

The Character of God Part 1 – His Majesty

“God – The Awesome Other”

Isaiah 40

September 12, 1999

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A couple of weeks ago little 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 - 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.

And 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 Red Sea part,
if we had seen the sun stand still,
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.

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.

In our services of worship I want us to encounter God as he has revealed himself in his word – and meeting God in this way, I want us to worship him for who he is.

John Piper, building on what E.J. Carnall wrote, discusses three stages of worship: (Desiring God)

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.

The other day I laid down on the guest bed with Paris the 19-month-old in our home. 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.

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

Now most specifically this morning 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 today we focus our attention 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 got the syllabus in a class you were already worried about, and reading through it you were overwhelmed with how seemingly impossible it was?

This morning we look 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.

A 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 plummet 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.” (in Pink 89)

In the book of Job, 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.” (Job 11:7-9)

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. (Isaiah 55:8f)

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 will 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.

As much as anyone in all of Holy Scripture, the prophet Isaiah expressed the inexpressible, pictured the unseen, and made known the unknowable.

Look with me now at a passage of Scripture that uses language to venture into this mysterious, unique, otherness of our great God.

Isaiah 40:12-31 Please stand as I READ

Isaiah wants the people of Israel to trust God.

Because of their rebellion against God, they are headed into a period of years that 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, 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 comparisons.

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, has a job to do – to describe the majesty of God.

As we look at 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 that prove the majesty of God as you might if Paul was 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.

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 puny when seeing this beautiful earth from some great vantagepoint?

Using poetic language Isaiah describes a God who is so great, so majestic, so awe-inspiring that that which we consider to be limitless, because it is so large, is small compared to the God who created it.

Verse 12: “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 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 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!

Our God is also one of a kind – unique!

READ verses 13-14.

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 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. (A.W. Pink The Attributes of God 9-10)

God is not dependent on anything or anyone.

God is not just a larger us.

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". (in The Living God -382)

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.

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.

READ v15

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.

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 eye-witness paintings of God the Father or even of God the Son, Jesus.

The only description we have even 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 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.

Why is God so opposed to this that he makes it the second commandment listed?

Two reasons:

1. 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.

2. 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 "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.” (Pink 28)

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.

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 that 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 others 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 above it, greater than it, of a wholly different order.

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 verses 23 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.

V24 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 & 26, as in v18, God invites a comparison.

Based on what has just been stated in vv18-24 Isaiah says that God asks, "So" to whom will you compare 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 each one is appointed by God.

The point is that God is above it all, he is the transcendent “holy” God- the awesome “other”.

And then the application of the lesson on God’s majesty is given in 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 our 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, 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.