

November 3, 2013

Exodus 33:7-11 / Job 29:1-6 / Jeremiah 23:16-24 / Psalm 8:1-9

The Attributes of God (#6): The Paradox of God, Transcendent Yet Immanent

Since two of my initial messages on the attributes of God have led us to consider the Immensity, the Eternality and the Completely Inexhaustible

Self-sufficiency of God (His being so utterly complete within Himself that He needs no thing and no one) it has probably (or should I say, it has surely) led some of you to think: ***"How could a God so great, and so infinitely immense -- who fills all time and space in ways far beyond our ability to comprehend -- possibly care about me or the things that happen in my life?"***

It's actually a normal response when one is confronted by the incomprehensible grandeur of our God. In fact, it's the people who have an awesomely majestic view of God who tend to be afflicted by that haunting question the most! People like David who rightly understood that the creation is immense, and therefore God (as its Creator) must be far greater than all of it put together!

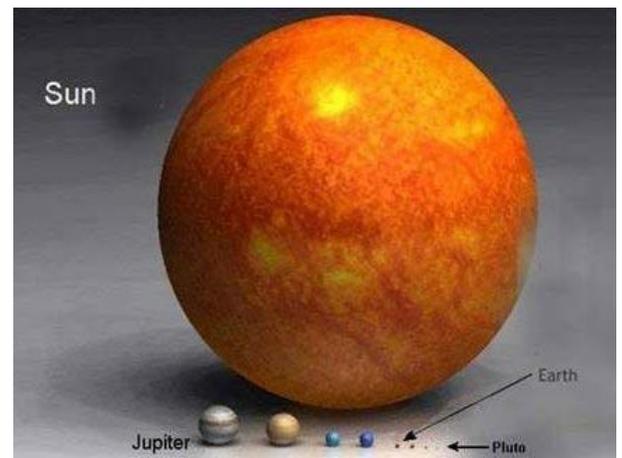
We see this in v. 3 of Psalm 8 (which I just read) where he says: ***"When I consider your heavens; the moon and the stars which you have created, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you even care for him?"***

Picture David as he sat alone at night, on the side of some Judean hillside, tending his father's sheep, and gazing up at the crystal clear night sky. Simply viewing what he could see of the creation with his naked eye, without any binoculars or telescope, made him ask: ***"If all that God has made is so vast and immense, and God (as He must be) is more vast and more immense than all of it combined -- how***

could He possibly care about beings as small and insignificant by comparison as us?"

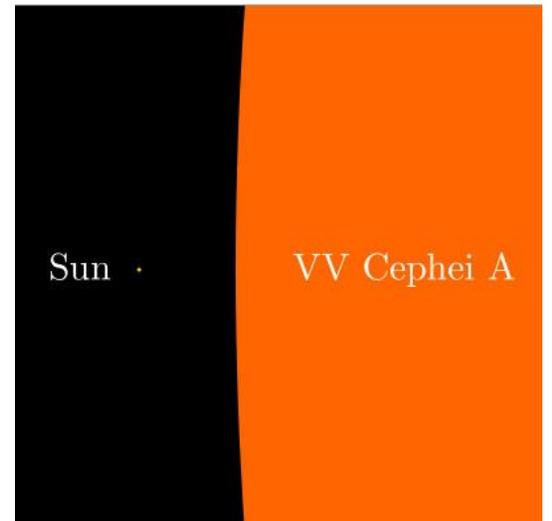
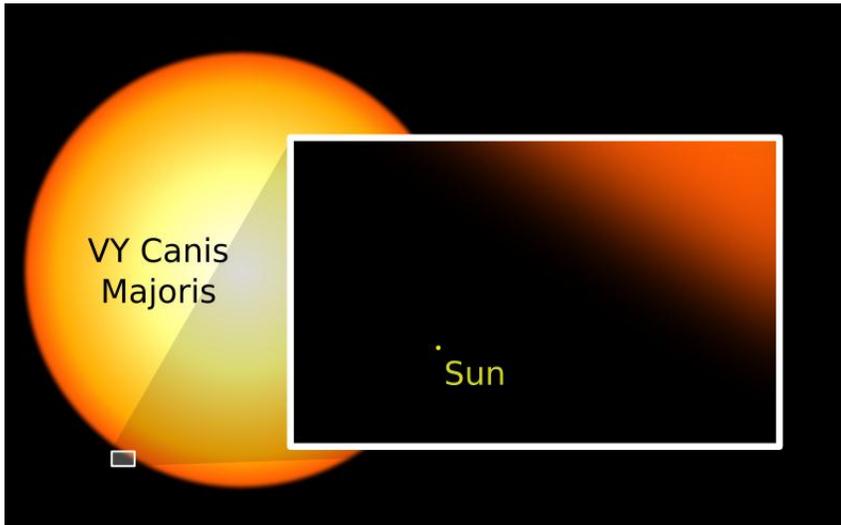
As one who has always loved to go for walks at night, especially those clear, crisp, chilly, autumn nights we just had, and gaze up at the moon, and the stars, or the occasional shooting star, or passing comet, I have often asked the same thing. It's hard not to when one considers the uncanny vastness of the universe, which is so immense it boggles the mind.

Yet if David had that crisis of faith put before him simply by viewing what he knew and could see with the naked eye, how much more will we (in 2013), in light of the pictures and information sent back to us by means of the Hubble Telescope. Information David had no way of knowing.



We used to be amazed at the facts about our sun. Its diameter of 865,000 miles. Its surface temperature of close to 10,000 degrees F. Solar flares have shot out from its surface some 30,000 miles in length (single flames 3-4 times larger than the diameter of the earth)! And it has a core temperature of about 27,000,000 degrees F!

That was impressive, until they discovered VY Canis Majoris and VV Cephei. Each has a diameter approaching 1.6 billion miles across, being about one billion times as large as our sun, and 500,000 times as bright!



You see, the things we know today about the immensity of the universe forces us to expand our understanding of God's immensity to a degree far greater than what David ever wrestled with.

In fact, if David felt small and insignificant in light of how immense he considered the universe (and thus its Creator) to be, in light of what he could see with the naked eye, how much more insignificant people must feel today (by comparison) when they realize (in light of these photos and facts) that the universe (and thus its Creator) is far more immense than we could ever imagine!

So, how do we resolve the struggle set forth by David or the crisis of faith one often encounters when they rightly come to see that God is so infinite and immense and we are so small and seemingly insignificant? How could God, as David says, "**be mindful of us**" or "**care about us**"?

LISTEN: It's a question we need to have an answer for, because in light of all the information we now have, people (our children) will struggle with it more than ever.

And in this regard there have been 3 ways people have tried to resolve the tension this knowledge thrusts upon the soul. The **FIRST** tendency, as I mentioned in my initial message on God's attributes, is to resolve the tension by seeking to shrink God down to a more manageable size.

McCullough was right when he said: ***"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 has been the trivialization of God... We prefer the illusion of a safer deity, and so have pared God down to more manageable proportions."***

In fact, the worst job of paring God down to more manageable proportions (that I've seen) was by one man, who said in the preface of a book on dreams (lest people think he held to a more traditional view of God): In declaring dreams to be from God, he says, ***"I do not have in mind the 'theological God' possessing a whole string of metaphysical attributes," or the God described in "elaborate creedal formulations."***

What then does he believe God to be? ***"The creative element in dreams... this creativity is divine."*** Or as we could put it, God is little more than the creative element in the human subconscious. You can't make Him much smaller than that!

And that tendency to shrink God down does work in making us feel like He's more personal and intimate. Although it's often an intimacy that goes no further than us, because God is often seen as little more than us, or a slightly magnified version of us.

That's the first way to deal with the conflict -- shrink God. The **SECOND** way people deal with the issue of God's immensity and infinite majesty is to be so overwhelmed by the sense of their own insignificance that they adopt what I will call a Deist view of God. A view of God as so other, and so immense, and so vast in His essence and being, that it reasons He can't possibly be concerned with people as small and insignificant as us.

As I've mentioned previously, it's the view of God I myself held to just prior to my conversion. In fact, at one point (when I was 19 or 20 years old), and my mother discovered I was going out partying again, I rebuked her in front of my friends for suggesting that the God of creation really cared about what I did on a Friday night!

My understanding of God's immensity made the possibility of His care, or His intimate concern for us, impossible. He was simply too great to care about and too immense, to care about (or as David puts it, to "be mindful of") beings as small and insignificant as us.

That's the danger of pressing home the infinite majesty and vastness of God. People will then think (as so many have) that His vastness, and eternality, and inexhaustible completeness or transcendence make His passionate love, intimate care and personal concern for us -- *impossible*.

That's essentially what the Deist's believed. God was so remote, distant, impersonal, unapproachable that He does not intervene miraculously in the world, or people's affairs... And thus for them, there is no possibility of receiving compassion, grace, hope, help, or salvation from Him. ***"He is Creator — immense and powerful -- but nothing more."***

In a much smaller way, some of you may even have experienced that same 'crisis of faith' the first time you looked out the window of a plane flying at 30,000 - 40,000 feet! From the top of a building, they say, you have a bird's eye view, but from a plane, you have a God's eye view.

With me it was the first time I flew over a stadium full of people. Out my window, the stadium looked about the size of a nickel, the cars in the parking lot like little dots, and the 40 or 50, 000 people in the stadium looked like indistinguishable specs of dust!

I want to say it was a football stadium, but given the time of year, it had to be baseball season. And as I looked down I remember thinking:
"Can God really care about each one of those people? Can He really be concerned with the struggles, concerns and smallest details of each one's life? They're too small to even see, never mind distinguish from one another!"

I had become a Christian by then, but those Deist-like thoughts started flooding into my mind again!

Ever happened to you? When you saw that picture I just showed you of Canis Majoris (1.6 billion miles in diameter!), with our sun next to it -- so small you could barely see it -- and then you considered that at that ratio the earth wouldn't even be visible, and one person the face of the earth a laughable fantasy, did it make you question how God could be mindful of us, or care for us?

Think of it: David was led to think that simply by looking at the moon and stars far, far smaller than that!

Which brings us to the **THIRD** option. The first did away with His transcendence by making Him smaller. The second did away with His immanence (or closeness) by reasoning that He was just too great to

care. But this third option -- the one the Bible presents us with -- is to affirm both at the same time.

That's why David states: "**O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!**" That is, you are great beyond anything we can imagine! Then he wrestles, and realizes God is also close to us -- having made us in His image (v. 5a), and given us honor (v. 5b), and authority (v. 6), and responsibility (v. 6b), and made us a little lower than Himself (Elohim - God - as the footnote in the Bible tells us).

Then He ends by declaring it again: "**O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!**" Great yet intimate, great yet close -- not one or the other!

And what we need to see is that it's God's immensity or transcendence that makes His personal closeness or intimacy with us possible!

That's the paradox of God! **The reason He is able to be so close and so intimate with each one of us, all at the same time, is precisely because He is so incomprehensibly infinite in His essence and being.**

A little god is extremely limited, and the smaller we make him the more limited he becomes! Which means that making Him smaller doesn't make Him intimate, it merely makes Him our own personal idol.

So what do we do if we want to become more aware of just how close and intimate He can be? We magnify Him or make Him larger in our understanding, not smaller! And part of magnifying Him is affirming His omnipresence -- His being in all places at all times, filling all time and space.

Which means that contrary to the once popular song by Bette Midler, God is never, "watching us from a distance." Nor is it ever true, contra

to Stevie Wonder's song, "taking Him so long cause He's got so far to come." They both fell prey, to some degree, to the Deist error. For God's time-filling, space-filling immensity does **NOT** make Him distant! It means that He is present everywhere and sees everything from the closest possible perspective!

He sees the soul of the person that appears distant to us as if He were looking at it through a magnifying glass! He sees the center of an atom as if He were examining it from under a microscope! And He does it all while observing the birth of new galaxies and colossal stars -- hundreds of billions of light years away!

That's the truth I needed to remember when I was looking out that window flying at 30,000 feet! Because God is so immense and so infinite, and thus everywhere present He never views anything from a distance -- precisely because He fills all time and space!

That's how the Bible resolves the paradox for us -- by encouraging us to continue to affirm how great and infinite God really is! For only an infinitely immense God could possibly indwell each one of His children, and know their innermost thoughts and desires and dreams, and attend to each silently whispered prayer, and be fully aware of our every need, and meet each one in each of His children, all over the globe, all at once!

A little, trivial, limited, finite God could NEVER do that! Which means His transcendence (rightly understood) NEVER negates His immanence, closeness, but rather it's what makes it possible!

So, my friends, to the person who says to you: "The universe is so immense, how can God possibly care for insignificant little beings like us?" -- what's the answer? "He can because He's far more immense than all of it combined! Your view of God is too stunted and small!"

The answer is **NOT** to shrink God down in size, but to magnify Him (or make Him even bigger) in people's understanding.

Which brings us to our **LAST** point -- the need to hold these two truth in tension, fully accepting and affirming BOTH at the same time, NEVER letting anyone convince us that a magnificently exalted view of God will make Him seem too aloof, and impersonal, and distant. We must never succumb to the tendency of many to "pare God down to more manageable proportions" in order to make it feel that He is more personal.

Both options contradict what Scripture does. Because what the Bible does is to declare BOTH His transcendence and immanence with equal emphasis at the same time.

God is SO GREAT that, "***not a sparrow can fall to the ground without God willing it,***" as we see in Mt. 10:29. And I point out it does not say, "***without His seeing it***" or "***without His knowing about it.***"

It's not a verse about His omniscience, but His sovereign rule! Not even a sparrow can fall to the ground unless God wills it to be so! He's that incomprehensibly great -- making His closeness to even the little sparrow possible.

In fact, He's SO GREAT He even knows (this time it IS about His omniscience) the number of hairs on our heads. That is, right now, as opposed to before we showered or combed our hair this morning! His knowledge about us is that intimate -- because He Himself is so infinite!

He's SO GREAT He keeps planets in their orbits and sets stars 1.6 billion miles in diameter in their place! Yet at the very same time He is not distracted from His care in making me, like a sheep He cares for, to lie down in green pastures, and be refreshed beside still waters.

He's SO GREAT He fans the flames at the sun's core to reach a temperature of 27,000,000 degrees! Yet at the same time He warms my heart with His presence. He can do both at once, because He's so great!

He can hold such stars in His hands, while He holds me and you in the grip of His grace. He can "sit enthroned in the heavens," as the Bible declares, and at the same time rule from the throne of your heart!

He is SO GREAT, in fact that Ps. 147:4 can tell us He has: "**determined the number of stars, and calls them each by name**" -- that is, each star in all the 176 billion galaxies in the universe!

Yet He has also: "woven you together in your mother's womb" (Psalm 139:15), "determined the exact places you would live" (Acts 17:26), and "written in His book every day you would live, before you were even born" (Psalm 139:16).

He "engraved your name on the palm of His hand" (Is. 49:16) / and called you personally by name when He brought you to a saving faith in Jesus (John 10:3).

It boggles the mind, does it not? He's so immense and so great, yet so intimate and so close. He's all we need and more than we could ever imagine.

So, with all that in mind, let us pray: **God we ask that you be to us nothing more than what you truly are -- magnificent and splendid, majestic and glorious beyond anything we can imagine. And let us know that believing that and affirming that is the best thing we could ever do for us and those around us.**

Not just for You and Your glory, though that would be enough, but for our own personal good as well.

Help us to know it is because you are so great that you can be so near to us. That your greatness is an invitation to be close to you, and abide with you, and be filled by you, and upheld by you, and embraced by you, and carried by you.

Help us to see that we pare you down to a more manageable size only to our own hurt and personal detriment -- not to mention the insult we pay to your glory when we do such a vile thing.

And help us to see that it's because of the greatness of who you are in love and mercy and righteousness and justice and grace that we -- ungodly though we were -- were brought near to you by the sacrifice of your Son, and given the inexpressible gift of your Holy Spirit to dwell within each one of us who believe.

And having been latched hold of by your grace, let us know you are always near -- closer to us than we are to ourselves -- and more concerned for our good than we ever have been or ever will be.

We praise you LORD for how great you are. We kneel while we rejoice / and we sing as we bow / for you are not only a God nearby, as you tell us in Jeremiah, but a God far away -- immense yet close, on high yet dwelling in each heart / attending to the needs of far off galaxies yet discerning my needs before I know them.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!