

“Transcendence of God: Other But Not Distant” Series: “Describing God”
Texts: Genesis 1:1-2; Psalm 78:35; 97:9; Isaiah 55:8-9; John 8:23-24; Revelation 4:10
Rev. Dave Sattler August 2, 2020 North Shore Alliance Church

Sources: NIV Life Application Bible, Bible Gateway, NIV/Message Parallel Bible. Textbooks: Walter Elwell, “Evangelical Theology” (1984), Millard J. Erickson “Christian Theology” (1990), Donald Guthrie, “New Testament Theology” (1981). William LaSor, “Old Testament Survey” (1982). Books: “*Themes in Old Testament Theology*” by William Dyrness (1979) and “*Seriously Dangerous Religion*” by Iain Provan (2014). Wikipedia: *Alexander Graham Bell*, *Abraham Maslow*, *Eastern Orthodox Worship*. Sermon: Mark Peters, NSAC (May 3, 2020).

I. <Slide> Review & Introduction

- Hello everyone! Thanks for joining us — here, and online.
- Welcome near and far. I’m Dave Sattler, one of the pastors at NSAC continuing in our Series, “Describing God.”
- We have been examining aspects of God’s character ... like God’s goodness, God’s redemption, God’s justice.
- We have been ‘studying’ God — or, you might say, we’ve been doing theology.
- ILL — Now I know from experience that theology ...
 - Isn’t exactly the hot topic of conversation among friends ...
 - On the office Zoom call, or at the local dog park, or at the brewery, or even in the church parking lot! At least not overtly.
 - <Slide> But, like Pastor Mark says, Q: “What we think about God matters most” — NSAC, 05/03/2020. **Theology really matters.**
- Still, while learning about God is helpful, understanding God does not come solely come through study.
- Knowing God grows through our experience of God. What truly sustains us is experiencing God in real-life relationship. That’s the ‘game-changer.’
- Our theology grows as we do.
- And so we come to the “Transcendence of God.”
- <Slide> In his book “*Seriously Dangerous Religion*,” Iain Provan warns,
 - Q: “It is possible to be highly educated and at the same time morally depraved. There is, in fact, a certain kind of moral depravity that only the highly educated can attain, because it requires sophisticated skills of rationalization and self-deception.”
- Because of its infinite depth, the study of God is still unreachable to human grasp. It’s only from assuming a humble posture that believes, ‘God is big and I am not,’ that genuine encounter with God, and accurate study of theology, can truly take place.
- As will hopefully become clearer today, this attribute of God, transcendence, puts all other aspects of God into perspective. Or ought to.
- <Slide> So today, we’ll take a bit of a ‘Biblical Tour’ of the Transcendence of God, starting in the Book of Genesis.

- <PRAY> ‘Lord, move me out of the way. Come, speak to us by Your Spirit. Open our hearts to what You have for us. We’re hungry to hear from You.’

II. ‘Biblical Tour’ Outline

1. <Slide> **God Presides Over Creation (Genesis 1:1-2)**

- The eternal pre-existence of God is established in the first verses of the Hebrew text, Q: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (v1). V2 goes on, Q: “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”
- The image here is of God **presiding** over the deep, controlling it, bringing order to the chaos, ushering creation into being.
- And, oh the wonders! Consider the complex sea of stars ... spinning in our galaxy and how they function with remarkable order and efficiency.
- Think about the boundless waters of the Pacific ... regulating our planet and fuelling it with consistent and delicious bounty.
- Yet, while God is fond of His creation, and intimately involved with creation, God is also superior to it, distinct from creation.
- God is uniquely other. Uncreated. Not animal, plant, human, or otherwise, God has no category. Or God is His own category. God does not share essence with any other being. God **transcends**.

2. <Slide> **“God Most High” (Psalm 78:35; 97:9)**

- Throughout history, the journey of the people of God could be called a ‘spiritual rollercoaster’ for it is characterized by the shifting of loyalties to other gods.
- Psalm 97:9 proclaims, Q: “For you, O Lord, are the **Most High** over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.” Yet, how easily we allow other gods to ‘topple’ the Lord from His rightful perch in our hearts?
- In Psalm 78:35, the people of God are exhorted to remember that, Q: “God was their Rock, that **God Most High** was their Redeemer.”
- <Slide> “*El Elyon*” is a Hebrew name for God.
- Indicative of ‘height’ or ‘prominence’ it confers God’s exaltation over all things. Roughly translated into English as “God Most High.”
- Q: “Who is like our God,” Psalm 113:5-6 declares, “the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?”
- APP — We make a huge mistake when we imagine even for a moment ...
 - That God is simply like us. Or on our level.
 - Sure God has revealed Himself in history, as our Rock and our Redeemer, but God still lies far outside our ability to comprehend, fully experience, or even adequately describe.
 - In that wondrous-pre-1980s-sense-of-the-word kind of way, **GOD is “AWESOME!”**

- o *Elyon*. When used of God it has the connotation of “Highest.”
- o Even for tall people, there is a massive height-difference between God and humanity. To say otherwise would be to misdescribe God.
- o He is *El Elyon*. God **Transcendent**. God Most High.

3. <Slide> The Perspective of God (Isaiah 55:8-9)

- ILL — Years ago I attended the Greater Vancouver Open ...
 - o My one and only ticket to a PGA Golf Event.
 - o Huge course. 18 holes. 200+ golfers. Activities happening all over the place. Simultaneously! [Classic male I can hardly walk and chew gum at the same time! I was in trouble.].
 - o So how in the world does one spectate well at a golf tournament?!
 - o I decided it best to stay and watch every player’s approach shot on just one hole.
 - o It was fine, but hard to comprehend all that was going on.
 - o I heard crowds cheering on other holes. That was distracting.
 - o And who was that lining up his approach shot? Never knew til I read the name of the golfer on the back of his caddy.
 - o And I rarely knew any scores.
 - o Wouldn’t have been appropriate to ask Mark Calcavecchia what shot he was on when he was walking by me!
 - o I took the best vantage point I could, but it gave me only a very limited perspective on the golf tournament.
- <Slide> God is the ultimate Multi-Tasker and can literally think about, and do, ‘a trillion things at once.’ God is aware of what is happening, has happened, and what will happen at each point in history.
- God is everywhere and yet never confined to any particular space.
- God’s **perspective** is unlimited. God sees all, all the time.
- He can even watch every shot live in a golf tournament!
- And we would be foolish to assume we know what God is thinking or doing.
- Isaiah 55:8-9 says, Q: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”
- APP — We mustn’t project our thinking or our ways of doing things onto God.
 - o News flash: There’s stuff we do not know and cannot know.
 - o And that’s good, because if I am the ‘pinnacle’ of thought and action in this world, we are all in deep deep trouble!
 - o God’s perspective, God’s thoughts and ways, **transcend** ours.
 - o ‘God is God and we are not!’ And as difficult as that is to swallow sometimes, it’s also tremendously relieving.

4. <Slide> Transcendence in Jesus (John 8:23-24; Revelation 4:10)

- When God comes to earth in Jesus, His tangible presence, His immanence, does not eliminate His transcendence.
- The **transcendence** of God and the immanence of God come together, and are perfectly balanced, in the person of Jesus.
- In one of His many encounters with the religious leaders of His day, Jesus reminds them of the fullness of His identity, Q: “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins ... if you do not believe that I am he” (John 8:23-24).
- When cf. Romans 3:23 says, Q: “... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” we are reminded the standard for measuring humanity is the “glory of God.” So, the glory of God, transcendence, personified in Jesus, makes Jesus the perfect sacrifice for sin on the cross. Jesus alone can save humanity.
- Why in John’s vision in Revelation 4, Jesus is exalted, Q: “the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever” (10).

III. Application

- Time to ‘land the plane’ now on a few application points. In what ways should the transcendence of God impact how we live our lives?

A. <Slide> God cannot be boxed into human concepts.

- God’s energy is inexhaustible. While the world’s — and my energy — is subject to depletion, God is not bound by the laws of entropy or arthritis or old age. One could never say of God, ‘He sure ain’t what He used to be!’
- No system or method or person can fully describe God.
- Complex mathematics, intricate science, sound doctrine is not enough.
- No church ministry or worship style or well-crafted sermon is suffice to express the complexities of the nature of God. God sits above it all!
- ILL — A significant modern challenge to this image of “God Most High” is ...
 - The 20th Century invention of human flight.
 - <Slide> 2 summers ago we visited the Alexander Graham Bell Museum in Baddeck, Nova Scotia.
 - The Scottish engineer not only invented the telephone, but also dabbled in aerial technology. At the same time as the Wright Bros.
 - On December 6, 1907, in Canadian airspace, Graham Bell’s 40-foot-long, 200-pound tetrahedral kite carried a man 168 feet, in the air!
 - One of the very first human flights!
 - Humanity had soared to new heights! And suddenly the idea of God being above creation wasn’t so novel anymore!
 - Humanity was literally on the rise.

- o And in mere decades, airliners fashioned with human hands could fly people tens of thousands of feet above the earth making the concept of God being ‘up’ feel somehow less transcendent.
- o Now, scientific progress and human discovery are not bad.
- o But it becomes a problem when God is supplanted by our greatest achievements. Some scholars even declared,
 - ❑ Q: ‘Primordial God died in the 20th Century. Humanity no longer needs a God that’s transcendent.’
- o **<Slide>** And I wonder: Why are we so consumed with building higher perches for ourselves? Why do I long so much to be ‘noticed’ or recognized or made to feel ‘worthy’ as a result of my own accomplishments? What does this drive feed in us? Is this how we’re wired? And, is it healthy for me, or others all around me?
- o And there’s a caution here: when our estimation of ourselves is self-determined, or when we achieve worth based solely on our own accomplishments, we quickly get off track.
- o Truth is: determination of human value lies solely in the hands of our transcendent Creator. We would do well to listen first to Him.

B. <Slide> God and humanity are innately different.

- A pitfall in modern thought is the idea that God must be just like us.
- Or, we are just like God. This notion causes no end of trouble. For if we are just like God then our thoughts and ways can be easily misconstrued as God’s.
- Ex. Like the German Church that accepted Kaiser Wilhelm’s ambitious and destructive WW1 strategies carte blanche as ‘God’s plan.’
- When we project human values and ambitions onto God, God becomes for us little more than ‘Uncle Sam’ or ‘Johnny Canuck’ — merely human projections of what we think are the best representations of humanity. Dangerous.
- **<Slide>** ILL — American psychologist Abraham Maslow devoted his life ...
 - o To study of the question, ‘What motivates people to do what they do?’ Maslow built his now-famous hierarchy of needs (c.1943).
 - o At the tip of his pyramid is the human need for: self-actualization.
 - o In later years, he added that the fullest realization of humanity is giving oneself to something beyond oneself — **transcendence**.
 - o And Maslow states,
 - ❑ Q: “Transcendence refers to the very highest ... of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.”
 - o There is definitely truth to what Maslow is saying, but he is still a ways off.

- o Yes, we do find meaning through contact with something greater than ourselves. However, none of us, by anything we do, can ever elevate ourselves to a level of transcendence.
- o And our transcendence is the wrong goal to seek, anyways.
- o The Westminster Shorter Catechism of c.1646 puts it right,
 - ❓ Q: “[Humanity’s] chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.”
- **<Slide>** APP — CoVID19 has ‘levelled’ our planet.
 - o In the darkness of this most challenging time in history there are some important lessons for us all.
 - o The future is foggy. Every day feels the same. What can we look forward to? What about tomorrow? Or next week? Or next year? The ‘goalposts’ keep shifting. All our plans seem temporary now.
 - o And we see that we are not nearly as in control as we maybe thought we were.
 - o And there’s still no clear end in sight. We haven’t been able to fix it. Or find a way to stop it yet.
 - o And we would do well to warm up to the chilling truth that maybe we don’t know as much as we thought we did. And, maybe we can’t actually do as much as we thought we could do.
 - o Perhaps, during this time, some of these false notions, ‘pipe-dreams’ of our own transcendence, are being pushed down.
- **<Slide>** APP — The Christian Story stresses ...
 - o We cannot and will not ever become God. We cannot raise ourselves up to God. Or make our way to God on our own.
 - o There is always a gap between us.
 - o Unlike some other world religions, Christianity teaches salvation is a gift from God Himself.
 - o And it is only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, **God coming to us, bridging that gap**, that salvation is possible and relationship with our Creator may be restored.
 - o And part of this wonderful gift is that now, in relationships with loved ones, or in beautiful art, or in encounters with God’s creation, we can tap into something beyond ourselves.
 - o By joining in the mission of Jesus, or in worshipping our Creator, we get glimpses of God’s transcendence.
 - o And these are the powerful experiences that provide genuine meaning to life here on earth.

C. <Slide> Reverence is our best response to a transcendent God.

- ILL — Some ‘non-church-going’ friends of mine ...
 - Certainly have reverence for God.
 - Some even express fear of ever setting foot inside a church. Afraid of being ‘smote’ when they come in contact with a holy God!
 - Or, maybe they’re just afraid of church people, or pastors! We are a ‘scary’ bunch!
- God and us are not equals. God is still hidden and mysterious. And it is dangerous to approach God too casually. Or simply on our own terms.
- When worship is me-focused and not God-focused, we badly miss the mark.
- When we view God only as a friend [which He is] we lose the wonder of God’s transcendence. When, in reality, we should be waking up every morning, wonderstruck, asking: ‘What’s a God like that doing with a person like me?!’
- Worship must always involve a keen sense of awe and wonder.
- <Slide> ILL — This concept of God’s transcendence ...
 - Is far more familiar to non-Western ways of thinking.
 - A Hebrew world-view considers God as “wholly other.” Out of **reverence** no one even dares utter God’s name out loud.
 - Many Indigenous peoples believe the Creator is good, but also very dangerous if treated carelessly or approached with disrespect.
 - In another wing of Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy, worship involves extensive bowing, and even prostrating oneself before God. These bodily actions serve the fundamental purpose to express human **reverence** and subservience to a transcendent God.
 - While these mindsets may feel foreign or uncomfortable for proud Westerners there is something powerfully freeing about them.
 - <Slide> APP — Like one commentator says, Q: “The inestimable benefit of bowing to a transcendent Lord of all is that it frees one from every finite, fallen tyranny.” — Guthrie, p.458.
 - When we choose to bow in reverence before the Lord, all other powers in our lives — our addictions, our possessions, our relationships, our fears, our business worries, our political concerns, all other gods, fade in the presence of God Most High.
 - While, in one way, God is unapproachable ...
 - God is always ready to talk.
 - While, in one sense, God exists above, in another whole dimension, God is also in the same place as us — right here, right now.
 - **God is other but not distant.**
 - Transcendent and immanent.

- <Slide> I love how Eugene Peterson paraphrases cf. John 1:14 ...
 - In *The Message Bible*, Q: “The Word, [God in Jesus], became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”
- APP — Here’s the thing: Transcendent God loves to step into time and space to make a difference, to change circumstances, to transform people.
- Friends of NSAC, may we come to anticipate that our great and generous God can, and will, work in our lives in surprising and entirely unexpected ways — even perform miracles!
- Yes, please keep seeing your doctor, keep going to your counsellor, and don’t stop looking for that house or job ...
- And, at the same time, place your future squarely in the hands of God Most High. Trust in Him. Lean on Him. Cling to Him.
- Truth is: With our Great God in the picture, there is always reason for hope, no matter the circumstance. Amen.
- I invite the Team to come now. And together let us worship God Most High!