

God Is Great

There is a story about an old sailing ship that ran into a severe storm off the coast of Brazil in the south Atlantic. The ship broke apart. The good news was that members of the small crew were able to get aboard a lifeboat so they were initially saved. However, they had no fresh water and so after days of drifting in the ocean they became dehydrated and were nearing death. Delirious, one of the sailors who from his experience on the ocean probably should have known much better, as a last desperate act reached over the side of that lifeboat and scooped up ocean water to take a deep drink. To his amazement it was not salty!

It was no miracle. Although land was not in sight, their lifeboat had sailed near the mouth of the Amazon River where the magnitude of the flow of the river was so great that it was still fresh water even that far out at sea. They didn't know the most important thing for them to know at the time and it was ignorance that was essentially costing them their lives.

I think it can be much the same with our ignorance about God. We can know all kinds of facts about all kinds of things but if we don't know what is most important of all then everything else by comparison really doesn't matter. It is a sad and a dangerous thing to be ignorant about God.

Suppose that we were to make a short list of the top five things that everyone should know about God. What would they be? It's difficult to pare the list down because if everything were written about God the world could not contain all of the books. I would have to include that God is great, that God is good, that God is holy, that God is love and that God is knowable (for if we can't know Him all of the others are merely theoretical).

The greatness of God is a theological lesson that has been taught by tens of thousands of parents to their children in a simple and easily memorized table prayer. You probably know it. "God is great. God is good. And we thank him for this food. In Jesus' name, Amen." With this prayer parents have taught the basic principle at the very beginning of the list of the theology of God, that God is great. This is the cornerstone of life and of faith. If God is not great then nothing else about him much matters and everything else becomes irrelevant. But if God is

great then when we as Christians believe in him, we have confidence in him and we are convinced that he can make a significant difference in our lives.

Attempting to understand the greatness of God begins with the realization that God is very different from us. Now that may seem obvious to you but to many people it is not obvious. In everyday conversation we will sometimes hear someone say, "Men and women are really different from each other." You think to yourself, "And you have to be told that?" The bestseller *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* is based on the premise that men and women are very different from each other. Yet the difference between us and God is a far greater difference than the difference between the sexes or the difference between any of us.

Isaiah 55:9 quotes God as saying, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." As different as the distance from heaven to earth. A distance that with the most powerful telescope is still far beyond our sight and beyond our reach. That is how different God is in his ways and in his thoughts. He is very, very different.

That creates some problems for us. We are told in the Bible that we are created in God's image and that means that we are modeled after God in intellect, in feeling and in choices. Well, if that's the case, maybe we're not so different after all. But just as a painter is infinitely different from his self-portrait, so the creator God is infinitely different from us. If God is that different, how do we understand him?

It's a great challenge because most of our understanding of that which is different from us is by extension of the way we think and act. The way we understand is in terms of ourselves. We do this with

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our pets. We say, "Doggie is sad because we're going away on vacation next month." The

truth is, Doggie doesn't know that we're going away on vacation. We have extended our thought patterns, our feelings, to a pet. We do that even with inanimate objects. We imagine that houses and cars have feelings and thoughts because that's the way we try to understand that which is very different from us. In movies about space and aliens, the aliens are

made to look like extensions of our life form, using our type of conversation because that's the only way we can imagine something so different to be.

God is so different that it is virtually impossible for us to adequately understand that difference. That's a challenge for us except that God has reached out to us and given to us through the Bible and his creation ways for us to understand him. What is crucial is that we form our understanding of God on the basis of the way he has revealed himself to be rather than by extending our imaginations as to what we think God should be like. Just as pagan religions have formed God to look like animals and other objects, we are prone to the same mistakes. The truth of it is that we need to shape our thinking on the basis of the way that God says that he is rather than recreate him in our image. If we keep that basic understanding that God is different and that God is great then we can tread softly down the path of the greatness of God.

One of the big ways in which God is different and one of the ways in which God is great is that God never began and will never end. Psalm 90:2 is one of the many places in the Bible which tells us about this eternity of God. "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." Or open the Bible to its first page, "In the beginning God. . ." It makes no difference when you define the beginning. No matter how far back anyone takes it, already there was God. I think that is an especially difficult concept for us to understand because we live lives that always have starts and finishes. A race begins and ends. On our tombstones we put the year in which we were born, the year in which we die. Employment begins with being hired and ends with retiring or being fired or quitting. Everything has a start and a finish to it and so we have to go through some type of mental gymnastics to try to imagine that God always was, is and always will be because we don't have filing categories for that type of eternity of God.

Maybe the closest comparison we can make is to space. We know that space has no beginning and no end. No matter how far you go in any direction, there's always more. If you could go a trillion light years you still couldn't find the end of space. Just as there is no end to space so there is no beginning or end to God. God is eternal. He always was. He always will be and even if I have no category for

grasping the infinity of God, that doesn't change the reality that God is eternal.

Throughout all of this eternity God never changes. That, too, speaks significantly to the greatness of God. God is the same today as he was a billion, trillion years ago. He thinks the same. He acts the same. His purposes and character are identical. This is very good news because what if God switched? What if God redrew the rules? What if physics or mathematics were suddenly changed? We wouldn't know what to expect. The consistency of God, the changelessness of God gives us a fixed point for our lives and for everything that exists. This truth is found throughout the Bible. Malachi 3:6, almost at the end of the Old Testament, quotes God as saying, "I the Lord do not change." Near the end of the New Testament in James 1:17 we're told that every good and every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. Whoa, does that mean that everything's fixed? Does that

The message is clear and powerful. God is present. He has everything under control.

mean there's no point in praying? What if I really had a crisis in my life

this past week and I pleaded with God to do something? If God doesn't change then what's the point in praying? What's the point of anything? Are we stuck with fatalism? No — because it is God's character and purposes that never change. Certainly God deals differently with different issues and situations.

Throughout the Bible there are times when God will tell a person or a nation to repent because of some sin or he will punish them. Then the person or the nation repents and God calls off the punishment. God did not change in who he is or in the way he operates but the situation changed and God handled it accordingly.

Another way of saying all this is that God is absolutely dependable. He does not change. He does not play games with our lives. He doesn't tell us the truth one day and lie the next. To use a term frequently associated with God in the Bible, he is our "rock." He is the fixed point; he is solid.

There is a current theology that denies much of this about God. It is a theology that in my opinion is both unbiblical and unchristian. While aspects of this theology go back for many, many hundreds of years and generations it really has been popularized in the United States in the twentieth century from the writings of a man who was born in 1897.

It has been called “process theology” and the basis of it is that God is in process, that God is changing. The theory behind it is that genuine existence requires change and therefore God is constantly evolving. He’s not the same as he used to be. Process theology also teaches that our human behavior changes and develops God. So when we do something that impacts God, he is altered. He is a changing and evolving and developing God.

How contrary to the God that is pictured in the Bible. Jesus Christ is described as “the same yesterday and today and forever.” The God of the Bible is predictable because of his consistency. In our generation, where change is so rampant everywhere we look, we find great assurance and stability for our lives in this biblical, true God who is an unchanging God.

Now add to this growing picture of the greatness of God that God is everywhere at the same time. God is in Minneapolis but he’s also in Miami. He’s at the top of the highest mountain but also at the bottom of the deepest sea. God is in heaven but God is also in hell. The Psalmist said it very well in Psalm 139:7-10.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

God is not limited the way we are. God is different. He is not our size; he is not our shape. God can be everywhere at the same time. Now, that doesn’t mean he acts the same way in different situations. In one place something is going on and he functions accordingly. In another place something else is going on and he functions differently there.

We understand this because we act differently in different places as well. This morning I have a suit and tie on but at home I hang around with a T-shirt and shorts. Fortunately, you’ll probably never see me dressed like that in a church service! If you’re a lawyer you’ll act differently in a courtroom with a felon then you will at home in the nursery with your newborn baby. The difference is that God is simultaneously everywhere and he may be experienced very differently in different places at the same time.

For Christians that is a source of great encour-

agement. This omnipresence of God means that no matter where we go, he is there for us. It’s a source of encouragement for parents who want to protect their children but say, “I can’t be everywhere my children go. I can’t protect them from every danger and risk that is out there — but I know that God is there even when I am not.” We may not be there with our children at the moment of their greatest need, but we know that God is always there.

The omnipresence of God is a wonderful truth and comfort for those who are Christians. But for those who are not, it is a frightening thing because you can’t escape from God no matter where you go. He beats you there. No matter what you do, he’s always right there watching you. There’s no place where we can hide and get away from God.

Not only is this great God everywhere but he also knows everything. This makes sense when we’re talking about the present because if God is in Minneapolis and Miami at the same time and he’s everywhere in this room at the same time then he would know everything that is going on. But it’s more than that. God has an infinite memory so that everything that has ever happened, ever has been said or done, God knows it all and has instant recall. God knows every secret including our private thoughts. There is no information that is unavailable to God. God knows every possibility. It isn’t just that he knows what actually is but he also knows all the options that could have been.

I John 3:20 says that “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” Now this is kind of mind boggling.

It’s astonishing. It means that God even knows the future before the future happens. He knows what’s going to be history in the next day, week, year and millennium. He knows all of the details in advance. Now that’s troublesome for those who would philosophically say that the future is unknowable. But you see, to deny that God knows the future is to claim that God is like us, to downsize him and to think that he fits only into our categories. We need to remember that God is infinitely different.

The Bible is loaded with prophecies that give specific names and conversations and places, even dates. All this information that God could only reveal if God knew all about the future. Every precise detail. The Psalmist in Psalm 139 says, “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts

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from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.” Then get this line, “Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.” Before a word comes out, before our tongue begins to shape the word, God knows what that word is in advance. The Psalmist goes on to say, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Now I think that’s kind of scary. We seem to lose our privacy and our independence if God knows all about us. On the other hand, it is a wonderful comfort and assurance when life seems to be filled with jagged pieces of glass that are supposed to fit together in some celestial jigsaw puzzle but we can’t seem to make any sense of it. God who knows everything can see into the future and can see how these jagged things that are happening in our lives have meaning and purpose and will assemble into a mosaic that is magnificent. God understands and can see all this because he knows everything.

But all of these truths about God’s greatness wouldn’t mean much if God were too weak to use his presence and knowledge. However, the pinnacle of God’s greatness is his ability to do whatever he wants. God is all-powerful. Jesus sums it up in Matthew 19:26: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” The Bible is filled with examples of this huge power of God. He created the universe. He not only created it to be but sustains it so it can continue. He made the blind to see, the lame to walk and made the dead come back to life again.

He can do whatever he chooses to do. But God does not choose to do anything that is wrong. God does not want to use his power for evil. The fact that he doesn’t change, the fact that he is good, means that the supernatural power of God is always used to accomplish that which is right and that which is good.

How we think of this unlimited power of God largely depends on how we are related to him. If we are Christians who have confidence in him, if our trust and allegiance is fully to God, then we are delighted that God will use his resources to our good. By contrast, those who seek to defeat God or escape him or defy him are frightened by this great power of God for there is the quick recognition that God is unbeatable. There’s no way we can take him on and ever triumph.

You start putting all of this together and you begin to see there is no doubt about the greatness of

God. It’s something that everyone should know! The more we learn about God and his greatness I think the more we reflect the words in Deuteronomy 10:17: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome.”

Related to that is another word in the Bible that some people are uncomfortable with and that word is “fear.” I remember the first time I saw the mountains of Alaska. I was stunned by what I saw. They’re so many and they’re so high and they are so intimidating. I tried to imagine someone climbing up Mt. McKinley. How would you ever do that? You would have to have great preparation, great care, great respect. A fear. But it wouldn’t be the wrong kind of fear. It would be an understanding of the awesomeness of what you were dealing with. The same thing would be true if you were trying to explore the depth of the sea. The sea goes below 20,000 feet, far below the capacity of the scuba diver or most deep sea equipment. So you have a fear that is respectful for something that is far greater and far different than yourself.

With God, his greatness is so huge that we fear him. We ought to fear him. His power is so much more, his presence so much greater, his knowledge infinitely beyond ours. He is truly awesome. We are no match so we fear him but we fear him in the best sense that we do not try to manipulate him. We should not seek to recreate God according to our mold or our design. We connect to him on his terms. When we connect to him on his terms we discover that all these marvels of the greatness of God are to our benefit and blessing.

The words of the Bible are true. “The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome” — and he is ours.

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