

Sound
Living

The
Character
Of
God

Jerry Nelson

This study emphasizes the majesty, transcendence, holiness, and power of God. God truly is all of that and more. But He is also very present—the God who is near, even right here, now. He is the God we worship—not some distant deity but the God who is with us and will never leave us. If we allow that truth to saturate our minds, it will truly confront us, challenge us and comfort us.

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Chapter One

The Sovereignty of God

What is God like? We casually, but correctly, go to church on Sundays to worship God. Who is the God we worship? What is He like? What about Him makes us desire to worship Him? If I said we should meet to worship Billy Graham or Mother Theresa you would rightly think such a suggestion was blasphemous. You would think of those people as worthy of commendation but not “worship.” Why? Because worship speaks of something higher, more exalted, purer.

We may well be enamored of people of the caliber of Billy Graham and Mother Theresa but we recognize they are still LIKE us in more ways than they are different. In our thinking, “worship” is reserved for someone who is not just better than we are but infinitely better, even perfect. Worship is reserved for God!

Sovereignty speaks of God’s control of everything, of everyone and of all history. The word “sovereign” means the chief, the highest, or the supreme one. It has to do with being the highest authority. And it has to do with being in complete control. It means to be unlimited by anything or anyone else.

We speak of “free will” as if it were something common. We think of ourselves as having the ability to make choices freely—as if our choices were determined solely by us. But we all know that our choices are very conditioned. All our choices are profoundly influenced and conditioned by people and circumstances totally out of our control. We are not sovereign. Our choices are very limited.

We speak of kings **as sovereign**—but we only mean that they have more authority and power to make choices than others in the country. We know they aren't completely sovereign because they are subject to many of the same conditions we are: life, health, weather, natural disasters, and so on. Their sovereignty may be great compared to ours but it is limited and conditional.

But when we speak of God's sovereignty, we speak of a Being who is completely free—nothing else conditions or controls His actions—no force, no other person, no other conditions, no principles outside of Himself, influence or in any way condition His choices and actions. He is complete. Not only does this mean that His actions are uncaused by anything outside of Himself, but that all other actions by anyone or anything else are ultimately controlled by Him. For if there were anything outside His control then He would be limited and even conditioned by that something else.

Since He is such a sovereign God, He is worthy of worship. But if He is controlled by something, if something else ultimately determines God's actions, then that something else is ultimately in control, is exercising the ultimate influence, is the cause of all other causes—then that something else is sovereign and deserves to be worshipped more than God.

Who is in Charge?

What controls life? Who or what ultimately makes the difference in what happens? Does blind luck determine everything? TIME magazine in October, 1999 carried an article by Robert Hughes, TIME's art critic, who had a serious automobile accident in Australia. He wrote, "At one point I saw Death. He made no gesture, but he opened his mouth and I looked right down his throat, which distended

to become a tunnel. He expected me to yield, to go in. This filled me with abhorrence, a hatred of non-being. In that moment I realized that there is nothing, nothing whatsoever, outside of the life we have; that the 'meaning of life' is nothing other than life itself, obstinately asserting itself against emptiness." As bizarre as it all was, "it all seems a long way off from the nice, uplifting sort of near-death experience that religious writers like to effuse about. I am a skeptic to whom the idea that a benign God created us and watches over us is somewhere between a fairy story and a poor joke. People of a religious bent are apt...to see a tunnel of white light with Jesus beckoning at the end as featured in the memoirs of a score of American K-Mart mystics. Jesus must have been busy when my turn came: he didn't show. There was, as far as I could tell, absolutely nothing divine on the other side." Robert Hughes is recovering from his accident and he said, "Blind luck has dealt me a whole new hand."

Is "luck" the uncaused cause, the principle behind every action and condition of life? Even Christians struggle with answering the question, "Who is in charge?"

Is that what is in charge? "Blind Luck?" Is "luck" sovereign? Is "luck" the uncaused cause, the principle behind every action and condition of life? Even Christians struggle with answering the question – "Who is in charge?"

Gerald Sittser in his book entitled *A Grace Disguised* tells of a fateful night in the fall of 1991. Jerry, his wife Lynda, their four children and Jerry's mother piled into the Sittser's mini-van and left Spokane, Washington to visit a Native American reservation just across the state line in Idaho. They had a great evening participating in an authentic pow-

wow. About 8:15 that night, when the children were making it plain they were done, the Sittsers climbed back into the van to make their way home.

Ten minutes into the trip home, Jerry noticed a car approaching them. It was coming very fast and on a curve in the road as they met. That other car, driven by a drunk driver, swerved into their lane and hit them head on. Jerry writes that in the first moments after the accident it was as if everything were in slow motion.

With three of his four children, some of them seriously injured, Jerry looked at the carnage before them—the unconscious and broken bodies of the fourth child (four-year-old Diana Jane), his wife Lynda, and his mother Grace. In spite of every effort, he watched those three members of his family die.

He writes, “I (later) felt wild with fear and agitation...I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens and wailing children. I could not rid my eyes of the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead. Over the next months I thought I was going to lose my mind...the foundation of my life was close to caving in. I wondered whether I could survive another day, whether I *wanted* to survive another day.”¹

Have you ever questioned the sanity of life? Maybe for you it wasn't sudden, maybe for you it was the steady deterioration of your resources until you didn't know if you could go on. Gerald Sittser said he had always believed in the sovereignty of God—that God is in absolute control of everything that happens. God's sovereignty follows logically from who He is—He is God. But Sittser writes, “This positive inclination toward God's sovereignty may come to a

sudden stop in the face of severe loss.”

Do you believe in the sovereignty of God? Do you believe that He is truly in control of all history, including your history, your life, even down to the smallest detail? If everything in your life is manageable right now, then the question of God’s sovereignty and its answer probably doesn’t feel very important. But if you have experienced life seemingly out of control or if you have the good sense to realize you aren’t in control right now and there will come times, even at death itself, when you will know you aren’t in control, then this question and its answer about the sovereignty of God are very important. Gerald Sittser wrote, “the issue of God’s sovereignty was no longer a mere abstraction...”²

Do you believe that He is truly in control of all history, including your history, your life, even down to the smallest detail?

What God Says About Himself

Read God’s own claim through Isaiah the prophet:

“Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say my purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” (Isaiah 46:9-10)

Read God’s claim through David:

“Yours O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God,

we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name."
(I Chronicles 29:11-13)

"Whatever the Lord pleased, that he did in heaven and in earth, in the seas and all the deep places." (Psalm 135:6)

Read Job's words:

*"I know that you can do all things; **no** plan of yours can be thwarted." (Job 42:2)*

And Daniel:

"And he changes the times and the seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings." (Daniel 2:2)

And even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar:

"He does according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35)

Through Isaiah we learn that God's sovereignty extends even to the calamities of life—God openly admits to causing adversity and disaster:

"The one forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these things." (Isaiah 45:7)

The Apostle Paul said:

"God works all things after the counsel of his will."
(Ephesians 1:11)

In both Isaiah's day and the apostle Paul's day, as today, there were those who wanted to argue that God wasn't fair if He acted differently toward some people than toward others. And in all of Scripture, one answer to such criticism is:

"Woe to the one who quarrels with his maker."

(Isaiah 45:9)

"Who are you, O man, who answers back to god?"

(Romans 9:18-21)

God is sovereign; He doesn't have to answer to us or to anyone—His decisions are not controlled by anything outside of Himself

Don't you understand? God is sovereign; He doesn't have to answer to us or to anyone—His decisions are not controlled by anything outside of Himself. In fact, both Isaiah and Paul argue, if it weren't for the sovereignty of God, none of us would be saved. If God didn't overrule our hearts, none of us would ever turn to Jesus for forgiveness and life.

We could cite so many more verses from Scripture; in fact all of Scripture affirms this basic, fundamental concept. God is sovereign—God controls all that happens in life and eternity.

The Struggle with Sovereignty

I know we struggle with the questions this raises about God—questions about the role of prayer, the necessity of evangelism, God's relationship to tragedy and suffering in our world and other questions. Those questions can be answered, but I don't want you to miss the point: **We dare not say we believe the Bible if we begin to limit the sovereignty of God in any way.** When you read the verses we have already reviewed and scores of others like them, you cannot say God is sovereign *except in certain situations*. No, God says He is absolutely sovereign, in *all* ways, in *all* things.

Sovereign over nature

Not only does Scripture explicitly state that God is sovereign, but also impressive to us doubters, is that history demonstrates His sovereignty. Over and over again in history we see God demonstrating His sovereignty over nature.

***Over and over again in history we
see God demonstrating His
sovereignty over nature***

We rightly stand in awe of hurricanes, tornadoes, and erupting volcanoes. But God is sovereign over them all—He created the world, He parted the sea, He stopped the sun, He calmed the storm, He stopped fire from burning, and turned water into wine. He stopped the mouths of lions, He made ravens carry food for Elijah, and He caused a donkey to speak.

Sovereign over the angels and rulers of the world

In history, God demonstrated His sovereignty over the angelic and demonic world. He banished the evil angels from heaven and time after time He defeated the forces of evil such as through Elijah on Mt. Carmel. He exercised His sovereignty over people, even the mightiest of men on the earth, when He defeated the kings of Assyria without a sword being lifted, when He lifted David up and took Saul down, and when He wiped out the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah while saving Lot and his daughters. Not a ruler has ever lived or ruled, including today, without the sovereign superintendence of God.

Sovereign over life and death

He has even demonstrated His sovereignty over life and death. In that plan, He gave a child to the ninety-year-old barren woman named Sarah. Time and again in the Old Testament we have accounts of God giving or taking life, according to His perfect plan. He caused a virgin to conceive. He took the lives of Annanias and Saphira while He gave life back to the widow's son and to Lazarus. And supremely, He raised to life His own Son Jesus, who unlike Lazarus, never again experienced death.

Sovereign over history

And so, over and over again, we can't miss it; we see in history how God manages all the events of history to accomplish His purposes. He used the evil of Joseph's brothers' to protect Jacob's family and the line of the Messiah. The kings of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, over 1000 years of history, were used by God to position His people exactly where He planned. One of the most amazing aspects of the Bible is to watch events unfold and realize the hand of God controlling, managing, and working every detail, even hundreds or thousands of years earlier, to accomplish His perfect plan. He used the murderous designs of the religious leaders of Jesus' day to accomplish His purpose of atoning for the sins of His people. The religious leaders thought they were putting to death a troublemaker but they were simply accomplishing God's greater goal of the sacrifice of His own son. Opponents of the gospel in the time of the apostles thought they were crushing Christianity by persecuting it fiercely. But in God's sovereign plan and control all they managed to do was spread it even more widely. Romans 8:28 speaks to the sovereign control of God in every detail of life: *"And we know that in **all** things God works for the good of those*

who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Is God sovereign only in some things? No! "*In ALL things*" God works for the good of His own people. The Scripture asserts that there is not a detail of life too small or irrelevant that it is outside God's notice or outside God's control. And God takes all the events of life, every last one of them, and weaves them to accomplish His purposes.

Lord of All

I first read this story in one of Charles Colson's books. Remember that as surely as God was controlling the history of Israel, He is controlling history today—even our histories. Boris Kornfeld was born to Jewish parents who were so influenced by Communist theory that they had abandoned any hope of a Messiah and fixed their hope instead on the Revolution. Kornfeld followed his parent's beliefs but in spite of the fact that he was a doctor, he ended up in a prison camp of the Soviet Union.

As the inhumanity of prison life went on day after day, even prisoners who formerly believed in the Soviet philosophy lost their faith in Communism. It was then that Kornfeld came in contact with a Christian, another prisoner, who spoke of real hope even in that place.

A great struggle ensued in Kornfeld's mind but he was overwhelmed by God's love demonstrated in the life of the Christian prisoner and Boris Kornfeld became a Christian. It changed his life. His hatred began to give way to love. In his role as a doctor, he became unwilling to sign the medical releases confirming that prisoners were strong enough to withstand solitary confinement knowing that the intention of the officials was to kill those prisoners. Not only did he refuse to any longer cooperate with the murderous

intentions of the officials but he also did the unimaginable. He caught an orderly taking food from a hospital patient dying of malnutrition. And in spite of the fact that orderlies were a protected class of prisoners who were stooges of the officials, Kornfeld turned the orderly in.

With that Kornfeld knew he was signing his own death certificate, because the orderlies would retaliate—as they had done to others several times in recent months. Knowing he could no longer stay in his barracks, he stayed in the hospital, taking quick naps all the time looking out for an attempt on his life.

A great struggle ensued in Kornfeld's mind but he was overwhelmed by God's love demonstrated in the life of the Christian prisoner and Boris Kornfeld became a Christian

But along with his carefulness came a new freedom. He began to say and do what was right. He no longer feared what men could do to him. The anger he felt for his captors and those who wished to kill him turned to love. So overwhelmed by this love welling up within him, he had to tell someone. He found a patient—a man with colon cancer.

He talked all afternoon and into the night with this patient, telling him about his conversion and his new freedom in Christ. Sick as the patient was, he was awed by the testimony. That patient was awakened the next morning by a great commotion only to discover that Dr. Kornfeld had been murdered during the night.

That patient pondered the Doctor's testimony and over many days finally became a Christian. He survived the

Soviet concentration camp and went on to tell the world what he had learned there. That patient was Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn was used by God to influence people all over the world and his voice and writings were instrumental in the final dismantling of the "iron curtain" in 1989. His testimony has influenced thousands including Charles Colson.³ A prison camp, an unknown Christian who shared the good news of Jesus with a communist doctor, a man with colon cancer who one night hears the testimony of the doctor's conversion, a murder, a book—*The Gulag Archipelago*, the fall of the "iron curtain," Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Russians, Kyrgyz, and millions of others now hearing the gospel who formerly were inaccessible—is this chance or the sovereign hand of God? It is the sovereign hand of God in the smallest details of life, working His world-changing purposes.

The Scripture declares God's sovereignty, history demonstrates His sovereignty, and **logic demands it**. Many years ago A. W. Pink wrote: "men imagine that the Most High is moved by sentiment, rather than actuated by principle. They suppose that his (sovereignty) is such an idle fiction that Satan is thwarting his designs on every side. They think that if he has formed any plan or purpose at all, then it must be like theirs, constantly subject to change. They openly declare that whatever power he possesses must be restricted, lest he invade the citadel of man's free will and reduce him to a machine.

"They lower the all-efficacious atonement, which has actually redeemed everyone for whom it was made, to a mere remedy which sin-sick souls may use if they feel disposed to; and they (reduce) the invincible work of the Holy Spirit to an offer of the gospel which sinners may accept or reject as they please.

"The God of this twentieth century no more resembles the supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim

flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun.

"A God whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits naught but contempt."⁴

Either He is Lord of all or He is not Lord at all. It is not possible to be somewhat sovereign.

What a God!

I want you to realize how encouraging this truth is about God's sovereignty. We have hope because God is sovereign. When I pray according to God's will, I can know it will happen. When I ask God to forgive me, I can know He will. When I encounter difficulty in life, I can know it is under His control and good will come out of it. When I reach the end of life, I know there is a future for me that is secure because a sovereign God secures it. Planning and work, goals and effort, even pain and difficulty have value in a world overseen by a sovereign God. My choices and my actions matter because God, not fate, is in control!

Charles Spurgeon wrote so well, "There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that Sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules (those afflictions), and that Sovereignty will (use those afflictions for good). There is nothing for which the children (of God) ought more earnestly to contend than the doctrine of their Master over all creation - the Kingship of God over all the works of his own hands - the Throne of God and his right to sit upon that throne."⁵

The Scripture declares it, history demonstrates it, logic demands it, and our lives and future depend on it – God is

sovereign. Gerald Sittser, whose family was killed, wrote toward the end of his book:

"...over time I realized that the trajectory of my grief had set me on a collision course with God and that eventually I would have to wrestle with this most complex of issues. I knew I had to make peace with God's sovereignty OR I had to reject God altogether, OR I had to settle for a lesser God who lacked the power or the desire to prevent the accident."⁶

He had to know, is God sovereign or isn't He! Sittser concluded:

"Loss may call the existence (and sovereignty) of God into question... In our pain we are tempted to reject God, yet for some reason we hesitate to take that course of action. So we move toward God, then away from him. We wrestle in our souls to believe. Finally we choose God... we decide to be in a relationship with God. And then we discover that God, in his sovereignty, has already decided to be in a relationship with us."⁷ God is sovereign even in our struggles with unbelief. He is Lord!

The implications of this are enormous. First of all, He deserves our worship—what a God! Secondly, He deserves our allegiance—how foolish to do anything other than to cooperate with His purposes. He will accomplish His desires and He will accomplish them through us—either through our rebellion or through our obedience. God will not be thwarted—He is Lord! We love Him for it and we yield our lives to Him.

"Yours O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name."
(I Chronicles 29:11-13)

End Notes

¹ Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, p. 16-19

² Ibid, p. 138

³ Charles Colson, *Loving God*, p. 27-34

⁴ A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 28,29

⁵ From Spurgeon's Sermon on Matthew 20:15; also found in Pink, p. 32

⁶ Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, p. 135

⁷ Ibid

Chapter Two

God's Faithfulness

Richard Strauss tells the story of a successful salesman he knew named Don, who at 44 was struck totally blind. His job, his hobbies, and his appreciation of the "great outdoors" were brought to a halt. Don was so angry he begged God to take his life and threatened suicide. But God seemed to assure him that He had a plan for Don's life.

A short time later, Don insisted on taking a walk even though no one was available to help him. Angrily he took his cane, stumbled down the steps of his home and started across the road in front of his house. He became disoriented and tripped into a small creek. As he sat waist deep in water he thought he could almost hear God say to him, "Don, have you cooled down enough now to hear and trust Me. I have a plan for your life." That was the moment Don gave away his anger and entrusted himself to God. A few years later, Don was serving the Lord as a representative of a Christian mission to the blind and finding more joy and satisfaction in life than he had ever known before. God was faithful.¹

Such stories both encourage me and infuriate me. They encourage me because I cannot refute their truth—time and time again God has taken the worst and turned it for good—God is faithful. But they infuriate me because they would seem to indicate that such happy endings are always the outcome of tragedy—and everyday I see evidence that that is not true. In those times is God still faithful?

As I studied this topic, I had no idea I would struggle with what I truly believe about God's faithfulness. C.S. Lewis

wrote, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope (is) strong... as long as you are merely using it to (wrap) a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a (cliff). Wouldn't you then... discover how much you really trusted it?"²

I may be wrong in this, but I sense that the concept of God's faithfulness is something of an abstraction until it intersects our lives. Like Lewis' rope, saying I believe in the faithfulness of God is much easier than confidently trusting in His faithfulness. Therefore I will write of both God's faithfulness and our faith in His faithfulness. For though it is true that God is faithful whether we trust Him to be or not, it is when our faith meets His faithfulness that we experience what God desires for us—the full knowledge of His love.

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As I said, little did I realize how I would struggle with faith and the faithfulness of God.

How Strong Is the Rope

In September of 1998, we were caring for a seven-month-old baby boy. When he was 36 hours old he came into our lives. His mother gave birth to him in prison. We loved him from the start, wanting desperately for him not to go back to the life that seemed inevitably his if he returned to his mother. The more we understood the situation, the greater

our fear became.

For 17 months we lived from month-to-month not knowing if he would be with us any longer. For 17 months the love grew deeper and deeper. I suspect people who have adopted children understand when I say those who think there is something less in the relationship because it isn't biological anger me; they don't know what they are talking about.

After over a year, we decided to take a risk. With his mother's mandatory release from prison imminent, we thought appealing to the court for permanent custody until such time as his mother could prove herself fit to care for him would best protect Paris.

But by taking the matter to court we knew we risked everything. We had no legal standing in our relationship with the baby. We were not parents, grandparents, or even foster parents. We had no more legal standing than a babysitter. By forcing the matter before the court we knew that two other options presented themselves to the court—he could be awarded to his mother who was then out of prison, or to Social Services to be placed in foster care. Our love for Paris was so strong, and our fear for his physical or emotional safety in the other options before the court, made it feel like we were risking everything. Again I quote from Lewis, "Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief."³

A while later, we stood in a courtroom of the Jefferson County District Court, made our case, sat down and waited. And this was in the midst of preparing for a sermon on the faithfulness of God. Before going to court and as I studied the text, I realized I was wrestling with my belief in the faithfulness of God. But to be more precise, it was not whether I believed God could and would do what He said

He would do but whether He would do what I considered to be "good." I realized I was also questioning the "goodness" of God.

With the subject of God's faithfulness before us, we come back to His goodness. To have an all-powerful God who is not good would be to have a malevolent God. To have a good God who is not all-powerful would be to have a well-meaning but impotent God. Implicit in the faithfulness of God are His attributes of power and goodness. And I realized I was wrestling with whether I believed God would exercise His power to do what was good, even "the best," for Paris.

Implicit in the faithfulness of God are His attributes of power and goodness

Four or five days after court, I had to stand and proclaim the faithfulness of God. Could I do it? What if this very human judge, maybe overworked, maybe easily indifferent, maybe a "rehabilitationist," ruled that Paris should immediately be given to his mother or placed in the protective care of the social services' foster care program? Would I still be able to speak of the faithfulness of God?

Tested

The prophet Jeremiah was put to the test. If you have watched and read the international news over the past several years then you know something of the conditions under which Jeremiah lived. You have seen pictures of the atrocities of war waged on the Kurds in northern Iraq, the Albanians in Kosovo, earlier the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda in Africa, and earlier still the Cambodians under Pol Pot. If you let the pictures touch you at all, you realize how unbearable it would be to experience such things. You too

must wonder if you would be like Elie Wiesel, the WWII concentration camp victim, who survived but only with the conviction that there cannot be a God. Maybe you have read of the torture and death of so many Christians in Sudan and Columbia.⁴ So at the least your belief in the faithfulness of God is threatened.

In chapter 1 of the book of Jeremiah, the author describes the results of the invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. Like the pictures we have seen of thousands fleeing their homes in Kosovo, so the residents of Jerusalem were either running or being led away in chains by the thousands. Jeremiah had seen the starvation that preceded the final assault. He described the children and infants fainting without food and dying in their mothers' arms. Jeremiah was shaken to the core.

In chapter 3 he describes it all in very personal terms—he was personally a victim of the horror he described. And he described it in the context of his relationship with God:

*¹ "If a man divorces his wife
and she leaves him and marries another man,
should he return to her again?
Would not the land be completely defiled?
But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers—
would you now return to me?"
declares the LORD.*

*² "Look up to the barren heights and see.
Is there any place where you have not been ravished?
By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers,
sat like a nomad in the desert.
You have defiled the land
with your prostitution and wickedness.*

*³ "Therefore the showers have been withheld,
and no spring rains have fallen.
Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute;*

you refuse to blush with shame.

⁴ *Have you not just called to me:*

'My Father, my friend from my youth,

⁵ *will you always be angry?*

Will your wrath continue forever?"

This is how you talk,

but you do all the evil you can."

⁶ *During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me,*

"Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. ⁷ I thought that after

she had done all this she would return to me but she did

not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. ⁸ I gave faithless

Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister

Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed

adultery. ⁹ Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to

her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. ¹⁰ In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah

did not return to me with all her heart, but only in

pretense," declares the LORD.

¹¹ *The LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel is more righteous*

than unfaithful Judah. ¹² Go, proclaim this message toward

the north:

'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD,

'I will frown on you no longer,

for I am merciful,' declares the LORD,

'I will not be angry forever.

¹³ *Only acknowledge your guilt—*

you have rebelled against the LORD your God,

you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree,

and have not obeyed me,' "

declares the LORD.

¹⁴ *"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two*

from a clan—and bring you to Zion. ¹⁵ Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land," declares the LORD, "men will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. ¹⁷ At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. ¹⁸ In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance.

¹⁹ "I myself said,
'How gladly would I treat you like sons
and give you a desirable land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.'
I thought you would call me 'Father'
and not turn away from following me.

²⁰ But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 3:1-20)

I don't know if you can feel the anguish of his soul. But maybe you too have wondered about the goodness, the faithfulness of God. Maybe you too, like Jeremiah, have been put to the test.

It is Jeremiah's anguish that makes his next words so powerful. It knows, as he knows, what it means to be sick with fear, to question the goodness of God, to wonder if there is any hope that makes his affirmation so attractive. Read his words in Lamentations 3:21-25:

²¹ Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

²² *Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

²³ *They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

²⁴ *I say to myself, (The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him.)*

²⁵ *The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;"*

Walt Kaiser said that given the terrible circumstances at the time, Jeremiah's resounding affirmation of the faithfulness of God is like someone standing in the concentration camp called Auschwitz in 1943 (before the war ended) and singing the beloved song, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness".⁵ How could he do it? What caused him to make such a declaration when the circumstances were so dark? He tells us. He said, "*Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.*" What does he call to mind, what does he remember?

Mercy

The first is in verse 22. "*Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed...*" The old King James translation said it this way, "*It is (because) of the Lord's **mercies** that we are not consumed...*" It seems the first thing Jeremiah remembers is that unless God had intervened in mercy, Jeremiah would have already experienced the **consuming** judgment of God—Jeremiah wouldn't even exist. He was a man who remembered that he deserved nothing from God except judgment. He remembered he had no right to claim God's goodness. His own sinfulness deserved any misery inflicted on him. It was only God's mercy, great love, loyal love, covenant-keeping love that kept Jeremiah from being wiped off the face of the earth and eternally separated from God.

John Calvin said it this way, "Were God to take away the promise (of his mercy), all the miserable would inevitably perish; for they can never lay hold on his mercy except through his word. This, then is the reason why Scripture so often connects these two things together, even God's mercy and his faithfulness in fulfilling his promises."⁶

The first thing Jeremiah remembers is that unless God had intervened in mercy, Jeremiah would have already experienced the consuming judgment of God

"Have it your way," "You deserve a break...", "inalienable rights," children's rights, women's rights, workers rights, patient's rights, "entitlements" - every day we hear how we deserve good. While the Bible unequivocally commands that we do good to each other, it equally clearly declares that not one of us deserves anything but the judgment of God. That casts a very different light on life. Hard as it is to accept, if I never knew any mercy from God, I would be getting exactly what I deserve. Such humility takes the wind out of our sails of anger toward God for what comes our way. Were it not for God's mercy, His great love, we would know only judgment.

Victor Hugo, author of *Les Miserables* said, "The supreme happiness of life is the conviction of being loved for oneself or more correctly (much more correctly) in spite of oneself." Jeremiah is reminded that God loves him in spite of Jeremiah's unworthiness.

Grace

The second thing Jeremiah notes is that in addition to mercy (God not giving us what we do deserve) God does

give us what we don't deserve. Lamentations 3:22b says, "...for his compassions never fail, they are new every morning..." If mercy is "not getting what we do deserve" then His compassions are grace, "getting what we don't deserve."

I don't think you will find the plural word "compassions" in your dictionary. The English translators are attempting to describe a Hebrew word that is related to the word "womb," noting the various ways a mother tenderly cares for her child.

Though Jeremiah doesn't enumerate them here, his mind apparently wandered down memory lane noting the ways God has demonstrated and still demonstrates His grace each day. I think the hymn-writer Thomas Chisholm, captured something of this when he wrote in *Great is Thy Faithfulness*,

"Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love."

Every season, every new day, every colorful fall mountainside, every enjoyment of life, even life itself is a gift from God—witnesses to His grace, His tender "mother-care" of every one of us.

Jeremiah knew it would be a great blasphemy to characterize God based only on the discomforts, difficulties and even tragedies that come into our lives. It was his responsibility and privilege to characterize God based also on the compassions He showers us with each day. Tennyson, I think, starts to get at this attitude when he writes,

"For nothing worthy proving can be proven

Nor disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt."⁷

But Tennyson has not nearly the insight of Jeremiah for Jeremiah concludes, "Great is your faithfulness!" With Jeremiah it is not the "sunnier side of doubt" but the full light of belief in the faithfulness of God.

Jeremiah had not only seen God's faithfulness declared new every morning but he had heard God Himself say: *"I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them... I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul."* (Jeremiah 32:40-41)

***God's declaration is that He is always
doing good for His own***

God's declaration is that He is always doing good for His own. He doesn't do good sometimes and bad other times.

Look at Romans 8:28: *"He works all things together for good to them that love him..."* And at Psalm 84:11: *"No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly."* Even when things are going badly, it means He is changing things to be able to do more good. Isaiah 38:17 says, *"Lo, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness."* And Psalm 119:71 says, *"It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."*

In fact, God said in Jeremiah 42 that He **"rejoices"** in doing good for us. The Scripture depicts God as taking great pleasure in accomplishing our good—so much pleasure does He take in it that He will go to any length to accomplish it, including the sacrifice of His own Son. God said in Jeremiah 42 that He rejoices in doing good for us with all His heart and soul. God is not passionless,

emotionally unmoved, uncaring. He pictures Himself as involved at the very core of His being, caring more for us than WE could ever care for anything.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story we know as the prodigal son. In the story the father is clearly a representation of God. John Piper, commenting on this story, said “Well-to-do, dignified, aristocratic, aging men don’t run.” He said

God wants us to know that His love for us is so great that He can’t contain Himself.

they would probably stand and wait or possibly they would walk to meet their returning son but they wouldn’t run. But God wants us to know that His love for us is so great that He can’t contain Himself—He runs. I am that son and I see the Father running toward me—He is glad with all His heart and soul that I am in His family and He delights in doing good for me.⁸

History Lessons

While God’s compassions are new every day, they are also as old as human history. Jeremiah didn’t have half the history we have to see the love of God unfolding and **yet he believed** in the faithfulness of God. He knew of God’s promise to Abraham 1400 years earlier; he knew of the miraculous birth of Isaac.

Even before Isaac was born, God told Abraham: *"Then the LORD said to him, 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions...In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full*

measure'."(Genesis 15:13-16)

In the days of Abraham's grandson Jacob, and his sons, these people moved to Egypt and there they were enslaved just as predicted by God. Abraham's descendants groaned under the burden of Egyptian slavery. Had God forgotten His promise? No. Jeremiah remembered the faithfulness of God in raising up Moses who led the people out of slavery at exactly the time God said it would happen. Look at Exodus 12:41: "*At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD's divisions left Egypt.*" Jeremiah knew of the 1200 years of God's faithfulness and he believed God had not changed.

We have a longer history with God. Through Isaiah the prophet, God declared "*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel.*" 800 years later the virgin Mary conceived and Paul said to the Galatians, "*When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son born of a woman.*" (Galatians 4:4) We have heard the witness of the disciples, the witness of men and women for the past 2000 years since Jesus was here. We have known personally the forgiveness of sin and a new relationship with God. Sociologists like longitudinal studies—how about a 4000-year study—God never failing to do exactly what He promised.

What does Jeremiah remember in the middle of his miserable circumstances? Jeremiah remembers that God is merciful and gracious. But he also remembers that God Himself is the goal of Jeremiah's life. In Lamentations 3:24, he says, "*I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion'; therefore I will wait for him.*" This reflects a refocusing of perspective that I don't pretend to fully understand. I think the Psalmist was expressing the same perspective when he wrote:

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:25-26)

Jesus Himself repeatedly spoke of our need to change our perspective. The "good life" is not made up of things or even trouble-free lives. Rather, as John wrote, *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."* (John 17:3) I will say no more on that subject because I am out of my league.

When Jeremiah finds himself thoroughly depressed by the circumstances of life, he calls to mind the mercy, grace and centrality of God Himself; in the midst of his Auschwitz, he proclaims with conviction, "Great is your faithfulness!"

We waited that Wednesday many years ago. We had stated our case for keeping Paris in our care. We sat and waited for a very human judge to determine the fate of a little boy we couldn't love more deeply than we did. I wondered then as I had all week, "On what do I base my belief in the faithfulness of God? Can I say with Job, *'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him'*? Will I say with the Psalmist, *'Will not the judge of all the earth do right'*? If this District judge says Paris will now live with strangers or worse, will I be able to say, *'Great is thy faithfulness'*?"

Delight in the Will of God

George Mueller is famous in church history as the Englishman who started orphanages and sustained them by prayer alone. In July 1853, Lydia Mueller, the only child of George Mueller, became deathly sick with typhoid fever. She went to the brink of death. Here is Mueller's description of this time of trial:

"While I was in this affliction, this great affliction, (I was

also) at peace, so far as the Lord's (plan) was concerned....Parents know what an only child, a beloved child is, and what to believing parents an only child, a believing child must be. Well, the Father in heaven said, as it were, by this (sickness of my daughter), 'Are you willing to give up this child to me?' My heart responded, 'As it seems good to you, my heavenly Father. Your will be done.'

"But as our hearts were made willing to give back our beloved child to Him who had given her to us, so He was ready to leave her to us, and she lived.... Of all the trials of faith that as yet I have had to pass through, this was the greatest; and by God's abundant mercy, I owe it to His praise, I was enabled to delight myself in the will of God, for I felt perfectly sure, that, if the Lord took this beloved daughter, it would be best for her parents, best for her and more for the glory of God than if she lived: this better part I was satisfied with; and thus my heart had peace, perfect peace and I had not a moment's anxiety."⁹

Seventeen years later, the outcome was not so good. On February 6, 1870 George Mueller's wife, Mary, died of rheumatic fever. They had been married 39 years. George was 64 years old. Shortly after her death, he preached a sermon from Psalm 119:64 entitled, *You are good and do good. His points for the sermon were:*

The Lord was good and did good in giving my wife to me.

The Lord was good and did good in so long leaving her with me.

The Lord was good and did good in taking her from me.

During her illness he prayed:

"Yes, my Father, the times of my darling wife are in your hands. You will do the very best thing for her and for me, whether life or death. If it may be, raise up yet again my precious wife – You art able to do it, though she is so ill; but however you deal with me, only help me to continue to

be perfectly satisfied with your holy will.

After her death he prayed this:

"Everyday I see more and more how great is her loss...Yet without an effort, my inmost soul habitually (rejoices) in the joy of that loved departed one. Her happiness gives joy to me. My dear daughter and I would not have her back, were it possible to produce it by the turn of the hand. God himself has done it; we are satisfied with him."¹⁰

No matter what the circumstance, Mueller had matured to be able to say, "*Great is thy faithfulness.*" What about me? Could I say it and mean it?

***No matter what the circumstance,
"Great is thy faithfulness."
Could I say it and mean it?***

I'm not George Mueller, or Job, or Jeremiah—yet! And as yet, God has not put me in the position to test it fully. The Court declared we had full parental responsibility for Paris. He was in our home until the court determined otherwise—if it ever did. He was **not yet** available for adoption but the court protected him for the foreseeable future. As the judge ever so slowly, it seemed, revealed his judgment, it became increasingly apparent that Paris was safe. We couldn't contain our emotions. And though our thanks went to the judge, our praise went to God!

But I was still troubled; what if the decision had been otherwise? Later I realized that what God had done was give us one more reason to trust His faithfulness in the future. In His grace, He was building our confidence in Him. No, I'm not a Jeremiah yet. But I hope by God's grace, as painful as the process is or will become, that I am getting there.

A conviction regarding the faithfulness of God doesn't come in a flash of inspiration, but like a long rain, it soaks in, almost imperceptibly over time. C.S. Lewis said it is "Like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight, when you first notice them, they have been going on for some time."¹¹

In every experience of life God is working His grace in us to believe Him, that with His whole heart and soul He rejoices in doing us good—the kind of "good" that comes from His perfect wisdom and perfect love.

*"I remember my affliction...and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; **great is your faithfulness.** I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him'."*

End Notes

¹ Richard Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God*, p. 275

² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 25

³ Ibid

⁴ *Christianity Today*, October 4, 1999, p. 23

⁵ Walt Kaiser, *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*, p. 80

⁶ Ibid, p. 87

⁷ Alfred Lloyd Tennyson, *The Ancient Sage*, p. 1.66

⁸ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 196

⁹ Autobiography of George Mueller 424-440 in Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 190-191

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 71

Chapter Three

God's Majesty

Several years ago, then three-year-old Emily Losey, daughter of one of our missionary couples serving in Central Asia, stepped into an elevator with her parents and sisters and was instantly terrified as the elevator began to move. For a day and a half she couldn't stop talking about the "alligator." After she got past the terror of that first experience on the "alligator" she was captivated by it. When she spoke of it, you could see in her eyes a fascination—that combination of fear and delight. Getting on, or even near, an elevator was not **boring** for Emily.

Worship is boring for many. God is boring for many. We created Him in our image. We know what to expect of Him, we have managed Him so as to have Him present when we need Him, and there's nothing left about Him that interests us. So some come to church on Sundays with no expectations, no anticipation. God and worship are boring for too many.

The reason? We don't know God. We haven't even gotten close to Emily's "alligator" experience. If we knew God like Emily knows elevators, we'd be fascinated. All we have is our caricature of God and we are bored with that.

But if we had been at Mount Sinai when the law was given and the mountain was surrounded by thunder and lightening, we wouldn't have been bored. If we had seen the smoke of the presence of the Lord fill the Temple at its dedication, we wouldn't have been bored. If we had seen four-days-dead Lazarus come out of the grave at Jesus' command, we wouldn't have been bored. If we had seen

God speak worlds into existence, if we had watched the Red Sea part, if we had seen the sun stand still or if we had seen Jesus calm the storm, we wouldn't have been bored.

When was it that people in the Bible truly worshipped God? When they encountered Him! Whether it was the pyrotechnics of a burning bush or the reading of God's word, when people understood something more of who God is, they couldn't help but worship. If we could grasp *even something* of the magnificence and magnitude of this one we call God, we would thrill at *just being* in His presence.

Worship God for Who He Is

God has chosen to reveal Himself both in creation and in His mighty acts in history, but most fully He has revealed Himself in His Son and His Word.

John Piper, building on what E.J. Carnall wrote, discusses three stages of worship. The final stage of worship (yes, I'm discussing the third stage first) is an unencumbered joy in the perfections of God. It is to delight in Him.

On time several years ago, I laid down on the guest bed with Paris our then 19-month-old son. It was time for his nap. He wasn't quite ready yet to sleep and it was fascinating to watch him. I partially closed my eyes so he would stop being so aware of my presence. Then I watched and listened as he talked to himself, smiled at whatever 19-month-olds think about, and tossed and turned and played with his feet and anything else he could get hold of. Finally he fell asleep and I just lay there looking at his little face. I was thoroughly delighting in him.

That is what I long for with God. I want to know Him so well that I just delight in Him. I want to observe His

character and ways and be filled with delight at who He is and what He does. I want it to well up in my soul and force itself through my lips and hands—to worship Him. That’s the third and highest stage of worship.

The second stage of worship, before that third and highest total-delight stage, is the stage of *an unfulfilled desire*. It is the stage when we know we have experienced the feast of full worship before and we long for it again. Our hearts are not overflowing but we want them to be. We are willing to recall the goodness of the Lord, seeking to remind ourselves of who He is that we may enter into that joy of His presence. That’s the second stage.

The first stage of worship is a heart that knows it is cold but is *willing to be restored*. It is a heart that has *little* feeling of love but wants to again experience love for the Lord. This stage calls for sorrow over our cold hearts and it calls for repentance—a willingness to use the means of grace to restore the joy of our salvation. It is a willingness to look to the word of God to teach us afresh who our God is. It is to reflect on His goodness and greatness—to bathe in the knowledge of who He is until our hearts are warmed and our delight returns—enjoying the presence of God.¹

Worship is not just an activity; it is an affair of the heart!

God’s Majesty

Most specifically I want us to read about and meditate on the majesty of God. It would be possible to focus our attention on the power and creativity of God, or the faithfulness of God, or the love of God or the sovereignty of God. But for now, focus on the majesty of God—what the theologians called His transcendence—that which is unique to God alone.

I hope to put definition to that as we proceed, but I want

you to be aware of a problem even as we begin. Have you ever had the experience of facing a task that seemed overwhelming? Do you remember the day you received the syllabus in a class *you were already worried about*, and reading through it you were overwhelmed with how seemingly impossible it was? We're looking into a subject that is too deep to fathom, too high to reach, too intense to focus on, so beyond our comprehension that we can barely scratch the surface of understanding.

Can We Really Grasp God's Greatness?

One hundred years ago, Charles Spurgeon wrote, "The proper study of the Christian is (God). The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy which can engage the attention of a child of God is the name, the nature, the person, the doings, and the existence of the great God which he calls his Father...It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can comprehend and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-contentment...But when we come to (the study of God), finding that our plumb line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, 'I am but of yesterday and know nothing'."²

In Job 11:7-9, Zophar asked,

"Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens – what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave – what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea."

God said of Himself in Isaiah 55,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

With these verses and thoughts in mind, it would seem that we are embarking on the impossible mission. And the truth is, only by God's gracious Spirit can we begin to grasp something of the subject before us. So unlike us is God, that we struggle for ways to understand, but by His grace we can catch a glimpse, and if we will let it, that glimpse will fill our hearts and move our lips to worship Him.

The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy which can engage the attention of a child of God is the name, the nature, the person, the doings, and the existence of the great God which he calls his Father

As much as anyone in all of Holy Scripture, the prophet Isaiah expressed the inexpressible, pictured the unseen, and made known the unknowable. Isaiah uses language to venture into this mysterious and unique otherness of our great God.

"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?

Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?

Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?

Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

*Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.
Before him all the nations are as nothing;
they are regarded by him as worthless
and less than nothing.*

*To whom, then, will you compare God?
What image will you compare him to?*

*As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and fashions silver chains for it.*

*A man too poor to present such an offering
selects wood that will not rot.*

*He looks for a skilled craftsman
to set up an idol that will not topple.*

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

*He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.*

*He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.*

*he brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.*

No sooner are they planted,

no sooner are they sown,

no sooner do they take root in the ground,

than he blows on them and they wither,

and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

'To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One.

Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:

Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one,

and calls them each by name.

Because of his great power and mighty strength,

*not one of them is missing.
Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the LORD ;
my cause is disregarded by my God'?*
*Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint."*(40:12-31)

Isaiah wants the people of Israel to trust God. Because of their rebellion against God, they are headed into a period of years where they will be severely disciplined. Their homes will be destroyed, their children taken into captivity, and their freedoms squashed under the boots of an invading army. Like any of us when we encounter chronic difficulties and life-changing disasters, they wondered *if God cared* and if He cared, *was He truly able* to do anything about their situation. They would be sorely tempted to abandon their faith in God and they would be tempted to a sort of agnosticism—believing God might exist but not trusting that His existence has any bearing on their lives.

Isaiah wants to counter those temptations—his desire is

that they would stop and think about who their God is. He wants to so impress them with the nature of their God that they will trust Him no matter what happens. And to do that he launches into this expression of the incomparable greatness—uniqueness—majesty—transcendence of their God.

There is a certain irony here in that Isaiah attempts to describe the incomparable by using comparisons. He uses comparisons to describe the God who has no comparison. I suppose if he didn't he would have nothing at all to say. And nothing at all to say was just what often happened when people encountered God—they were suddenly mute in the presence of the Holy. But Isaiah, at the Holy Spirit's prompting, is called to describe the majesty of God.

As you examine these verses, I want you to understand it is Isaiah the **poet** who is writing these words, not the Apostle Paul, the **logician**. You will not discover five points in succession proving the majesty of God as you might if Paul were writing. Instead, Isaiah using poetry, will give impressions; impressions that when heaped on each other give an overwhelming sense of the majesty of this God he is describing.

The Whole World

Isaiah starts his description by asking us to think **about the largeness of the world around us**. Who has stood at the ocean and not been impressed with how vast it appears? Who has looked into a night sky and not been nearly overwhelmed by the seeming endlessness of it? Who has stood on or near a mountain peak and not marveled at the sheer size of the earth beneath them? Who has not felt small when seeing this beautiful earth from some great vantage point?

Using poetic language, Isaiah describes a God who is so

great, so majestic, and so awe-inspiring that what we consider to be limitless, because it is so large, is small compared to the God who created it. Verse 12 says, “*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?*” God did! “*Who, with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?*” God did! “*Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?*” God did!

We look at the vastness of this world and our universe and

Isaiah describes a God who is so great, so majestic, and so awe-inspiring that what we consider to be limitless, because it is so large, is small compared to the God who created it

can't imagine anything greater. But the God who loves us is the God who is outside of this creation, above it, responsible for it. He is the God who is so great that all the vastness of this universe is small, to the point of insignificant, in comparison to Him. And we are not talking about God's size, as if He had a body—we are talking about greatness as in His majesty.

The poetic word picture is of a God who is so great that the oceans, the heavens, the land and the mountains of the world are little things that He measures out in the palm of one hand or on an everyday scale. So great is our God that He is not in any way subject to the creation as we are, all creation is subject to Him. If the vastness of the universe is awesome—how much more awesome is the God who is behind it all!

Self-Existent

Our God is also one-of-a-kind—unique!

Verses 13 and 14 say,
*"Who has understood the mind of the LORD,
or instructed him as his counselor?
Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge
or showed him the path of understanding?"*

What is the obvious answer begged by these questions? No one! No one has counseled, enlightened, instructed, taught, or showed God what to think, say or do. This concept is heavy but I think we can understand it to some extent—**God is self-existent.**

We exist because we have been caused to exist by God and our continued existence is completely dependent on things outside of us—food, water, air, God Himself. But God has

***God has always existed and He doesn't
need anything else for Him to exist***

always existed and He doesn't need anything else for Him to exist. A theologian of another era wrote, "There was a time, if *time* it could be called, when God, in the unity of His nature...dwelt alone. 'In the beginning, God.' There was no heaven, where His glory is now particularly manifested. There was no earth to engage His attention. There were no angels to hymn His praises; no universe to be upheld by the word of His power. There was nothing, no one, but God; and that, not for a day, a year, or an age, but 'from everlasting.' During a past eternity, God was alone: self-contained, self-sufficient, self-satisfied; in need of nothing. (The creation of the universe when God did), added nothing to God essentially. He changes not, therefore his essential glory can be neither augmented nor diminished."³ God is not dependent on anything or anyone. It is not a

matter of quantity but of quality. He is qualitatively different.

We cannot describe God by attributing to Him more of all the positive things we are and eliminating the negative. Democritus of old said that if a pig could think, his god would be an infinite pig, with all the glories of infinite "pigness" minus whatever is unworthy of "pigness."⁴

We are tempted sometimes to think of God as just a larger, more powerful version of us. Not true! God is totally other. No, I don't understand that fully, because I don't have categories to describe it adequately. But I see the point Isaiah is making—God is unlike anything else we can imagine. He is majestic, transcendent, above us in every way imaginable.

All the Nations

When we come to verse 15, we have Isaiah comparing God to all the *nations* or peoples of the earth combined—whether they are nations close at hand or as far away as the islands of the world.

*"Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;
they are regarded as dust on the scales;
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust."*

If you poured out a full bucket of water and one drop was left, so insignificant would be that one drop that you wouldn't even bother to turn the bucket over again—so are all the nations of the world compared to God. If you were going to weigh a loaded 18-wheeler on a truck scale, you wouldn't bother to blow off some fine dust that had settled on the scale, it would be insignificant by comparison. Likewise, in comparison to the greatness of God, all the nations of the earth are as dust.

In verse 16, Lebanon is the example because it was considered in the ancient world to be a country wealthiest in trees and cattle. So great is God that all the trees of that country couldn't build an altar-fire large enough to be worthy of Him and all the animals of that country wouldn't be sufficient to make a sacrifice worthy of Him.

And in verse 17, continuing his comparison to the nations, Isaiah says compared to God, all the nations of the world are nothing. He uses three exaggerations to make his point:

The nations are as nothing—literally “that which are not.” They are regarded as worthless—literally “that which does not exist.” They are less than nothing—literally “nothing, emptiness.”

Isaiah is making the point **not** just that God is greater than all the nations but that there is no comparison. God is of a different order—He is on a completely different plane. Think of how different a rock and a person are. They are of different orders, almost no comparison at all. How different a thought and an elephant are—almost no comparison at all. Yet there is one comparison to be made—they are all created.

Now consider God compared to any of us or all of us together. There is NO comparison, He is totally other—of a different order. That He chose to make us in His image doesn't put us on the same plane with God. A sculptor may give a clay figure the shape of a nose but that doesn't put the clay figure in the same order with the sculptor. God may give us consciences, a God-awareness, undying souls, or however else we may express “God-imageness,” but that doesn't put us in the same class with God any more than drawing a smiley face on a piece of paper makes a human being.

God is unique. He is self-existent. He is outside of and beyond anything that is created. He is God, majestic in His otherness.

No Comparison

God is unique. He is self-existent. He is outside of and beyond anything that is created. He is God, majestic in His otherness

That leads Isaiah then to the obvious question posed in verse 18:

"To whom then will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?" And the question has an equally obvious answer—No one, no thing!

In verses 19-20, Isaiah shows how ridiculous and blasphemous it is to even think that you can represent God with some physical figure or imagination of the mind. There are obviously no pictures and there are also no eyewitness paintings of God the Father or even of God the Son, Jesus. The only description we even have of Jesus is a metaphorical one in Isaiah, written 800 years before the Son of God came to earth.

It might be possible, without it being a sin, to imagine what Jesus, God in the flesh, might have looked like, though it is all speculation. But the Bible is aggressively clear that in no way are we ever to make a physical representation of God. Listen again to the second commandment:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow to them or worship them for I the Lord your God am a jealous God..." (Exodus

20:4-5)

The first commandment made it clear that only the one true God is to be worshipped. The second commandment is not a repeat of the first but is instruction about how we

The Bible is aggressively clear that in no way are we ever to make a physical representation of God

worship the one true God. We are not to worship Him by using any physical or mental representations. Using a crucifix or any other object to represent God is ruled out. Using a mental picture of God is ruled out. Attempting to see God with our eyes or imaginations is ruled out.

Reducing God

Why is God so opposed to this that He makes it the second commandment listed? There are two reasons:

An image of any kind, be it ever so beautiful, dramatic, expensive, and awe-inspiring is completely insufficient to capture the exceptional, unique, totally other essence of our Holy God. Any physical or mental representation reduces God to the created and He is not created—He is other—He is God. No physical or mental representation can begin to reflect the nature and character of our God. Images obscure the glory of God.

The second reason physical or mental representations of God are blasphemous is because they mislead us. They lead us to think about God in certain ways that are not nearly sufficient. They limit our understanding of God. They lead us to settle for a God that is fashioned in our likeness—a limited God. Psalm 50:21b says, "*You thought I was altogether like you.*"

“Men imagine that the Most High is moved by sentiment, rather than actuated by principle. They suppose that His (power) is such an idle fiction that Satan is thwarting His designs on every side. They think that if He has formed any plan or purpose at all, then it must be like theirs, constantly subject to change. They openly declare that whatever power God possesses must be restricted, lest he invade the citadel of man’s free will and reduce him to a machine... The God of this century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle (resemble) the glory of the midday sun.”⁵

No, do not reduce God to anything like us. This transcendence of God, this total otherness of God is the most fundamental truth of the Bible. If He is just a super “man” we are in serious trouble. But He is not a superman, He is God—majestic in His otherness.

Over All

Again in verse 21, Isaiah asks, “Isn’t the majesty of God obvious?” Does not the very creation and existence of the universe point to something beyond it? Careful thought about the universe must point to a creator behind it. The “big bang” may be an attempt to describe the process of change but it doesn’t speak to the origins—what was before the “bang”? Where did the stuff of the “bang” come from? Many modern scholars, even non-Christian, are concluding something akin to Aristotle’s “unmoved mover” - a designer must exist behind the design of the universe. Some philosophers may see this as a force or a principle but the Bible says this is none other than the Majestic, Transcendent, God—our God.

But Isaiah is not done dramatically building his impression in our hearts; he gives another picture of the actions of this majestic God. In verse 22, he says God sits enthroned

above the circle of the earth. If you stand and look skyward, all you see is encompassed in a circle—one half above you and one half beneath you. Isaiah's point is, again, that God is above all that—not part of it.

And because He is above it, greater than all of it, of a different order than it, even all humankind with their vaunted egos are as nothing—like grasshoppers.

The earth and everyone on it are not controlling God – He controls it. He is wholly other in His majesty.

Also in verse 22, Isaiah says, God stretches out the heavens like a canopy. That whole vast sky with its sun and moon, that whole incomprehensibly vast universe made up of billions of stars and their universes are but a canopy, a mere tent that God has built to make life on earth possible, but He is not part of that—He made it. He is greater than it.

The heavens with all their splendor and power are not controlling God – He controls them. He is wholly other in His majesty.

Thirdly, Isaiah says in verse 23 that God brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. In spite of how the princes and rulers of this world appear to us as large, powerful, and having authority, they are as nothing compared to the work, power and authority of God.

*"No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff."*

Of those rulers, Isaiah says they are like a plant that barely takes root before it is burned out by the sun and blown away by the wind. So short and powerless, by comparison

to God, are their lives and authority that they are as nothing. If you are going to choose whose side to be on, pick God—He is of a different order than all the others. **All the authorities of the earth are not controlling God—He controls them.**

Now in verses 25 and 26, as in verse 18, God invites a comparison. Based on what has just been stated in verses 18-24, Isaiah says God asks, "*So to whom will you compare*

The heavens with all their splendor and power are not controlling God—He controls them. He is wholly other in His majesty.

me?" The obvious answer is "No one!" Earlier He suggested a comparison with idols. Here He invites a comparison with the universe around us. Look at the heavens! Are they not magnificent? Do not some in the world even worship the stars, treating them as gods from whom counsel is sought? Who created these? Obviously, our God did!

"He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name".

The stars may look numberless to us but God appoints each one. The point is that God is above it all, He is the transcendent "holy" God—the awesome "other."

Expect Everything

How do we attempt this worship? Look at verse 27:

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel. (Saying) my way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God."

I look at the magnitude of suffering around this world and I

am tempted to give up—to quit trying to make sense of it. I am tempted, strongly tempted to be agnostic, Yes, maybe there is a God but I can't make sense of it so I will stop trying and stop expecting God, if He is there, to do anything. I easily wallow in self-pity for the tough experiences I encounter in life and wonder if God really cares or will do anything about them. I, too easily, become cynical and expect nothing, suggesting, but not daring to say, "If there is a God, He doesn't care or He isn't able to do anything about it."

"Oh, don't say that," Isaiah writes in verse 28:

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom."

Do you see it? Do you understand? Do you know who your God is? He is majesty enthroned! He is God, high and lifted up, completely "other," the uncontrolled- controller of all, the self-existent – uncaused cause, the uncreated-creator. This is your God. Do you see why trust and allegiance are in order? Do you see why honor, praise and worship are appropriate? Do you see why collective worship of Him on Sundays is not only right but necessary?

How can we keep silent about such a God. Experiencing God in private is one thing, but like seeing a beautiful sunset, our knowledge of God must be expressed! If worship is boring, the problem is us, and not our God. When we open the eyes of our hearts to see Him in all His majesty, we delight in who He is and we cannot contain it.

End Notes

¹ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*

² A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 89

³ Ibid

⁴ Thomas Oden, *The Living God*, p. 382

⁵ A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 28

Chapter Four

God's Power

Is God powerful? Is He more powerful than anyone or anything else? Aware that we are Christians and socially conditioned to say the acceptable thing, we would probably all say “yes!” But do we believe it? When it comes to the “stuff,” the experiences of life and death, do we really believe it—do we actually trust Him? Do we trust that He truly is more powerful than anything else and fully able to do what needs to be done? Or do we suspect that God might fail us either because He isn’t aware, doesn’t care, or can’t do anything significant about our situation?

When you are without a job and income, when your child is deathly sick, when the most significant human relationship you have falls apart, when everything about life seems dreary at best, our beliefs about God are put to the test. And it is then that you find out if your religion is relevant or not.

What We Must Believe

If we have any expectation at all about God’s intervention in our situations there are three things we must believe about Him.

- We must believe He is wise—God knows what is going on—He is aware.
- We must also believe He cares—He is gracious toward us—He wants to do what is best for us.
- And we must also believe He has the ability to do something about it—to change what needs to be changed.

Those three attributes are wisdom, grace and power.

Many years ago Dr. Paterson wrote, "The value of a religion depends on the truth and sufficiency of its idea of God." ¹ Maybe this is simplistic, but why is it that many of us don't pray in a meaningful way. Oh, maybe we pray in perfunctory ways such as at meals or in religious group settings or in rote, trite, meaningless ways. But we don't really come to God expecting anything from our prayers.

Why? Is it because we are fatalists? Or is it because deep down we don't trust the wisdom, goodness or power of God? Have we prayed for something and not received an answer, so we go into prayer believing a little less each time?

The Power of God

I mentioned three attributes: The wisdom, grace and power of God. Assuming His wisdom and goodness, let's focus on the power of God. I want you to assume that God is fully aware of your life and circumstances and the circumstances of this world. I want you to also assume He cares—He desires that ultimately good not evil prevails. The question we address is whether He has the ability to make a difference. What do you believe about the power of God?

In Romans 8:28 the Apostle Paul wrote, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* Does God have the power to make good on those promises? Is He truly greater than anything this world or life can throw at us? I know the obvious answer to that question for church-going people is "yes" but I want you to think about why you believe it. Power, according to the Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary is "the ability to do or act." Omnipotence is "having absolute power." All living creatures have power,

the ability to do or act. But as we personally know, we don't have the power to do whatever we want to do—we are severely limited in power. But is God limited? Or can God do everything He wishes to do?

Show Your Power

Over and over again in the Bible God showed His power to prove to His people that they could trust Him. I want to remind you of the incident recorded in I Kings 18. Elijah, the prophet of God, met on Mount Carmel with the prophets of the so-called god, Baal. The people of Israel, God's people, were worshipping Baal, hoping he would send rain on their drought-stricken country. They said they believed in God, but thinking of Him as removed from their lives, their confidence was in Baal. We say we believe in God but in the everyday things of life our confidence is too often in our own ingenuity, other people, government, or other things—thinking there is more chance that good change will come about because of those things than because of God's gracious intervention. And so we begin to trust more in Baal than in God.

Over and over again in the Bible God showed His power to prove to His people that they could trust Him.

In the incident on Mount Carmel, God's prophet Elijah built an altar to the Lord and he challenged the prophets of Baal to build an altar to their god. Then instead of lighting a fire beneath either altar, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to see whose God would send fire down from the skies to light their altar. The prophets of Baal tried with all their rituals (some of them grotesque) to convince their god to send fire down but to no avail. Finally it was Elijah's turn and the God of heaven and earth did send the fire down.

What I want you to see is Elijah's prayer as he asked God to act. This prayer is my prayer for each of us.

"O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God...Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." (I Kings 18:36-37)

To the extent that we have looked to other sources as the "strength of our lives," to the extent that we have trusted in other sources as the answer to our deepest needs in life, we have turned our hearts away from the only true God, the mighty God, who has the ability to act exactly according to His will.

When the fire fell from heaven that day on Mount Carmel and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and soil of the altar and all the water that had been poured on it, the text says,

"When all the people saw this, they fell on their faces, and cried, 'The Lord – He is God! The Lord – He is God!'"
(I Kings 18:39)

I am tempted to say that if you and I had been there that day, we too would have been so awed that we also would have been on our faces before such a mighty God. I want us to have some of that sense of awe as we think about the power of God. But I want our thinking to be more precise than that.

God's power is not just a display of power like some schoolyard bully proving he is strong. God is not a law unto Himself; exercising arbitrary, absolute use of power. The exercise of God's power always has a purpose. Theologian Donald Bloesch wrote, "God is not power in and of itself but the One who exercises his power to liberate and redeem a

lost human race....His almightiness is his persevering and indefatigable (tireless) will to love, heal and redeem."²

As we think about God's power, I don't want us to just think "Wow! Isn't God powerful!" I want you to realize that all His power is purposeful and is directed to creating, saving, and forever keeping you and me. May we not be amazed just at the display of power like we were watching some strong man at a circus—let us be humbled that it is power used for us.

***God's power is purposeful and is directed
to creating, saving, and forever
keeping you and me***

Yes, if we had been at Mount Carmel with Elijah that day we would have been amazed and humbled *but God knows how quickly we forget* and so He has given us another witness to His greatness—a witness that is in front of us every day.

Creation

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge (of God)." (Psalm 19:1-2)

The Apostle Paul said it this way in Romans 1:20: *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that men are without excuse."*

It is in the world and universe around us that we see one of the most dramatic and effective witnesses to the power of God. I want to look at one of the greatest works of poetry ever written about the greatness of God as revealed in creation – Psalm 104.

It is in the world and universe around us that we see one of the most dramatic and effective witnesses to the power of God.

In this Psalm, the author is obviously caught up in emotion as he worships God for His greatness in both creating and sustaining the universe. Before you read the Psalm, I want you to see how personal this reflection on the power and the greatness of God is.

"Praise the Lord, O my soul. O Lord, my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty."
(Psalm 104:1)

The Psalmist is captured by one mighty thought: This God I am describing is MY God, the God in whom I trust. Psalm 73:23-26 says, *"O God, you hold me by my right hand... Who have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."* The God of all power is the Psalmist's God.

In Psalm 104 He describes God in raw power, creative power, preserving power, the magnitude of power, the variety His power creates, the power of life and death and ending with another statement of the sheer power of His power.

Psalm 104

"Praise the LORD, O my soul.

*O LORD my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendor and majesty.*

*2 He wraps himself in light as with a garment;
he stretches out the heavens like a tent*

*3 and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their
waters. He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.*

*4 He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.*

*5 He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.*

*6 You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.*

*7 But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;*

*8 they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.*

*9 You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.*

*10 He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.*

*11 They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.*

*12 The birds of the air nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.*

*13 He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work.*

*14 He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for man to cultivate –
bringing forth food from the earth:*

*15 wine that gladdens the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine,
and bread that sustains his heart.*

16 *The trees of the LORD are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

17 *There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the pine trees.*

18 *The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the coneys.*

19 *The moon marks off the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.*

20 *You bring darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.*

21 *The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God.*

22 *The sun rises, and they steal away;
they return and lie down in their dens.*

23 *Then man goes out to his work,
to his labor until evening.*

24 *How many are your works, O LORD!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.*

25 *There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number –
living things both large and small.*

26 *There the ships go to and fro,
and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.*

27 *These all look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.*

28 *When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.*

29 *When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.*

30 *When you send your Spirit,
they are created,*

*and you renew the face of the earth.
31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works –
32 he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
33 I will sing to the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the LORD.
35 But may sinners vanish from the earth
and the wicked be no more.
Praise the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD.”*

Before I continue writing about the power of God as displayed in the creation and preservation of the world and its universe, I must acknowledge that many in our western culture dismiss this biblical worldview of the Psalmist and the church. For the past couple of hundred years, some in the academic world have declared there is no place in rational modern thought for the myth of a God who created the universe. Materialism with its attendant agnosticism or atheism has become common fare in our schools, our media and our governments.

Historian and college president, George Roche said, “It really does matter, and matter very much, how we think about the cosmos.”³ Astronomer Hugh Ross went on to say, “If the universe is simply uncreated, eternally self-existent or randomly self-assembled, then it has no purpose and consequently we have no purpose. Determinism rules. Morality and religion are ultimately irrelevant, and there is no objective meaning to life.”⁴ If the universe, of which the Psalmist writes, was self-created then his conclusion about God is nonsense. You have to make a decision about God before the Psalm can have any relevance to you. Is God the Creator or did the universe create itself?

British physical chemist Peter Atkins wrote, "My aim is to argue that the universe can come into existence without intervention, and that there is no need to invoke the idea of a Supreme (God)... We (scientists) have been back to the time before time, and we have tracked the infinitely lazy Creator to his lair and he is of course not there."⁵

In his book *Creation Revisited* he writes, "In the beginning there was nothing. Absolute void, not merely empty space. There was no space; nor was there time, for this was before time...From absolute nothing, absolutely without intervention, there came into being rudimentary existence."⁶

Steven Hawking, wrote a very popular book entitled *A Brief History of Time*. In the preface to that book, the late but well-known author Carl Sagan wrote, "This is also a book about God, perhaps the absence of God." Hawking himself writes in his book, "The idea that space and time may form a closed surface without boundary also has profound implications for the role of God in the affairs of the universe.... So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a Creator. But if the universe is really self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place then, for a Creator?"⁷

I believe that kind of thinking and writing has affected not only the academies of our country but also all of us. More and more people are afraid to speak of a personal Creator God for fear they may sound ignorant.

I haven't time or the ability to build the case that Hugh Ross can build but I want you to listen to British physicist Paul Davies and hear the change this scientist went through in just five years. In *God and The New Physics*, he denied the possibility of God as a creator and promoted an atheistic interpretation of the universe. By 1984 in

Superforce he wrote, "The laws of (physics)...seem themselves to be the product of exceedingly ingenious design...The universes must have a purpose." Then in 1988 in *The Cosmic Blueprint* he wrote, "I see powerful evidence that there is something going on behind it all. The impression of design is overwhelming."⁸ And Mr. Davies is one of a fast growing number, in the scientific community today, who like George Greenstein would say: "As we survey all the evidence, the thought insistently arises that some supernatural agency—or rather, Agency (God) - must be involved (in the existence of the universe). Is it possible that suddenly, without intending to we have stumbled upon scientific proof of the existence of a Supreme Being? Was it God who stepped in and so providentially crafted the cosmos for our benefit?"⁹

Philosophical materialism is wholly inadequate to explain the existence and complexity and beauty of the universe around us

The simplistic materialistic explanations for the existence of the universe that have held sway for so long are fast becoming the philosophical equivalent of the Emperor Who Wore No Clothes. Philosophical materialism is wholly inadequate to explain the existence and complexity and beauty of the universe around us. What some of us have been willing to say only in Sunday school we can now say with a growing boldness, "*The heavens declare the glory of GOD!*" "*In the beginning, GOD created the heavens and the earth.*" Maybe that the Bible says it ought to be enough, but sometimes my faith needs bolstering and it helps me when even agnostic scholars recognize what the Psalmist said is right in front of our noses. What kind of God are you

being asked to trust today? What kind of God are you being invited to give your life to? Is He capable of doing good for you? Is He more powerful than all else?

Raw Power

The Psalm begins in verses 2-4, with a poetic statement about the raw power of God in creating the universe. Read verse 2: *"He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent..."* The Psalmist uses some of the language of the Genesis account of creation.

Genesis 1:3 – *"And God said, 'Let there be light and there was light'."*

Genesis 1:6-7 – *"And God said, Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water. So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse (earth) from the water above it (sky). And it was so. God called the expanse 'sky'."*

So powerful is God, that the Psalmist pictures Him as wrapping the light He created around Himself like a coat and then taking His arm to stretch out the heavens (the skies) with all their galaxies around the earth, which He had separated from the heavens.

So great is our God that the Psalmist pictures Him as making the clouds His chariot and He rides on the wings of the wind. We look at the clouds and particularly the storms that emerge from them and we are dumbstruck in awe of their power. Hurricane Floyd was 600 miles across and today there are far more people than before who respect the power of the wind. So powerful, so great is our God that all of creation is His servant—He created, controls and uses it all. For all the unfair questions that raises about the goodness of God, we must not attempt to answer them by reducing God to something less than the all-powerful God He is. *"Oh Lord, my God, You are very great."*

In verses 5-9, the poet writes a word-picture of Day Three of creation. From Genesis 1:9-10 it says, *"And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear. And it was so. God called the dry ground 'land' and the gathered waters he called 'seas'..."*

Here in Psalm 104, the poet makes clear that it was God who caused all this to happen. He spoke and the world came into existence. He rebuked the water and it fled, doing His will. God assigned the water to the seas and the dry ground to land—and it was so! The God we trust is the God who speaks and the waters of the earth obey. The God in whom we place our confidence is the God who with a word can make heaven and earth appear.

"Oh Lord, my God, You are very great!"

So powerful, so great is our God that all of creation is His servant—He created, controls and uses it all

Caring Power

And then in verses 10-18 we see the greatness of God in providing for the world He has made. I hope you were as impressed as I was the first time you learned about the way the earth cycles water, air, and soil. It takes 100 years to produce even ½ inch of topsoil. But the earth does it, year after year for thousands of years. Water falls from the clouds, it flows down mountains, it waters the plains, and plants and animals quench their thirst as the water flows into lakes and oceans. Those plants, animals, lakes and oceans give off moisture, evaporation, and the water cycles again to the atmosphere above us only again to form clouds and rain on the earth. The air we breathe is constantly recycled, as is carbon upon which all of us depend for life itself. The whole complex system is created and sustained by our powerful God.

One author cites 32 ways God delicately balanced and sustains the world's relationship to the universe around us. I refer to four:

1. The number of stars in the planetary system: If more than one, the tidal interactions would disrupt planetary orbits.
If less than one, the heat produced couldn't sustain life.
2. Surface gravity:
If stronger, the planet's atmosphere would retain too much ammonia and methane.
If weaker, the planet's atmosphere would lose too much water
3. Tilt of the earth's axis:
If greater or less, the surface temperature differences would be too great
4. Thickness of the earth's crust:
If thicker, too much oxygen would be transferred from the atmosphere to the crust.
If thinner, volcanic and earthquake activity would be too great.¹⁰

"Oh Lord my God, you are very great!"

***God delicately balanced and sustains
the world's relationship to the
universe around us***

Great Power

In verses 19-23, the Psalmist introduces the very existence of the sun and moon, the celestial universe around us. He notes how it controls our lives. But who made it all? - Our God! Humans have always looked to the skies with awe. Little else makes us feel smaller and the universe larger than to contemplate the immensity of the skies above us and around us. By the time of Christ, 2000 years ago, philosopher-astronomers thought the lights in the sky (the

sun, moon and stars) were fixed on rings around the earth like concentric circles or shells at differing distances from the earth. The moon was 60 earth-radii away and the sun was 19 times further away than that. They thought that the stars were on the furthest circle or shell. This idea held sway until the 1500's when it was judged that the sky was 20,000 earth-radii away from the earth and the universe was 80 million miles across.

In the late 1500's, English astronomer, Thomas Digges, convinced the world that the stars were not equal distance from the earth but were scattered throughout space far beyond what was earlier thought.

By the 1600's, astronomers were calculating that the universe was much larger than earlier thought—it would take a bullet from a canon 700,000 years to reach the nearest star.

By the 1800's, they were saying the universe was 175,970,880,000,000,000 miles across. They coined the term "light-year" to describe distance—the distance that light travels in one year. Thus the universe was 30,000 light-years across in size.

By 1923 with the discovery of the Andromeda Nebula, scientists revised their estimate of the size of the universe so that it was then thought to be 200,000 light-years across (1,173,139,200,000,000,000 miles). When the 100-inch telescope at the Mount Wilson Observatory opened it was estimated that the universe was 1million light-years across (5,865,696,000,000,000,000 – five times as large as previously thought).

It now seems that the universe may be expanding and stars moving away from us at a rate so fast that we may

never be able to calculate the size of the universe. It is beyond our ability to measure, maybe even to imagine. We can see about 5000 stars with the naked eye. It is estimated that there are 100 billion stars in our one galaxy—the “Milky Way.” There are an estimated 100 billion galaxies, which means 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, stars. If each person on earth had an equal number of those stars, 2 trillion (2,000,000,000,000) stars would be yours. Howard Van Til of Calvin College wrote, “The universe in which we live is no place for a small God...”¹¹
“O Lord, my God, you are very great!”

Original Power

In verses 24-26, the Poet speaks of the greatness of God in the variety of His creation. Psalm 104:24-25 says, *“How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number – living things both large and small.”*

Veterinarian and author James Harriot didn’t originate the phrase, “all things great and small.” He took it from poet Cecil Alexander, “All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful; the Lord God made them all.” And Alexander obviously took it from Psalm 104:25.

“How many are your works... beyond number.” 40 years ago it was believed that in the world there were over 1 million different kinds of living things. 25 years ago it was believed there were 5 million kinds of living things. For example, we could identify 250,000 flowering plants. Today it is estimated that probably closer to 25-40 million (40,000,000) different kinds of living things exist. Thus far we have named only about 1.5 million. Much of life beneath the oceans, which cover 2/3 of the earth’s surface, has

been only partially explored.¹²

By the late 1940's, scientists knew that neutrons and protons were not the smallest particles in an atom. They continued their search for the basic building blocks of life. In 1958 an almanac was published to list all the particles—it was 19 pages long and discussed 16 new particles of matter smaller than neutrons and protons. By 1984 that almanac was 304 pages with 200 ever smaller particles being discovered such as muons, pions, and neutrinos. Particles known as quarks are now believed to be in 18 different kinds. Now with gluons and leptons added to the list, some scientists are acknowledging that they may not have even come close to the smallest particles or building blocks of matter.

***How many are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom you made them all***

“There may be additional levels, and even the possibility that there are an infinite number of levels. Quarks and leptons may be composed of smaller particles, which are composed of yet smaller particles, and so on. Physical reality could conceivably be a kind of cosmic onion, with level below level below level. It may be that the levels never come to an end.”¹³

Our universe is not static but dynamic—ever expanding, ever changing, new variations billions of times a day. The universe is not like some gigantic machine simply doing the same thing over and over again. Our world is moving—we have traveled through space over 1000 miles just as I have written this last sentence. Like snowflakes, no plants, animals or even children are alike—each one a slight

variation of all the others that have ever existed or will exist.

"Oh Lord, my God, you are very great!"

Immortal Power

In verses 27-30, the Psalmist describes the power of God over life and death. I can delay here only to say, if we had stood outside Lazarus's tomb or had been in the upper room when Jesus showed Himself alive to His disciples, we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that our God has the power of life and death.

"Oh, Lord my God, you are very great!"

A year or so into the Civil War, a group of statesmen met in Washington D.C. to lament the South's surprising strength and victories. The famous Fredrick Douglas, speaking on behalf of many, choked with emotion as he described the terrible fate he feared was awaiting the North. In a pause, pregnant with desperation, a voice called out from the gallery. A mature older black woman spoke with absolute conviction: "Mr. Fredrick Douglas, God is not dead!"¹⁴

I end this study of God's power with the closing words of the Psalmist:

"May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works – he who looks at the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord all my life, I will sing praises to my God as long as I live." (Psalm 104:31-33)

I can trust Him in death and I can trust Him in life.

"O Lord my God, you are very great."

End Notes

¹ W.P. Patterson, *The Rule of Faith*

² Donald Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, p. 106-107

³ Source Unknown

⁴ Hugh Ross, *The Creation Hypothesis*, p. 141

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 115

⁶ Robert Herrman, in *How Large is God*, p. 119

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Hugh Ross, *Creation and Time*, p. 128

⁹ George Greenstein, *The Symbiotic Universe*

¹⁰ Hugh Ross, *The Creation Hypothesis*, p. 162

¹¹ Robert Herrman, *How Large is God*, p. 131

¹² Calvin DeWitt, *Earthwise*

¹³ Morris quoted in Herrman, *How Large is God*, p. 230

¹⁴ Source unknown

Chapter Five

The Omnipresence of God

If somebody could follow you for a full week and even know your thoughts, what would they say about your belief in God? After observing you, how would they answer the following questions? When Kevin is at work, does he think of God as being there? When Ashley is in school, does she think of God as being there? When Michael prays, does he think of his prayers as having to go somewhere to be heard? Does Michele think of God as being with her or as being somewhere else? Again, I ask, if someone could follow you around and even know your thoughts for a full week, what would they expect you to say in answer to that question—Where is God?

350 years ago a philosophy developed in England that eventually captured the minds of many in the upper classes in Europe and America. Eventually people like Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson adopted this philosophy. It could just as appropriately be called their theology—their belief in God.

Some of the particulars of their belief were these:

1. There is a God.
2. God deserves our worship
3. We ought to turn away from doing wrong and live ethical, moral lives.
4. God will reward good and punish wrongdoing both in this life and the next.
5. All religions basically believe these same things and thus we must be tolerant of all religions.
6. God is the first cause of everything that exists; he created the world and established unchangeable laws, which require no further involvement by him.

7. God is there, in heaven, and we are here, on earth, and we are responsible for getting on with living the life God gave us.¹

Sound fairly good? It was called Deism. And frankly it describes, fairly well, a whole lot of American churchgoers. They believe in a Divine power who got everything going somehow and **withdrew to His heaven** from where He looks benevolently on all His creatures below, expecting them to act benevolently toward each other. God is, for them, a distant, respected, but relatively impersonal being. He is out there somewhere but has no particular relevance to life here and now.

Maybe for the more devout, they think of God as someone they go to. **They go to Him** in prayer, as if their prayers had to cross some distance to get to Him. They go to Him in worship, as if He were looking down from some distant place. But they don't think of Him as there in their geometry class, or while changing a diaper, or fixing a computer, or making a sales presentation. In fact, in those situations, they rarely if ever even think of Him.

Where Is God?

Read God's own answer as given through the Psalmist David in Psalm 139:

*"O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.*

² *You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.*

⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.*

⁵ *You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.*

*⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.*

*⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?*

*⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

*⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,*

*¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*

*¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"*

*¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

*¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

*¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully
made;*

*your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*

*¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.*

When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,

¹⁶ your eyes saw my unformed body.

*All the days ordained for me
were written in your book*

before one of them came to be.

*¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

*¹⁸ Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand.*

*When I awake,
I am still with you.*

*¹⁹ If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!*

²⁰ *They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.*
²¹ *Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD,
and abhor those who rise up against you?*
²² *I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.*
²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
²⁴ *See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting."*

Verses 8 and 9 directly address the question, "Where is God?" In these verses David imagines the furthest distances away. In verse 8, he speaks of the highest place above and the deepest place below. And in verse 9, he speaks of the furthest east ("the wings of the dawn") and the furthest west ("the far side of the sea" - the Mediterranean was west of where he was). Any direction David might go—who was there? God!

***The Psalmist is declaring the
omnipresence of God.***

The Psalmist is declaring a truth that is everywhere taught in the Bible. Theologians call it the omnipresence of God. "Omnipresent" simply means He is present in all places. You, who have grown up in Christian homes and in Sunday School, have always known that and probably even believed it. But what is it you believe when you say God is present everywhere? And if it is true, what difference does it make?

Again, I want to emphasize that while many of us would easily say, "God is everywhere," many of us don't think and act that way most of the time. Elijah on Mt. Carmel spoke

to the prophets of Baal telling them to call louder to their god since he was either asleep or on a journey. They did it; they called louder to their god. By doing so, they revealed their belief in a god who was present somewhere else but not there at the time. But when Elijah prayed he simply asked the God who was present to show Himself powerful (I Kings 18:27, 36-37).

In I Kings 20:23, the Syrians thought the god of Israel was a god of the hills while theirs was a god of the plains and that if they fought on the plain they could beat the Israelites. Their concept of god was that He was confined to space. Don't we easily make the same mistake, thinking of God as somewhere else, and not here? We think of Him as in heaven only and thus **not** here now. By thinking of God as limited in that way, we think we avoid something but we actually lose much. We avoid accountability and we lose relationship. If we value autonomy most then we like a god who is somewhere else except when we call on Him to be present. If we value relationship, then we will like a God who is present.

But back to the main question, "What does it mean when we say 'God is present everywhere'?" I will readily admit that what I am about to describe is **difficult to describe and comprehend** because we are dealing with categories outside of our experience. For example, the concept of "eternity" is difficult for us to grasp.

Likewise the concept of "omnipresence" - one being, present everywhere—is difficult to grasp. But as difficult as it is to comprehend, the Bible still declares it.

Jeremiah 23:23 and 24 says, "*Am I only a God nearby, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?*" declares the Lord. *'Do not I fill heaven and earth?'* declares the Lord."

To get a better grasp of this there are several things I want you to factor into your thinking:

God is spirit.

Like the prophets of Baal, we are tempted to think of God as having a physical body and thus being limited to occupying space. We think of Him as being *somewhere* and thus incapable of being *somewhere else* at the same time. But God is spirit. He is every place at the same time.

God doesn't just exert His influence everywhere but He is, Himself, everywhere.

It is not that God **just sits** in one place and exerts His power in all places, but that He is, personally, in all places at the same time.

In the gospel of John, chapter 14, Jesus explained to His disciples that He was physically going to leave them. The Bible tells us that God the Son took on a human body. That body was limited in the ways ours are. It was capable of being in **only one place at a time**. Jesus, in His body, could not be in both Capernaum and Jerusalem at the same time. He said He was leaving His disciples via His death, resurrection and ascension. But to comfort them, He makes a truth clearer than it had ever been before—God would be with them even after Jesus' body ascended into heaven.

*"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor **to be with you** forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for **he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you...** On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and **I am in you...** **If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.**"(John 14:16-23 – Emphasis Added)*

Jesus does **not** say only that His prayers would be with them or that He would **watch over them from a distance** and protect them. He says He would be with them! He is not distant—He is here—“at home” here—“dwelling” here—not just showing up from time to time.

And as hard as it is for us not to think in terms of space, we must not think of God as some kind of huge cloud that spreads out over every place and every thing. It is not that one part of God is in one place, while another part of Him is in another. God says that He is personally, fully, wholly, every place at the same time.

Jesus is not distant—He is here—“at home” here—“dwelling” here—not just showing up from time to time

God, present everywhere, is still distinct from it.

Pantheists and their “new age” counterparts would want us to believe that by saying God is everywhere means that everywhere and everything is God, but it is critically different.

The Pantheist says “God minus the world = nothing.”

The Theist says, “God minus the world = God.”

In Colossians 1:16-17, the distinction between God and His creation is clear and at the same time His immediate involvement in His creation is equally clear: *“For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth...all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and **in him all things hold together.**”* (Emphasis added). God is everywhere in His creation but He is distinct from it. God as Spirit is personally everywhere present at the same time and yet He is distinct from all He created.

Here's the way the Apostle Paul described it in Acts 17:24-28:

*"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands..." God "is not far from each one of us. For **in him we live and move and have our being.**"*

(Emphasis added)

As a fish lives in the presence of water, so we live in the presence of God. As a bird flies in the air, so we live in the presence of God. He is everywhere, which means He is here!

300 years ago Stephen Charnock wrote concerning the Acts 17 passage:

"In him we live and move and have our being" God is "not absent from anything, but so present with (everyone), that they live and move in him, and move more in God, than in the air or earth wherein they are; (God is) nearer to us than our flesh to our bones, than the air to our breath; he cannot be far from them that live, and have every motion in him. The apostle did not say, "by him" but "in him" to show the inwardness of his presence."²

From the eloquent to the cute, listen to the way one near-poet declared it:

"He was just a little lad, and on a fine Lord's day,
was wandering home from Sunday school and dawdling on
the way.

He scuffed his shoes into the grass; he found a caterpillar;
he found a fluffy milkweed pod and blew out all the filler.
A bird's nest in the tree o'erhead, so wisely placed and
high, was just another wonder that caught his eager eye.
A neighbor watched his zigzag course and hailed him from
the lawn, asked him where he'd been that day, and what
was going on.

"Oh, I've been to Sunday school", (he carefully turned the sod, and found a snail beneath it) "I've learned a lot 'bout God."

"M'm, a very fine way," the neighbor said, "for a boy to spend his time. If you'll tell me where God is, I'll give you a brand-new dime."

Quick as a flash his answer came, nor were his accents faint,

"I'll give **you** a dollar, Mister, if you can tell me where God ain't."³

If it is true truth that God is personally everywhere, meaning that He is personally, fully, wholly here right now, then that truth confronts us, challenges us and comforts us

God declares in His Word that He is everywhere, but what difference does it make? If it is true truth that God is personally everywhere, meaning that He is personally, fully, wholly here right now, then that truth confronts us, challenges us and comforts us.

God Confronts Us

How many live today as if God does not see, does not care, or does not even exist? How many assume God does not see or understand their actions of sin against Him. Adam said, "*I heard your voice in the garden and hid myself.*"

Did he think God could not find him or that God was absent from the place? Again I quote Charnock: "Ask the thief why he dares to steal? Will he not answer, 'No eye sees me?' Ask the adulterer why he strips himself of his chastity and invades the rights of another? Will he not answer, 'No eye sees me?' He disguises himself to be unseen by man, but

slights the all-seeing eye of God.”⁴

Do we have greater regard for the eyes of others than for God’s eyes? We treat with greater respect the eyes and knowledge of parents, spouse, friends, even complete strangers than we treat the all-seeing, everywhere-present God. Even children, at least older children, have the good sense to disobey only out of sight of their parents or teachers. But do we think so little about the presence of God, or think so little of God Himself, that we disregard His wishes right in His very presence? If we go on sinning in the very presence of God, how can it be called anything but rebellion? We can no longer say, “I didn’t mean what I did to be against God.” It cannot be anything but against God, for He is everywhere.

Do we think so little about the presence of God, or think so little of God Himself, that we disregard His wishes right in His very presence?

The Psalmist said in Psalm 139:1-4:

“O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.”

The omnipresence and omniscience of God confronts us, forcing us to either repent or acknowledge our rebellion.

God Challenges Us

God’s omnipresence challenges us to live in relationship with God at all times. God is in your schoolroom, your home, your office, your work tomorrow and He longs for you to know Him, to experience Him, and to love Him as He loves you. The truth is that when we live each day as if

God were somewhere else, we deaden the relationship. Someone wrote: "Love calls many times each day but finds me preoccupied, not able to make the time to be at home for her. I let the signs of her visitation come and go unnoticed: and am not nourished by a love that is not recognized or named. So I continue to live in a world that deadens with its indifference:

Alas, that I cannot be here when you call and have time to be at home together."⁵

But how can anyone think of God all the time? Wouldn't it be burdensome to try to keep God constantly in focus in the middle of our fast-paced and complex days? A.W. Tozer quotes another who wrote, "The wings of the dove do not weigh it down, but they carry and support it. And so the thought of God is never a burden; it is a gentle breeze which bears us up, a hand which supports us and raises us, a light which guides us, and a spirit which (enlivens) us though we do not feel its working."⁶

Those, down through history, who have lived with a daily, moment-by-moment awareness of the presence of God tell us it is a discipline that must be cultivated, but once cultivated it becomes as natural as responding to someone we love. Having someone you love deeply, unexpectedly show up at your place of work or in a time of trouble is not a burden but a delight. Their presence pulls you out of the near-sightedness of the moment and gives you a broader perspective on the important. So consciously experiencing the presence of God gives a peace. Thinking about the presence of God is not a burden but a burden carrier.

Brother Lawrence wrote: "In order to form a habit of conversing with God continually, and referring all we do to him, we must first apply to him with some diligence; but that after a little care, we should find his love inwardly excite us to it without any difficulty."⁷ The truth of God's omnipresence challenges us to live in relationship with Him

continually.

That is what King David was expressing in Psalm 139:

"O Lord you have searched me and you know me.

You know everything about me.

You are always present no matter where I go.

You even knew me intimately in my mother's womb.

You ordained my life from beginning to end."

And Psalm 139:23-24 says,

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

***The truth of God's omnipresence
challenges us to live in relationship
with Him continually.***

Don Williams, pastor in California, wrote this about David's prayer:

"This is the intimacy that God wants to have with us. He formed us in the womb. He knows our frame. He sees our embryo. He fashions our days. He knows our thoughts. He hears our words. He knows when we sit down and when we stand up. He protects us. His hand is upon us. He who inhabits all things is near to us. We cannot escape his presence. In the light he sees us. In the dark he sees us. We are the continual objects of his thoughts. He searches us. He changes us. Here is true intimacy..."⁸

God challenges us to live in that kind of intimate relationship with Him.

God Comforts Us

Remember Jerry Sittser's story who lost three members of his family in an automobile accident? In the aftermath of it, Jerry struggled greatly with his relationship with God. But what he discovered in the process, is that while he thought

he was moving away from God, God was there all the time.

"Loss may call the existence of God into question...In our pain we are tempted to reject God, yet for some reason we hesitate to take that course of action. So we move toward God, then away from him. We wrestle in our souls to believe. Finally we choose God...We decide to be in a relationship with God. And then we discover that God, in his sovereignty, has already decided to be in a relationship with us."⁹

God said, *"I will never leave you, or forsake you."* He is always and everywhere present. Here is how God said it through the prophet Isaiah:

"Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior..." (Isaiah 43:2ff).

Thomas Goodwin, a Puritan preacher of the 1600's described the relationship of a father with his son as an illustration of God's presence with us. A father is walking down the road with his son's hand in his own and the child is enjoying the presence of his father and knows that he is loved. Then, without the child doing anything special, moved only by the father's love, the father reaches down and scoops his son off his feet and up into his arms. He hugs the child tightly, showers him with kisses, tells him he loves him more than life itself and sets him down again. The child already knew his father loved him, there was no doubt. But oh the added measure of assurance, the joy of knowing that love is not based on anything you have done but simply flows out of the heart of the father. That is what it means to have God near.¹⁰

In this study, I emphasized the majesty, the transcendence, the otherness, and the power of God. God truly is all of that and more. But He is also very present—the God who is near, even right here, now. He is the God we worship—not some distant deity but the God who is with us and will never leave us. If we allow that truth to saturate our minds, it will truly confront us, challenge us and comfort us.

What will you do with the truth of the omnipresence of God?

End Notes

¹ *Deism* in The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology

² Stephen Charnock, *The existence and attributes of God*, Discourse VII, God's Omnipresence, p. 367

³ Richard Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God*, p. 104-5

⁴ Stephen Charnock, *The existence and attributes of God*, p. 397

⁵ Peter Hannan, *Nine Faces of God*, p. 297

⁶ A.W. Tozer, *That Incredible Christian*, p. 67

⁷ Brother Andrew, *Practicing the Presence of God*, p. 15

⁸ Don Williams, *The Communicator's Commentary Psalms 73-150*, p. 488

⁹ Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*

¹⁰ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable*, p. 95-96

This study emphasizes the majesty, transcendence, holiness, and power of God. God truly is all of that and more. But He is also very present—the God who is near, even right here, now. He is the God we worship—not some distant deity but the God who is with us and will never leave us. If we allow that truth to saturate our minds, it will truly confront us, challenge us and comfort us.