting to let my response sink in to my own ears.

It did.

I didn't like the sound of it. Sure, at first I did, but after it settled, and I repeated it back to myself, well, it sort of left a bad taste in my mouth.

I suppose there was a part of my heart that really did want that. But it was a dark part, not my best part. In those few minutes, I faced something in me that I was not proud of, and I dug a little deeper to find something better. The part of my heart that did *not* want to be the only woman in the Kingdom of God who could speak. The part of my heart that wanted to be captivated by Ketty's amazing story, just like everyone else in the room. The part of my heart that wanted to be glad for her, for the way in which God had worked in her life and the way in which He had gifted her to communicate it so powerfully.

The excavation was successful. Once I found that part of my heart, I clung tightly to it as I walked up to the podium following the thunderous applause for Ketty and spoke the words that God had given me.

After I was finished and people started making their way toward lunch, I found Ketty. She had no idea of the internal warfare I had emerged from. I was glad of that. I stuck my hand out to shake hers and said, “It is a pleasure to be a part of the body of Christ, and to listen to preaching that is so obviously God inspired.” And I meant it.

Comparison is so destructive. It erodes our love for other people and causes us to shun the gifts that God has given us. Like Peter, it keeps asking, “Well, what about him? What about her?” It keeps our eyes darting around the room, sizing people up, and holding up placards with numbers on them. It robs us of our own stories and gifts from God, all because we like someone else’s better.

Comparison becomes a faulty scale on which we place ourselves, waiting to see how we balance out with the people on the other side. Comparison leaves us jealous and critical and insecure. It can propel us into unhealthy competition or relentless people-pleasing. God wants us free of that.

Part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that each person has his or her own story, giftedness, and calling. I cannot find mine by looking at yours. Your story may inspire me or warn me, but I should never use it to determine my own.

The gospel frees us from comparison, making it possible to admire other people’s gifts and be grateful for their contributions to the Kingdom. In Christ, there is no need for Jell-O molds or rigid constraints. We are called to delight in the diversity that reflects the many facets of God and sheds light on what it truly means to be created in His image.

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**Nancy Ortberg** served as a teaching pastor for eight years at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. During that time she lead Network, a ministry that helps people identify their spiritual gifts and find a place of service in the church, and Axis, a weekly gathering for the eighteen- to twenty-something generation.

She is a founding partner of Teamworx<sup>2</sup>, a business and leadership consulting firm that provides fast-paced, practical, and compelling sessions to leaders and their teams. Teamworx<sup>2</sup> works with businesses, schools, nonprofits, and churches to address issues of organizational effectiveness and teamwork.

Nancy is a gifted communicator who is passionate about helping people connect what they believe with their everyday lives. A highly sought-after speaker, Nancy has been a featured presenter at the *Catalyst* and *Orange* conferences, and has been a regular contributor to *Rev! Magazine*. Nancy is the author of *Looking for God: An Unexpected Journey through tattoos, tofu, & pronouns* and releasing in August 2008, *Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands, lessons in no-linear leadership*.

She and her husband, John, live in the Bay Area and have three children: Laura, Mallory, and Johnny.