

“The Spirit of God – The Awesome Other”
The Greatness of His Character
Isaiah 40
June 22, 2003
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Next Sunday we begin a 10-week series seeking to better **know** God the Holy Spirit.

Many of us have a sufficient understanding of the Bible to think great thoughts about God the **Father** but we aren't quite certain what to think about the Spirit.

In fact when we say “God” we are most often thinking of the Father God, not of Jesus or even less of the Spirit.

And it is also true that most of us have been sufficiently schooled to think of Jesus not just as the **Son** of God (in some hierarchically inferior way) but as **God** the Son – with the emphasis on his deity.

We believe Jesus is fully God.

But when it comes to our thinking about the Holy Spirit – again, we are not quite certain what to think.

Is the Spirit just a different way of describing the Father or even just a different way of describing the Father and the Son?

Is he just some of kind of celestial, intangible influence emanating from the Father?

It is not my intention, this morning, to show you the evidence proving that the Holy Spirit is God or to plumb the mystery of the Trinity.

It is rather my intention to DECLARE to you the majesty, the “awesomeness” of the character of the Spirit, who is God.

And I ask you to remember that every time the Bible speaks of God, it is speaking of the one and only God eternally existing in three persons, Holy Spirit, Son and Father.

This morning I am asking you to assume that Trinitarian belief that you declare every time you repeat the Apostles' Creed.

And I hope that by declaring the majesty of the Spirit we will begin to grasp the significance of the full deity of the Holy Spirit - that he is not a lesser God.

Thus when we study the Holy Spirit this summer you not think merely of the Spirit as a celestial messenger boy but you will think “God”

When we say that the Holy Spirit is “God with us” I want you to think not only God “with us” but “God”, in all his majesty, with us.

So today we focus our attention on what the theologians called God’s majesty – the greater greatness of the Holy Spirit – God.

I hope to put definition to all of this 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 then reading through it you were overwhelmed with how seemingly impossible it was?

This morning we look into a subject that is 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)... 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 plumbline 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.

So unlike us is the Spirit, 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 and lives to worship and serve 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” – the majesty and transcendence of our great God.

Open your Bible please to Isaiah 40:12-31.

(Although I will reproduce the text on the screen for those who don't have a Bible, I hope you will follow along in your Bible if you have one.)

To make again the point that I have already tried to make, I wish to alter the reading of the text to specifically say the “Spirit” every time the text says “God”.

Now we know that when the text says “God” it is referring to the eternally existing three-in-one God – Holy Spirit, Son and Father.

But to keep us from thinking only of the person of the Father, which we are prone to do, I am prompting us, by this method of reading, to also think of the person of the Holy Spirit.

Stand in honor of God's Word as I read.

Isaiah 40:12-31

“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?

ISA 40:13 Who has understood the mind of the (Spirit),
or instructed him as his counselor?

ISA 40:14 Whom did the (Spirit) 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?

ISA 40:15 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.

ISA 40:16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.

ISA 40:17 Before him all the nations are as nothing;
they are regarded by him as worthless
and less than nothing.

ISA 40:18 To whom, then, will you compare (The Holy Spirit)
What image will you compare him to?

ISA 40:19 As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and fashions silver chains for it.

ISA 40:20 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.

ISA 40:21 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?

ISA 40:22 (The Spirit) 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.

ISA 40:23 He brings princes to naught
 and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

ISA 40:24 No sooner are they planted,
 no sooner are they sown,
 no sooner do they take root in the ground,
 than (The Spirit) blows on them and they wither,
 and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

ISA 40:25 "To whom will you compare me?
 Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

ISA 40:26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
 Who created all these?
 (The Spirit) 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.

ISA 40:27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
 and complain, O Israel,
 "My way is hidden from the (Spirit)
 my cause is disregarded by my God"?

ISA 40:28 Do you not know?
 Have you not heard?
 The (Spirit) 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.

ISA 40:29 He gives strength to the weary

and increases the power of the weak.
 ISA 40:30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
 and young men stumble and fall;
 ISA 40:31 but those who hope in the (Spirit)
 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.

Isaiah wants the people of Israel to trust God.

Because of their rebellion against God through the years, they are headed into a season of discipline.

Their homes will be destroyed and their freedoms trampled 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, and transcendence of their God.

There is a certain irony here in that Isaiah attempts to describe the incomparable by using comparisons.

As we look at these verses I want you to understand it is Isaiah the **poet**, not the Paul, the **logician**, who is writing these words

You will not discover five points in succession that prove the majesty of God as you might if Paul were writing.

Instead, using poetry, Isaiah 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 and universe around us.**

Who of you is great enough to have measured the oceans of the earth in the hollow of your hand?

- Have we not stood at the ocean and been impressed with how vast it appears?
- Have we not looked into a night sky and been nearly overwhelmed by the seeming endlessness of it?
- Have we not stood on or near a mountain peak and marveled at the sheer size of the earth beneath us?
- Have we not felt puny when we have seen pictures of the earth taken from space?

We look at the vastness of this world and our universe and can't imagine anything greater.

But the Holy Spirit who is with us is also the Spirit 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 the Spirit's size as if he had a body – we are talking about the greatness of his being, as in his majesty.

If the vastness of the universe is awesome – how much more awesome is the Spirit who is behind it all!

The Holy Spirit, who is with us here and now and is so intimately connected to us that the Bible says he resides in us, is that God.

Look at verses 13-14.

Who has understood the **mind** of the Spirit? No one!

No one has counseled, enlightened, instructed, taught, or showed the Spirit what to think, say or do.

Probably the best way to state what Isaiah is describing here is the “self-existence” of the Spirit.

When I say “self-existence think of it this way: We exist because we have been caused to exist by God and our continuing existence is completely dependent on things outside of us – food, water, air, God himself.

But the Spirit 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 (there was only God – Holy Spirit, Son and Father). 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...self-contained, self-sufficient, self-satisfied; in need of nothing. (God's creation of the universe) 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)

And the Spirit is not just a larger us.

We cannot describe the Spirit by simply 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 the Spirit as just a larger, more powerful version of us.

Not true! The Spirit is totally other.

No, I don't understand that fully, but I see the point Isaiah is making – The Spirit is unlike anything else we can imagine.

He is majestic and above us in every way imaginable.

In the weeks ahead we will look carefully at the ways the Holy Spirit ministers to us.

But in that we must never forget who he is – the self-existent, majestic God of eternity past and future.

When we come to verses 15-17 we have Isaiah comparing the Spirit to **the entire known world** even the wealthy nation of Lebanon.

He writes, “Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket...or (as insignificant) as dust.”

If you poured out a large 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 the Spirit.

Even “Lebanon with all its trees and animals is not sufficient...”

Then in verse 17, Isaiah says that in comparison to the Holy Spirit, all the nations of the world that we find so impressive are as nothing, worthless, less than nothing.

Isaiah is making the point **not** just that the Spirit is greater than all the nations but that **there is no comparison**.

He's of a different category – 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.

Think of 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 the Holy Spirit 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 Him.

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.

The Spirit may give us consciences, a God-awareness, undying souls, or however else we may express what it means to be made in the image of God,

But that doesn't put us in the same class with the Spirit any more than our drawing a smiley face on a piece of paper makes a human being.

The Spirit 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 the Spirit?

What **image** will you compare him to?

And the questions have an equally obvious answer – No one and no image!

In verses 19-20 Isaiah shows how ridiculous and blasphemous it is to even think that you can represent the Spirit with some physical figure or even imagination.

The second of the Ten Commandments reads:

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.

Now the second says 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?

Two reasons:

1. **An image of any kind**, be it ever so beautiful, dramatic, expensive, or awe-inspiring **is completely insufficient** to capture the exceptional, unique, and totally “other” essence of our Holy God.

Any physical or mental representation reduces the Spirit 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 the Holy Spirit.

Images obscure his glory.

2. The second reason physical or mental representations of God are blasphemous is because **they mislead us**.

They lead us to settle for a God that is fashioned in our likeness – a limited God.

God says in Psalm 50:21b “You thought I was altogether like you.”

“Men imagine that the (Holy Spirit) 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 (the Spirit) has formed any plan or purpose at all, then it must be like theirs, constantly subject to change. They openly declare that whatever power the Spirit 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 the Spirit to anything like us.

This majesty of the Spirit, this total otherness of the Spirit is a most fundamental truth of the Bible.

The Spirit with us is not a superman, he is God – majestic in his otherness.

Beginning in verse 21 Isaiah asks, isn’t the majesty of the Spirit 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 origin – 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.

In verse 22, he says the Spirit sits enthroned above the circle of the earth.

If you stand outside 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 the Spirit 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 is as nothing – like grasshoppers.

The earth and everyone on it are not controlling the Spirit – he controls them.

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 the Spirit has built to make life on earth possible.

But the Spirit 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 the Spirit- HE CONTROLS THEM.

He is wholly other in his majesty.

Then Isaiah says in verses 23 the Spirit 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 the Spirit.

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 the Holy Spirit—he is of a different order than all the others.

All the authorities of the earth are not controlling the Spirit – he controls them.

Now again in verses 25 & 26 the Spirit invites a comparison.

Based on what has just been stated the Spirit asks again, “So” to whom will you compare me?

And again the obvious answer is “no one!”

Earlier he suggested a comparison with idols but 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, the Holy Spirit 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 the Spirit.

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

And then the application of the lesson on the Spirit’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.”

Like Jacob, like Israel, we look at the magnitude of suffering around the world and some of us are tempted to be agnostic –

Yes, maybe there is a God but we can't make sense of it so we stop trying and stop expecting God, if he is there, to do anything about it.

We easily wallow in self-pity for the tough experiences we encounter in life and wonder if God really cares or will do anything about them.

We, too easily, become cynical and expect nothing. Suggesting, but not daring to say, “If there is a God...”

But Isaiah says in verse 28, “Oh, don't say that.”

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Spirit 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 know who the Spirit is?

He is majestic in his power, his self-existence, his uniqueness, his immensity, his sovereignty, and his eternity.

He is God, high and lifted up, completely “other”, the uncontrolled-controller, the uncaused cause, and the uncreated-creator.

This is the God who is with you and in you in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Don't make him anything less.

You can trust him – he is God.

And this is the Spirit we plan to study to get to know even better in the next 10 weeks.

He is **God** with us.