

July 8, 2007

## The Incomparable Majesty and Glory of God (#2) – The Paradox of God

I Chronicles 29:10-13 / Psalm 8 / Revelation 15:1-8 / Job 37:19-24

One of the hardest things for the believer to grasp, or integrate, or hold in a right and balanced perspective, is how God can be a God of infinite immensity (limitless in greatness and grandeur), and at the very same time be so close and intimate (unspeakably near to His own) indwelling and inhabiting their hearts — making His residence at the very center and core of their being.

It's what I call The Paradox of God — How God can be both Infinite and Intimate at the very same time. How He can be "enthroned in heaven" as Psalm 2 tells us (filling all time and space to the infinite reaches of the furthest galaxies), and at the very same time be enthroned in the hearts of all who believe (Gal 4:6 / Eph. 3:17) – aware of every thought we think and feeling that we feel!

The Scriptures would affirm that both statements are true, though to many believers, and most seekers (including myself in my earlier years) the one would seem to invalidate the other.

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I remember the first time I flew on a plane, looking down at huge skyscrapers from 30,000 feet up, or football stadiums which looked about the size of a dime (or less) and hold 60 to 80,000 people! And all of a sudden I thought, "How could God even notice individual people, never mind their every thought, feeling, word and deed?"

I was wrestling with the same thing David wrestled with in Psalm 8 when he looked up at the infinite expanses of the heavens and in contrast to them contemplated the smallness of people by comparison — a comparison that caused him to ask: "What is man that you are even mindful of him?"

Some of you may have had the same experience — standing out in a field at night, or laying (like I did) in a sleeping bag on a mountain-top, looking up at the stars on a clear Autumn night.

You've probably entertained the same thought David did as he wrote: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

You see, the massive expanses of the heavens, and the knowledge that God fills them all to the furthest reaches of the farthest galaxies, seems to nullify the concept that God could also be "mindful" and "care" for each one of us — about what we feel and what burdens us, or the things we struggle with.

And thus, as I begin today, maybe I could do so by asking you: Which view of God dominates your perception of God — His Immensity or His Intimacy? Do you focus more on His nearness and closeness, or His Grandeur, Otherness, and more distant Lordship over all creation? (What theologians call His transcendence vs. His Immanence.)

Because depending on which one predominates in your thinking, it does make an enormous difference in the way you view God's love and His interaction with you; the way you pray and the way you live your Christian life.

Do you most often perceive God to be "out there," or to the God who is so close to you that He dwells "in here" (in your heart)? / Is He, as Bette Midler sang, "watching us from a distance" (from His throne in heaven), or is He nearer to you than any human being ever could be, even if you were engaged in the most intimate of conversations and they had their arms wrapped around you — squeezing you tight!

Do you most often address God as "Abba Father" ("Daddy" in the Hebrew) or as "Lord God Almighty—Sovereign of the Universe, and Maker of Heaven and Earth"?

You see, Elihu unquestionably falls into the second category. To him God is almost exclusively a God "awesome in majesty" (v. 22). "The Almighty," he says, "is beyond our reach and exalted in power..." (v. 23). He's far above and beyond us.

And, of course, there is a sense in which he is right. God is indeed more awesome and majestic than we could ever imagine! He IS so Immense and Infinite and Almighty that in some senses He is indeed "beyond our reach" (or at least great beyond our comprehension as we'll see in the next few chapters).

No human being ever has, nor ever will "climb up to heaven and bring God down," nor "force Him to do anything He does not desire to do."

No human being possesses the power to twist God's arm, make Him respond or force Him to come close! "He does whatever He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth," as we read in Daniel 4:35. ***God does what He determines, when He determines it, not what we demand, when we demand it!***

Yet that's NOT the whole story. For the Bible also tells us that "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him" (Psalm 145:18). He knows when we sit and when we rise, He knows our every thought, and even our words before we speak them (Psalm 139:2-4). He is with us wherever we go — His hand guiding us, and His right hand holding us tight (Psalm 139:5-10).

He even (as Jesus points out) knows the exact number of hairs that are on each one of our heads (before and after we shower!). And He also knows every one of your needs before you ever voice them in prayer (Matthew 10:30 and 6:8). He is very near to us all.

He is NOT a God who is "beyond our reach"— simply seeing us, regarding, or watching us from a distance. For He is with us who believe, and even inhabiting the bodies of believers, and dwelling at the very center and core of our being — like a spring that wells up to eternal life — waters that bubble up from the deepest recesses of our soul!

In fact, as much as people have often told me how they wished they could have Jesus with them at all times, in person, in the flesh, like the disciples, Jesus Himself told His disciples (when they were grieving the fact that He would go away): "It is for your good that I am going away. For unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go I will send Him to you" (John 16:5-7). Or as some versions put it: "It is to your advantage," or "It is better for you that I go away..."

WHY? Because then God would not merely live with them, or in their midst, He would live inside them — indwelling, inhabiting and making their bodies the "Temple" in which His Spirit (or His own intimate personal presence) would live.

Therefore let me ask YOU — Do you simply know God as "the God out there"— or has His Spirit (His intimate presence) taken up residence in your physical body, and become for you like a spring of living water that wells up from deep within your soul?

Which brings us to our FIRST point. God DOES want us to know and affirm the truth that He is Inexpressibly and Incomprehensibly Great. Immense and Majestic and Powerful beyond our ability to even conceive of it in our wildest dreams! That understanding is one of the things that causes us to "revere Him" as Elihu points out in verse 24.

And who wouldn't? What thinking person would not "fear" or "revere" a God who has made over 100 billion galaxies each containing about 100 billion stars (some 250,000,000 miles in diameter with flames that shoot 250,000 miles into the air — flames 10 times the diameter of our entire

planet)! Or take the human brain with 75 to 100 billion nerve cells, each having as many as 10,000 connections with other nerve cells, or the human heart that is without question the most efficient and durable pump of its size ever created! Even to this day!

God's creative power and genius is beyond human imagination (as we will see in the next 4 chapters). Making Elihu right in one sense: Who would not "fear" or "revere" Him?

Yet unlike Elihu, God never wants the truth of God's immensity to cause us to lose sight of the fact that He is near to us all. Not just "having regard for the wise in heart" (v. 24), but intimately caring for us, and coming to us, and even living within us who believe.

On the Day of Pentecost, while the disciples were gathered in one place waiting for "the gift the Father promised" ("to be baptized with the Holy Spirit" as Acts 1:5 puts it), "Suddenly the sound of a mighty rushing wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting... and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:1-4). He came upon them and entered into them.

Likewise Paul reminds the Corinthians of the same truth when he says to them: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

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**So what's the answer?** What do you do when one truth seems to negate or contradict another truth? You continue to proclaim **BOTH** with equal earnestness and urgency!

The typical human tendency is to disdain paradoxes. We don't like living with paradoxes! It's hard to explain them or hold both of the seemingly opposite truths in a correct or balanced perspective. Human nature tends to focus on or emphasize one to the exclusion of the other.

But if we are to be people of the Book, and worship God as He really is, we must never let go of either. We must NEVER fail to emphasize and proclaim the Awesome Majesty, the Infinite Wisdom, and the Sovereign Might of an all-powerful God. A God who is indeed Almighty — Exalted in Power and Unthwartable in all He purposes to do. "A God who is Great in Justice and Righteousness, and does not oppress," as Elihu points out — an understanding of God which causes us to "fear" or "revere" Him.

In fact, it's the hesitancy of pastors to speak on the topic of God's greatness that has caused "the fear of the Lord" to disappear in the modern day church — some (many?) pastors even purposely avoiding the topic for at least a generation or so in many, many churches.

WHY? I heard one Christian psychologist suggest it was because speaking too often on God's Sovereignty, Omnipotence, Might, Immensity and Immutability makes people feel small and powerless by comparison. It makes people feel God is distant and doesn't care. That it's useless to pray to a God who sovereignly ordains all that happens.

Secular psychologists would surely agree. And pastors who want to "serve up God as people want Him" rather than "how the Bible declares Him to be," have taken note of what people want and adjusted their messages appropriately — one of the reasons "reverence for God" or the "fear of God" has nearly disappeared from the contemporary church and even the contemporary Christian's everyday vocabulary.

For the sake of making people "feel" more powerful, or in control of their circumstances, and in charge of their lives — thus enhancing their sense of self-esteem — many sectors of the church have very purposefully avoided speaking on the infinite majesty and the immense power of God.

For the sake of making us feel bigger and more significant and in control, we have succumbed, as Donald McCullough points out, to the sin of "Trivializing God."

*"Visit a church on Sunday morning," he says, "almost any will do — and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, lends almighty support to social crusades, or conforms to individual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether the sermon will go over (well); the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing the offertory... Reverence and awe have often been replaced with a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding a bit of religious atmosphere, perhaps, but no heat, no blinding light, no power of purification. When the true story gets told... in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century [and lapping over into the 21<sup>st</sup> I might add] has been the trivialization of God."*

(He's right, and his book is a very challenging and convicting read.)

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Yet having said that, it must also be said that we should NEVER fail to emphasize and proclaim the equally necessary truth of God's intimacy and closeness to the believer. His intimate knowledge of all our thoughts, cares, concerns, desires, and inner yearnings.

We must never fail to proclaim the possibility (because of the Gospel and God's grace in Christ) of knowing Him, experiencing His nearness, dwelling in His presence, and best of all — having His presence dwell within us!

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Which brings us to our **LAST** point. It is absolutely imperative that we as Christians emphasize BOTH, because if we fail to stress God's Infinite Otherness — His Transcendence and Immensity and Grandeur / His Unequaled Might and Unlimited presence throughout the entire universe, you will actually make His ability to be intimately involved in our lives incomprehensible (or unbelievable) to the thinking person!

Like me and others (including King David) people WILL at some point stand in a field and look up at the billions of stars in the billions of galaxies. They WILL eventually ride on a plane and look down at skyscrapers smaller than ants with 10-20,000 people working in them and wonder how it is that God could know and care about each one, never mind knowing their thoughts from afar, and their words before they ever speak them.

And it WILL cause a crisis of faith unless they realize that God can do such things precisely because He is so Infinite in nature. The paradox of paradoxes is that His immensity is what makes His Intimacy possible! He can be intimate with every one of us only because He is so infinite!

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How can God know my thoughts before I think them, and my needs before I speak them?

How can He hear the cries of my heart as I sit in the pew on a Sunday morning (as if I had my own personal audience with the Almighty) while billions of other Christians are also offering up the cries of their hearts as well — in China, and Europe and Africa, and the Amazon Jungle, or the Siberian Tundra, or the teeming millions upon millions in Mexico City?

How can He watch over all His people, and provide for their needs, and intervene in their life situations, and selectively answer prayer in the affirmative or negative (depending on what is in their best interests)? The answer is simple: It's because He's so infinitely immense!!!

The "problem" of God's intimacy does NOT stem from His Immensity — though that does appear to be the case at first!

Because on further consideration, the inquisitive, contemplative, thinking person realizes that just the opposite is true. That the only thing that could keep God from being that intimate is if He was finite and limited and pitifully small!

Only a small, impotent, trivial God that could not know the number of hairs on the heads of every person on earth at every moment in time! Only an insignificant, limited, finite and feeble God who could not know my needs before I even ask!

Only a pitiful, puny, laughable God who is not God would be UNABLE to do as He pleased with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth — softening the will of even the most wicked sinner / placing kings in their positions of power or removing them / and causing even entire kingdoms or nations to rise to prominence or fall into obscurity!

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 Only a God who is in absolute sovereign control of all that happens could fulfill all His promises to each one of His children! A God so precise in all of His divine oversight in history and providence that as Jesus said, “not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father.”  
 (Apart from His willing it to happen.)

In fact, that’s surely how Jesus could have such an intimate understanding of God as “Abba” (or “Daddy”) — an understanding He calls us to adopt as well. Because He knew how utterly Immense God was! A God so infinite in power and knowledge that NOTHING was impossible for Him! A God so sovereign over all that happens in His creation — that He sees everything and is present everywhere at all times!

A God who clothes even the flowers of the field in all their beautiful array! Or so controls the events in His universe that not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from His will or His giving His permission.

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 That’s how God can know your THOUGHTS before you think them / your WORDS before you speak them / and your NEEDS before you express them — because He is so Infinitely, Unimaginably, Mind-numbingly and Incomprehensibly Immense. Majestic in splendor. Unequaled and limitless in His knowledge and power!

That’s the resolution of the “paradox” — God is BOTH Infinite and Intimate — His Incomprehensible Immensity being the only thing that makes His uncanny, personal and precious intimacy possible!