

## God: An Introduction

Isaiah 40

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Well, today we begin a new series on the being and attributes of God. I will begin with a provocative thesis: Christians are not much interested in God. It seems preposterous, maybe even offensive. What am I even talking about? One way to get at this, is what I have called previously the “God and X” problem. Where X is something good. Some noble Christian thing.

And all Christians have their X. Because we all have gifts and vocations. There’s nothing wrong with X. X may be prayer or ministry or engaging American culture, or family, or any number of wholesome things. But what happens is that, over time, X becomes big — enormous — and God himself becomes small, he fades into the background. At some point, you could replace the word God with “Green” and nothing would be different with the substance of X. God could have 4 persons instead of 3 in his being and X would look and sound and feel much the same. This is because serving, loving and knowing God, has become identified with being busy with X. God in himself — in his own eternal being, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, apart from and above and before all created things — holds little to no interest. God is, in the words of one theologian, *weightless* for the American church. The eternal being of the Triune God is of little consequence. All that is needed to underwrite X, in most cases, is a general monotheism.

Geerhardus Vos was a well-known Dutch Reformed theologian. He taught at what is now Calvin; he taught at Princeton for many years in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He addresses this problem... So you don’t think this is an idiosyncratic concern of mine. He has a series of sermons called “Grace and Glory” and Vos says this in the sermon:

The question, though searching, is an extremely simple one: Do we love God for his own sake, and find in this love the inspiration of service, or do we patronize Him as an influential partner under whose auspices we can better conduct our manifold activities in the service of the world?

Now, we DO love that God sent Jesus, but precisely WHO Jesus is, his person and his nature(s), his relationship to the Triune being of God – we are not really

interested in that either. What did Jesus do for me? And what does Jesus want me to do? We do care about that. Good. Jesus himself? His person, rooted and receding back into the depths of the Triune God? Eh, not that interested.

Imagine doing this with a spouse. He does this, I do that. She does that, and I do this. We serve each other, we know what's required, and we do our duty. But the inner recesses, the deep psychological terrain, the unexplored depths of the soul of my spouse? Eh, not really interested. That is how many of us are with respect to God himself — no interest in his inner life.

As I've said before, if we were to set the ground rules of a single conversation, such that we could only speak of God and God alone, not God and X, not God and any single thing in the created order — just the unmeasured splendor of the Triune God himself — most of us could not sustain even a 2-minute conversation under such constraints.

So, God himself is weightless; X is enormous, it literally eats God up. So, why is this distinction between God and X important? Because if we don't get this right, we are living disordered, malformed, misshapen lives. I want to draw this out from the Isaiah 40 text, our Old Testament lesson this morning. The passage speaks of the asymmetry, the radical, infinite difference, between God, who is unmeasured. Look at v 12:

*Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord or what man shows him his counsel? God is unmeasured and unaided by his creation. His counsel, his understanding, his justice and his knowledge, are his own. Infinite, unsearchable, and high above our thoughts and ways.*

Verses 15 through 17 draw out the implications of the immensity, and the infinite and self-sufficient wisdom of God, the Transcendent One, the uncreated Creator:

*Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; behold he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.*

This is a satirical commentary on v.12. The waters of the whole creation can be measured in the hollow of his hand, the nations, then, are but a drop from a bucket. If the mountains and hills can be weighed on a standard, everyday scale, then the nations are like the dust on the scale, which has no weight at all, and the coastlands are even finer, less significant dust. For Isaiah, God is weighty, all of the nations are weightless. The transcendent Creator has no need of them, and in no way depends on them — no God and X problem.

As for the worship, the religious devotion due to such a God, the choicest fruits of this creation are wholly insufficient. Lebanon, and all her beautiful cedar trees, would not provide enough wood to keep the altar burning, and all of its beasts, all the animals in Lebanon, would not be enough for a burnt offering to match his

dignity. The creation, and all of its vast glory, possesses no intrinsic capacity to offer the worship due the Transcendent and infinite Creator. As the hymn writer put it: “were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present FAR TOO SMALL.”

The nations come back into view in v.17. All the nations, the whole sum of them, are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

The word for nothing, used twice here, actually means non-existence. The vision of God the Creator is so weighty, so palpably REAL, so full of infinite glory, it's as if the nations don't exist, or in the second half of v.17, they are, if possible, less than non-existent. The word for emptiness, at the end of v.17, literally means void. It's the same word used in Genesis 1 of the original, unformed creation – the earth was formless and VOID. The nations, all of them, are a content-less abyss of nothingness. I've always thought this should be chiseled into the UN building in NYC. What is always missing in our endless chattering about American decline is the transcendent perspective of this text.

Now, the point is NOT that God despises the nations. He will, in fact, redeem them. They will Isaiah will later tell us, stream into Zion. The point is that IN COMPARISON TO HIS BEING, they are lighter than the finest dust; they are virtually nothing. Does the vision of the incomparable God do this for your theology of the nations? Isaiah, unlike us, does not have the God and X problem.

This brings to the second point, ends and means. It turns out that pernicious, pathological things happen, when the God and X problem is not seen, recognized, and properly addressed. Here we want to go back to some basics. The church has used some simple schemes historically, to give us the big picture of what the Christian life is and what Christian theology is (and everyone is a theologian).

One of those is called, in Latin, *Exitus* and *Reditus*, meaning everything goes forth from God, and everything returns to God. God is the source, and God is the goal, of all things. Christian reflection is the study of God, and (secondarily) of all things in the light of God. God always is the beginning, the middle and the end of Christian reflection. Or, as our New Testament lesson from Romans 11 puts it: From him, and through him, and to him, are all things. God is the source, God is the agent, and God is the end or goal of all things.

Because of this, two things follow. First is, that God is the great object – and even there we need to stop – God is not an object as other things, or fields of study, are objects. God is the object who is also living Subject, and He is the One we are to love with our whole being. We heard that in the gospel lesson — heart, soul, mind and strength. All our faculties are summoned unto the joyful task of loving God. True enough, IF we love God, then, we will do what he calls us to do.

But we cannot collapse loving God into our ministries. As if love for God just WAS love of this or that Christian service. God himself is to be our singular passion. For our hearts, as Augustine said, are made for God himself. Hear the words C.H. Spurgeon, 19<sup>th</sup> century English preacher (I will cite him at some length, because its hard to improve on what he says here):

It has been said by some one that 'the proper study of mankind is man.' I will not oppose the idea, but it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God. The proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. 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. When we come to this master-science, we find that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height... No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. But while the subject humbles the mind it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnifies the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity. And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently consoling. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a calming for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balm for every sore. Would you lose your sorrows? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.

It is as if Spurgeon believes high theology is highly practical. He does not have a God and X problem.

The second thing I want to draw our attention to, and again — this is what happens when the God and X relation becomes imbalanced is that God becomes merely a means to an end. Often this is hard to see, because it is some Christian end. But that does not matter – it just tends to conceal the problem. God is never a means to an end, because he is our end. Christ died, Peter says with elegant simplicity, to bring us to God. That's it. That's why Christ died — to bring us to God. This is the great end: Seeing God. Without holiness no one will SEE the Lord. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. This is our blessed hope:

*We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3).*

*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Rev. 22).*

The worship of this God — in contemplation, in song and in confession — is the unending and delightful occupation of every creature in the new heavens and earth. Thus, this One can never become a means to an end. Never. Making him such would be idolatry, and whole segments of the church are dangerously close to it.

Here's what it often sounds like in our circles. It sounds like this: Trump, liberals, Trump, democrats, gays, abortion, masks, vaccines, Biden, Pelosi, and so on. Or flip it around and string together a bunch of progressive concerns: race, gender, climate, whiteness, republicans, reparations, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy. Now if you can dig around in the smoke of all the verbiage you might — you just might — find a reference to God, but he will be weightless, a sort of background prop for the culture warrior. And he certainly won't be the God who, in our flesh, lived out, and taught, the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount.

Now these are all important matters. Politics is not inconsequential. I am NOT saying these things don't matter. Of course they do. Nor am I suggesting in any simple way that both sides are equal. So, what's wrong? Certainly — if you asked — no one (who is a Christian) would confess that these things have supplanted the Triune God as the deepest affection of their hearts. The problem, however, is the order and proportion. We get hours and hours, endless days, vast volumes of breath and heat and passion, hundreds of links and clips and memes, millions and millions of words on this stuff.

THIS — American politics — is clearly where the PASSION lies, NOT with the being of the Triune God. People in the church are not accumulating stacks of books on the Trinity to probe the mystery of God. They have, however, spent hundreds of hours arguing about masks and vaccines and making infallible pronouncements about various gov't policies. So, if you let people talk. They will tell you what their chief end is. And in doing so, they will tell you what means are needed to achieve the end. Often it sounds like this:

BECAUSE the culture is in such dire straits, WE need to pray, to worship. Because of X and Y and Z. This is why we need the gospel.

Do you see what has happened here? I suspect many don't. In this universe, which we now inhabit, the end (the actual goal measured by passion and time

and words) is American cultural transformation. God and his gospel, it turns out, are a means to an end. And that, beloved, is akin to idolatry.

It is literally the inverse of Isaiah 40. God is a drop in the bucket – the nations are of vast importance. And this is a serious disorder. For as I've said before, if you think out of existence all of your passions — everything that has driven you for the last 20 months — then move out to all that is dear to you over the whole course of your life. Think it out of existence. You children, spouse, family and friends, your church, your nation, your culture, your politics, your century. Then move out even wider. Every piece of art and technology, and every artifact ever made, every tribe and tongue and nation and language into nothingness. Think away all created things period. Including yourself. What is left, is not simply more interesting, but infinitely more interesting, than all you've thought out of existence. For what is left is God — just God, only God; our God, the Triune God stripped of all competitors.

We, in fact, do NOT believe this. Just listen to us. The other stuff is all we want to talk about --- from a Christian perspective, of course – maybe. It is the burden of this series, to which I invite you today, to persuade us, that God is infinitely more interesting than any and all created things. Let it not be said of us, that we are not much interested in God. For to know him IS eternal life. To be filled up to all the fulness of this God is what Paul prays for the church. Our chief end is to glorify him and to enjoy him – forever.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

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