

DG Topical Studies: The Attributes of God

Introduction

Growing up, many children learn a simple mealtime prayer: “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.” This simple prayer highlights two attributes or perfections of God: his greatness and his goodness. The impulse to teach children about the attributes of God is exactly right. It is not enough for children to know simply that God exists. They must also know what sort of God he is. What is he like? What are his characteristics, his perfections, his attributes?

Sadly, it is not merely children who are ignorant of God’s attributes. Many people in the world today go through life with a very vague notion of who God is. If they think about him at all, they do not think about him rightly. And even those who ascribe attributes to him, do not always ascribe biblical ones. Some may think of him as loving, but not judging. Others think of him as full of wrath, but not full of grace. Still others may think he is wise, but not powerful. And this is true even of those within the church.

Ignorance of God’s attributes is no small thing. It has profound effects. How can our hearts be gripped by the glory of God if we are ignorant of who he is? How can our lives be transformed by his grace if we remain ignorant of it? How can we passionately preach that Christ loves us and saves us from the wrath of God, unless we have a true understanding of both God’s wrath and his love?

To that end, we have designed these six lessons to highlight a few of the glorious attributes of God. Each lesson is built around a primary biblical text and a sermon preached by pastor John Piper. Ten study questions are scattered throughout each lesson in order to aid you as you read, reflect, and meditate on the Scriptures. While these lessons have been designed for individual study, they could easily be adapted for groups who desire to explore the attributes of God together. Whether you are studying alone or in a group, our prayer is that these lessons will increase your faith, awaken a deeper love for God, and cause your heart to rejoice in Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Lesson 1

Holy, Holy, Holy Is the Lord of Hosts

Introduction

What would it be like to actually see God? Isaiah the prophet knows. In the same year that the king of Judah died, Isaiah saw a vision of the holy God, the Lord of heaven and earth. More importantly, he wrote down what he saw. He recorded it so that future generations would be able to read what he wrote and therefore see what he saw. This lesson will carefully explore seven things that Isaiah saw. Our hope is that this sermon will give you a new taste for the majesty of God and a completely new understanding of the holy God.

Isaiah 6:1-4

¹ In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

1. Make a list of everything that you learn about God from this short passage. What would you say is the main point of this vision?

On June 1, 1973, Charles Colson visited his friend Tom Phillips, while Watergate exploded in the press. He was baffled and shocked at Phillips' explanation that he had "accepted Jesus Christ." But he saw that Tom was at peace and he wasn't. When Colson left the house, he couldn't get his keys in the ignition he was crying so hard. He says,

That night I was confronted with my own sin—not just Watergate's dirty tricks, but the sin deep within me, the hidden evil that lives in every human heart. It was painful and I could not escape. I cried out to God and found myself drawn irresistibly into his waiting arms. That was the night I gave my life to Jesus Christ and began the greatest adventure of my life. (*Loving God*, p. 247)

Charles Colson's New Understanding of God

That story has been told hundreds of times in the last ten years. We love to hear it. But far too many of us settle for that story in our own lives and the life of our church. But not Charles Colson. Not only was the White House hatchet man willing to cry in 1973; he was also willing to repent several years later of a woefully inadequate view of God. It was during a period of unusual spiritual dryness. (If you are in one, take heart! More saints than you realize have had life-changing encounters with God right in the midst of the desert.) A friend suggested to Colson that he watch a videocassette lecture series by R.C. Sproul on the holiness of God. Here's what Colson writes in his new book, *Loving God* (pp. 14–15):

All I knew about Sproul was that he was a theologian, so I wasn't enthusiastic. After all, I reasoned, theology was for people who had time to study, locked in ivory towers far from the battlefield of human need. However, at my friend's urging I finally agreed to watch Sproul's series.

By the end of the sixth lecture I was on my knees, deep in prayer, in awe of God's absolute holiness. It was a life-changing experience as I gained a completely new understanding of the holy God I believe in and worship.

My spiritual drought ended, but this taste for the majesty of God only made me thirst for more of him.

In 1973 Colson had seen enough of God and himself to know his desperate need of God, and had been driven "irresistibly" (as he says) into God's arms. But then several years later something else wonderful happened. A theologian spoke on the holiness of God and Charles Colson says that he fell to his knees and "gained a completely new understanding of the holy God." From that point on he had what he calls a "taste for the majesty of God." Have you seen enough of God's holiness to have an insatiable taste for his majesty?

Job Sees God Anew

"There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Job was a believer, a deeply devout and prayerful man. Surely he knew God as he ought. Surely he had a "taste for the majesty of God." But then came the pain and misery of his spiritual and physical desert. And in the midst of Job's darkness God spoke in his majesty to Job: Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor . . . Look on everyone that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked where they stand . . . Then will I also acknowledge to you, that your own right hand can give you the victory . . . Who then is he that can stand before me? Who has given to me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine. (40:8–14; 41:10–11)

In the end Job responds, like Colson, to a "completely new understanding of the Holy God." He says, Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know . . . I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. (42:3–6)

2. What caused both Charles Colson and Job to come to a completely new understanding of God? What was their response to seeing God in this new way?

Perseverance and Hope in Pursuing the Holy God

Can that happen at Bethlehem? It can and it is. If I saw no signs of it, I would be hard pressed to continue even though I know perseverance is the key to revival. A.J. Gordon wrote in his book, *The Holy Spirit in Missions*, pp. 139, 140:

It was seven years before Carey baptized his first convert in India; it was seven years before Judson won his first disciple in Burma; Morrison toiled seven years before the first Chinaman was brought to Christ; Moffat declared that he waited seven years to see the first evident moving of the Holy Spirit upon the Bechuanas of Africa; Henry Richards wrought seven years on the Congo before the first convert was gained at Banza Manteka.

Perseverance, prayer and labor, is the key to revival. But so is expectation and hope. And God has given me signs of hope that the experience of Isaiah and Job and Charles Colson can happen here if we continue to go hard after the holy God. For example, one of our members wrote me a letter a week ago which said the ministry here has

taken me soaring far past what I formerly perceived as mountaintops, to a grander, greater, bigger, more glorious picture of the God on high than I had ever imagined . . . My view of God becomes larger and larger and out of his omnipotent magnificence flows everything, all-sufficiency. In the ten months I have been at Bethlehem there has been a wonderful revival in my heart and the flame burns brighter and more surely than it ever has.

Revival happens when we see God majestic in holiness, and when we see ourselves disobedient dust. Brokenness, repentance, unspeakable joy of forgiveness, a "taste for the magnificence of God," a hunger for his holiness—to see it more and to live it more: that's revival. And it comes from seeing God.

Seven Glimpses of God in Isaiah's Vision

Isaiah invites us to share his vision of God in Isaiah 6:1–4.

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

Seven glimpses of God I see in these four verses, at least seven.

1. God Is Alive

First, he is *alive*. Uzziah is dead, but God lives on. "From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Ps. 90:2). God was the living God when this universe banged into existence. He was the living God when Socrates drank his poison. He was the living God when William Bradford governed Plymouth Colony. He was the living God in 1966 when Thomas Altizer proclaimed him dead and *Time* magazine put it on the front cover. And he will be living ten trillion ages from now when all the puny potshots against his reality will have sunk into oblivion like BB's at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord." There is not a single head of state in all the world who will be there in fifty years. The turnover in world leadership is 100%. In a brief 110 years this planet will be populated by ten billion brand new people and all four billion of us alive today will have vanished off the earth like Uzziah. But not God. He never had a beginning and therefore depends on nothing for his existence. He always has been and always will be *alive*.

3. Why is the truth that God is alive so comforting to us?

2. God Is Authoritative

Second, he is *authoritative*. "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne." No vision of heaven has ever caught a glimpse of God plowing a field, or cutting his grass or shining shoes or filling out reports or loading a truck. Heaven is not coming apart at the seams. God is never at wits' end with his heavenly realm. He sits. And he sits on a throne. All is at peace and he has control.

The throne is his right to rule the world. We do not give God authority over our lives. He has it whether we like it or not. What utter folly it is to act as though we had any rights at all to call God into question! We need to hear now and then blunt words like those of Virginia Stem Owens who said in last month's *Reformed Journal*,

Let us get this one thing straight. God can do anything he damn well pleases, including damn well. And if it pleases him to damn, then it is done, *ipso facto*, well. God's activity is what it is. There isn't anything else. Without it there would be no being, including human beings presuming to judge the Creator of everything that is.

Few things are more humbling, few things give us that sense of raw majesty, as the truth that God is utterly authoritative. He is the Supreme Court, the Legislature, and the Chief Executive. After him, no appeal.

4. What is your reaction to the blunt words of Virginia Stem Owens? Have you previously thought of God's authority in these terms before?

3. God Is Omnipotent

Third, God is *omnipotent*. The throne of his authority is not one among many. It is high and lifted up. "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up." That God's throne is higher than every other throne signifies God's superior power to exercise his authority. No opposing authority can nullify the decrees of God. What he purposes, he accomplishes. "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isaiah 46:10). "He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand" (Daniel 4:35). To be gripped by the omnipotence (or sovereignty) of God is either marvelous because he is for us or terrifying because he is against us. Indifference to his omnipotence simply means we haven't seen it for what it is. The sovereign authority of the living God is a refuge full of joy and power for those who keep his covenant.

4. God Is Resplendent

Fourth, God is *resplendent*. "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, *and his train filled the temple.*" You have seen pictures of brides whose dresses are gathered around them covering the steps and the platform. What would the meaning be if the train filled the aisles and covered the seats and the choir loft, woven all of one piece? That God's robe fills the entire heavenly temple means that he is a God of incomparable splendor. The fullness of God's splendor shows itself in a thousand ways. For one little example, the January *Ranger Rick* has an article on species of fish who live deep in the dark sea and have their own built-in lights—some have lamps hanging from their chins, some have luminescent noses, some have beacons under their eyes. There are a thousand kinds of self-lighted fish who live deep in the ocean where none of us can see and marvel. They are spectacularly weird and beautiful. Why are they there? Why not just a dozen or so efficient streamlined models? Because God is lavish in splendor. His creative fullness spills over in excessive beauty. And if that's the way the world is, how much more *resplendent* must be the Lord who thought it up and made it!

5. The word "resplendent" is an unusual word. Based on the description in this paragraph, what do you think it means? What evidence from creation does John Piper give that God is resplendent?

5. God Is Revered

Fifth, God is *revered*. "Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew." No one knows what these strange six-winged creatures with feet and eyes and intelligence are. They never appear again in the Bible—at least not under the name seraphim. Given the grandeur of the scene and the power of the angelic hosts, we had best not picture chubby winged babies fluttering about the Lord's ears. According to verse 4, when one of them speaks, the foundations of the temple shake. We would do better to think of the Blue Angels diving in formation before the presidential entourage and cracking the sound barrier just before his face. There are no puny or silly creatures in heaven. Only magnificent ones.

And the point is: not even they can look upon the Lord nor do they feel worthy even to leave their feet exposed in his presence. Great and good as they are, untainted by human sin, they revere their Maker in great humility. An angel terrifies a man with his brilliance and power. But angels themselves hide in holy fear and reverence from the splendor of God. How much more will we shudder and quake in his presence who cannot even endure the splendor of his angels!

6. Why does Isaiah include the fact that the seraphim cover their eyes with their wings? What should our reaction be to this knowledge?

6. God Is Holy

Sixth, God is *holy*. "And one called to another, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!' Remember how Reepicheep, the gallant mouse, at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* sailed to the end of the world in his little coracle? Well, the word "holy" is the little boat in which we reach the world's end in the ocean of language. The possibilities of language to carry the meaning of God eventually run out and spill over the edge of the world into a vast unknown. "Holiness" carries us to the brink, and from there on the experience of God is beyond words.

The reason I say this is that every effort to define the holiness of God ultimately winds up by saying: God is holy means God is God. Let me illustrate. The root meaning of holy is probably to cut or separate. A *holy thing* is cut off from and separated from common (we would say secular) use. Earthly things and persons are holy as they are distinct from the world and devoted to God. So the Bible speaks of holy ground (Exodus 3:5), holy assemblies (Exodus 12:16), holy sabbaths (Exodus 16:23), a holy nation (Exodus 19:6); holy garments (Exodus 28:2), a holy city (Nehemiah 11:1), holy promises (Psalm 105:42), holy men (2 Peter 1:21) and women (1 Peter 3:5), holy scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15), holy hands (1 Timothy 2:8), a holy kiss (Romans 16:16), and a holy faith (Jude 20). Almost anything can become holy if it is separated from the common and devoted to God.

But notice what happens when this definition is applied to God himself. From what can you separate God to make him holy? The very god-ness of God means that he is separate from all that is not God. There is an infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature. God is one of a kind. *Sui generis*. In a class by himself. In that sense he is utterly holy. But then you have said no more than that he is God.

7. Describe the difficulty in defining the holiness of God, as described by John Piper. How would you define God's holiness? How would you help ordinary people understand God's holiness?

Or if the holiness of a man derives from being separated from the world and devoted to God, to whom is God devoted so as to derive his holiness? To no one but himself. It is blasphemy to say that there is a higher reality than God to which he must conform in order to be holy. God is the absolute reality beyond which is only more of God. When asked for his name in Exodus 3:14, he said, "I am who I am." His being and his character are utterly undetermined by anything outside himself. He is not holy because he keeps the rules. He wrote the rules! God is not holy because he keeps the law. The law is holy because it reveals God. God is absolute. Everything else is derivative.

What then is his holiness? Listen to three texts. 1 Samuel 2:2, "There is none holy like the Lord, there is none besides thee." Isaiah 40:25, "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One." Hosea 11:9, "I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst." In the end God is holy in that he is God and not man. (Compare Leviticus 19:2 and 20:7. Note the parallel structure of Isaiah 5:16.) He is incomparable. His holiness is his utterly unique divine essence. It determines all that he is and does and is determined by no one. His holiness is what he is as God which no one else is or ever will be. Call it his majesty, his divinity, his greatness, his value as the pearl of great price. In the end language runs out. In the word "holy"

we have sailed to the world's end in the utter silence of reverence and wonder and awe. There may yet be more to know of God, but that will be beyond words. "The Lord is in his *holy* temple; let all the earth keep *silence* before him" (Habakkuk 2:20).

8. How does John Piper define God's holiness from these passages?

7. God Is Glorious

But before the silence and the shaking of the foundations and the all-concealing smoke we learn a seventh final thing about God. God is glorious. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." The glory of God is the manifestation of his holiness. God's holiness is the incomparable perfection of his divine nature; his glory is the display of that holiness. "God is glorious" means: God's holiness has gone public. His glory is the open revelation of the secret of his holiness. In Leviticus 10:3 God says, "I will show myself *holy* among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be *glorified*." When God shows himself to be holy, what we see is glory. The holiness of God is his concealed glory. The glory of God is his revealed holiness.

9. According to John Piper, what is the difference between God's holiness and God's glory? How do these two attributes relate to each other? What evidence from Isaiah 6 does he give for his view?

When the Seraphim say, "The whole earth is full of his glory," it is because from the heights of heaven you can see the end of the world. From down here the view of the glory of God is limited. But it's limited largely by our foolish preference for frills. To use a parable of Søren Kierkegaard, we are like people who ride our carriage at night into the country to see the glory of God. But above us, on either side of the carriage seat, burns a gas lantern. As long as our head is surrounded by this artificial light, the sky overhead is empty of glory. But if some gracious wind of the Spirit blows out our earthly lights, then in our darkness God's heavens are filled with stars.

Some day God will blow and turn away every competing glory and make his holiness known in awesome splendor to every humble creature. But there is no need to wait. Job, Isaiah, Charles Colson, and many of you have humbled yourselves to go hard after the Holy God and have developed a taste for his majesty. To you and all the rest who are just beginning to feel it, I hold out this promise from God, who is ever alive, authoritative, omnipotent, resplendent, revered, holy, and glorious: "You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me (go hard after me) with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:12–13).

Application

10. In this sermon, John Piper did not spend a lot of time giving practical application (though he does give practical application in many of his other sermons). Why do you think he chose not to spend a lot of time on practical application in this sermon? What does he focus on instead? How can you learn from his example for your own preaching?

Lesson 2

The Lord, a God Merciful and Gracious

Introduction

The book of Exodus contains some of the most foundational passages in all of Scripture. From action-packed passages like the Hebrew escape from Egypt to the giving of the 10 commandments, Exodus is filled with stories and events that echo through the Bible. Most people know that God reveals himself to Moses in a burning bush, telling him that his name is Yahweh, the Great I AM. But most people aren't aware that later in the book, following Israel's worship of the golden calf, God reveals himself to Moses again, unpacking for him the meaning of his name. This lesson will explore the name of Yahweh in the hope that you too will come to know him as a God merciful and gracious.

Exodus 34:1-10

¹ The Lord said to Moses, "Cut two tables of stone like the first; and I will write upon the tables the words that were on the first tables, which you broke. ² Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³ No man shall come up with you, and let no man be seen throughout all the mountain; let no flocks or herds feed before that mountain." ⁴ So Moses cut two tables of stone like the first; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tables of stone. ⁵ And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. ⁶ The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." ⁸ And Moses made haste to bow his head toward the earth, and worshiped. ⁹ And he said, "If now I have found favor in thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance."

¹⁰ And he said, "Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord; for it is a terrible thing that I will do with you."

1. According to this passage, how would you define God's name? What characteristics are associated with the revelation of God's name? What attributes are emphasized?

Exodus 34 Is Proof of God's Mercy

The sheer fact that Exodus 34 exists is proof that God is a God of mercy. This is the second time God has met Moses on the mountain to make a covenant with the people of Israel. When Moses came down from the mountain the first time, the people had fallen in love with the works of their own hands. They were worshiping a golden calf.

The covenant that God made with the people on the mountain that first time went like this: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and

you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). But instead of resting in the value of God, the people became restless and craved the value of their own workmanship. So they exchanged the glory of the invisible God for the image of their own glory—a golden cow.

They had been unbelieving at the Red Sea. They had grumbled against God in the wilderness. So this rebellion with the golden cow should have ended God's patience. Enough with this stiff-necked people!

But here we are on the mountain again, awaiting the revelation of God. The people have not been destroyed. The sheer fact of this meeting is proof that God is merciful.

God Proclaims His Name to Moses

But there is something even more amazing than the sheer fact that God is willing to meet Moses again and renew the covenant: namely, the content of what he reveals. Exodus 34:5 says "The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there, and proclaimed *the name of the Lord*."

God cries out in verse 6, "Yahweh! Yahweh!" And then he spells out the meaning of that name in words whose sweetness has never been surpassed, not even in the New Testament: "A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

2. Summarize the two proofs that John Piper gives that God is a God of mercy. As you read the description of God's name in the previous paragraph, write down two questions that you have about the meaning of God's name.

Two Problems in God's Self-Description

God is YAHWEH—the God who is, the God who is free, the God who is almighty, and the God who is merciful. There is a connection between his absolute existence and his sovereign freedom and his omnipotence and overflowing mercy. But before we zero in on this, there are *two problems to deal with in this text*:

1. Who God Does and Doesn't Forgive

First, after declaring the fact that God "forgives iniquity and transgression and sin" (v. 7), the text goes on to say, "But who will by no means clear the guilty." So the problem is: How can he forgive the guilty and yet not clear the guilty? Or: who are the guilty he forgives and who are the guilty he refuses to forgive?

The most fruitful way I have found for answering this is to see how the other Old Testament writers used this passage. Take Joel and Jonah, for example.

Joel's Use of This Passage

In Joel 2:12–13 God says to the rebellious people, "Yet even now return to me with all your heart with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." And Joel goes on to encourage the people, "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil."

In other words Joel uses Exodus 34:6 to encourage the people that *if they return to the Lord*, he will turn away from the evil he is about to bring on them. So the assumption is that the people whom the Lord will not forgive are the unrepentant people who will not return to God with all their heart. That's the way Joel understood Exodus 34:5–7. Forgiveness is for the repentant. The refusal of forgiveness is for the unrepentant.

Jonah's Use of This Passage

Jonah sees things the same way. After he preaches to the Ninevites, they repent, God spares them, and Jonah is angry with God for being so merciful. In Jonah 3:10–4:2 it says,

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil."

Here Jonah quotes Exodus 34:6 to explain why God had turned his wrath away from a sinful people who repented from their evil way. This is God's nature. It is his name. But notice that Jonah agrees with Joel that whether God forgives the Ninevites or not depends on whether or not the Ninevites repent and turn from their evil ways.

God Forgives Guilty People Who Are Repentant

Now let's go back to the words of God on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:6–7. On the one hand the Lord says he "forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin." On the other hand he says that he will "not clear the guilty." Yet all sinners are guilty. So which guilty ones will he forgive? And which guilty ones will he not forgive?

The answer of Joel and Jonah is that he will forgive the guilty who turn from their sin and turn to God with their whole heart. And the guilty who spurn his offer of mercy he will by no means clear.

That's the first problem and the solution of Jonah and Joel.

3. What problem does John Piper identify? How does he use Jonah and Joel to solve this problem?

2. The Father's Sins and the Children's Sins

The second problem in this text comes from the next words in verse 7. It says that God "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." But Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son." How can these two texts keep from contradicting each other?

4. How would you seek to resolve the tension between Exodus 34:7 and Ezekiel 18:20? After answering the question on your own, read the rest of this section and compare your answer to John Piper's. Note any differences that you see.

What Ezekiel Has in View

The most crucial thing to see is that Ezekiel has in view a son who does not follow in the sinful footsteps of his father, but Exodus has in view children who do continue in their parents' sinful footsteps.

Ezekiel 18:19 says, "When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live." In other words, he won't die for his father's sins because he is not following in his father's footsteps.

What Exodus Has in View

But the parallel to Exodus 34:7 in Exodus 20:5 says that God visits "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation *of those who hate me.*" In other words, the children share in the father's punishment because they share in the father's sins.

So Ezekiel teaches that any child that turns from the sinful ways of his father and obeys God will not be punished for the sins of his father. And Exodus teaches that any child that goes on sinning like his father will share the father's punishment.

When God visits the sins of the fathers on the children, he doesn't punish sinless children for the sins of their fathers. He simply lets the effects of the fathers' sins take their natural course, infecting and corrupting the hearts of the children. For parents who love their children this is one of the most sobering texts in all the Bible. The more we let sin get the upper hand in our own lives, the more our children will suffer for it. Sin is like a contagious disease. My children don't suffer because I have it. They catch it from me and then suffer because they have it.

Hope for the Downcast in God's Self-Description

Now with those two problems behind us, I hope we can hear the message of God's mercy with fresh appreciation. Let's go back to verse 6 and the declaration of God's name. The Lord comes down and proclaims his name: "Yahweh! Yahweh! A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

There are two kinds of people who are hard to help in pastoral counseling. One thinks he is too far gone to be forgiven. The other thinks forgiveness is a snap. One thinks he is utterly disqualified for the kingdom. The other thinks he is a shoe-in. The one thinks God is unbendingly wrathful. The other thinks God is a pushover. One is blind to the magnificence of God's mercy. The other is blind to the magnitude of his own misery.

I know I face people in both categories every Sunday morning. And the challenge of preaching is how to speak hopefully to the first person without giving strokes to the second. When a large and varied congregation is addressed, there must be wrath and mercy, threat and promise, warning and comfort. And then there must be prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit to cause the Word to be heard in its proper application to each person's need.

But I want to make explicit that what I have to say now is for the downcast, the humbled, the broken, the hopeless, the discouraged—the ones who may feel that you are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness.

5. List the two kinds of people that are hard to help in pastoral counseling. Have you encountered these types of people in your own ministry? How have you sought to help them?

Five Expressions of God's Nature

If I wanted to make clear to my sons that I intended to be their father and take care of them and treat them with mercy, I might use two or three different expressions and perhaps repeat myself to stress the truth of what I was saying. So God condescends to use our devices and make his mercy crystal clear. He piles phrase upon phrase to lay open his heart of love.

They fall into five expressions:

- a God merciful and gracious
- slow to anger,
- abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

- keeping steadfast love for thousands,
- forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

The more I ponder how these five descriptions of God are related, the more they seem to intertwine with each other.

The Triangle of God's Mercy

But let me describe one way to see their relationships with each other.

Picture a triangle: at either side of the base are the first and last statements about God, namely, that he is merciful and gracious (on the left side of the base) and that he forgives iniquity and transgression and sin (on the right side of the base).

Then, half way up the sides of the triangle on either side, picture the second and fourth statements about God, namely, that he is slow to anger (on the left side) and that he keeps steadfast love for thousands (on the right side of the triangle).

Finally, picture at the top of the triangle in the middle the third statement about God, namely, that he is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Now the point of this picture is to suggest that the first and last statements go together and the second and fourth go together and the third is central to all five. Let's start with the center and top of the triangle.

6. Attempt to draw the picture of the triangle of God's mercy as described by John Piper in the previous section.

Abounding in Steadfast Love and Faithfulness

God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. Two images come to my mind. The heart of God is like an inexhaustible spring of water that bubbles up love and faithfulness at the top of the mountain. Or the heart of God is like a volcano that burns so hot with love that it blasts the top off the mountain and flows year after year with the lava of love and faithfulness.

When God uses the word "abounding," he wants us to understand that the resources of his love are not limited. In a way, he's like the Federal government: Whenever there's a need, he can just print more money to cover it. But the difference is that God has an infinite treasury of golden love to cover all the currency he prints. The U.S. government is in a dream world. God banks very realistically on the infinite resources of his deity. I said earlier that there is a connection between the first three sermons in this series and this one. God is who he is, and God is free, God is almighty, and now God is merciful. The connection is that the absolute existence, the sovereign freedom, and the omnipotence of God are the volcanic fullness that explodes in an overflow of love.

The sheer magnificence of God means that he does not need us to fill up any deficiency in himself. Instead his infinite self-sufficiency spills over in love to us who need him. We can bank on his love precisely because we believe in the absoluteness of his existence, the sovereignty of his freedom, and the limitlessness of his power. So at the top of the triangle stands the infinite abundance of God's love, spilling over down each side for the good of his repentant people.

7. Why does God emphasize that his steadfast love and faithfulness are “abounding”? How can God’s abundance encourage us to come to him more often and more eagerly?

Slow to Anger, Keeping Steadfast Love

In the middle of each side are the second and fourth statements about God in Exodus 34:6–7. He is slow to anger, and he keeps steadfast love for thousands. When God says that he *keeps* steadfast love, the focus is on the durability of his love. It lasts. It perseveres. It keeps on flowing.

And I see a connection between that perseverance of God's love and the statement that God is slow to anger. Love cannot last where anger has a hair trigger. If God's anger had a hair trigger, his love would not last one day in my life. If rockets of wrath shot out from God's eyes every time I sinned, I would be blown to smithereens before I got out of bed in the morning.

But he shouts on Mount Sinai, "I am *slow* to anger!" He holds back his wrath by the reigns of his love. He is long-suffering. He is extraordinarily patient. And so he *keeps* steadfast love. He guards it and preserves it by being slow to anger.

8. Imagine a father who always gets angry at his son very quickly. Do you think the son will grow up and think that his father loves him? Why or why not? How can this illustration help us to understand our relationship to God?

Merciful and Forgiving

This leads us to the final pair of statements about God at the base of the triangle. If God is slow to anger even though we give him ample reason to be angry with us because of our sin, then he must be very merciful and forgiving—"merciful and gracious—forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." The reason God is slow to anger is not that he doesn't notice our sin but that he forgives it.

And not just some kinds of sin. For those of you who feel that there is a category of sin that is beyond God's forgiveness please submit your own opinion and feeling to the Word of God. The reason God used all three Hebrew words for sin here is to show that all sorts and degrees of sin are forgivable. He forgives *iniquity* and *transgression* and *sin*. He piles them up to make plain what he means. There are no categories of unforgivable sins. The only sin that is unforgivable is the sin that is unrepentable. If you can repent and turn from your sin, you can be forgiven.

9. According to John Piper, why does God use three different words for sin in this passage? How can this encourage us when we ourselves have sinned against him?

Jesus Christ Confirms God's Merciful Nature

I close with this reminder and invitation. Jesus Christ came into the world to confirm that God is just who he said he was on Mount Sinai—"a God merciful and gracious slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Turn from your sin this morning, trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, and you will find a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.

If somebody demands of you (or perhaps you demand of yourself): How do you know that's the way God is? you can answer, because Jesus Christ lived it and sealed it with his blood.

Application

10. The revelation of God's name in Exodus 34:6-7 is echoed elsewhere in the Bible. Look up the following passages in your own Bible: Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8-9; Psalm 145:8-9; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2. As you read these passages and the verses around them, make any notes that you wish to remember. Perhaps you could even use these passages to preach a sermon or teach a Bible lesson on God's name.

Lesson 3

God's Wrath: "Vengeance Is Mine; I Will Repay," Says the Lord

Introduction

The wrath of God has never been a popular attribute. Sinful human beings do not like to hear that not only does God disapprove of their conduct, but he is filled with anger at them for their rebellion. As a result, preachers are tempted to ignore this attribute and preach on more acceptable truths like the love and mercy and grace of God. But it is our conviction that we will never love the grace and mercy of God as we should if we don't see it against the backdrop of his wrath and fury. This lesson will explore this crucial doctrine. Our hope is that a deeper understanding of the wrath of God will produce a stronger urgency in prayer for the lost, a renewed commitment to preach the gospel to unbelievers, and a greater thankfulness to God for rescuing us from his wrath through the death of Christ.

Romans 12:19-21

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

1. According to this passage, why should believers not seek vengeance for themselves? In the space below, make a list of things that come to mind when you think of the wrath of God.

Here we have in verse 19 the phrase "wrath of God." "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the *wrath of God*, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Last time we focused on the psychology of this verse and how it works to free us from the burden taking justice into our own hands. We focused on implications of the word "for" in verse 19: "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, *for* it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Since God is going to take up your cause and see to it that justice is done, you can lay it down. You don't have to carry anger and bitterness and resentment and revenge. Indeed you dare not. Jesus warned that an unforgiving heart will destroy you in the end (Matthew 6:15; 18:35).

The Reality of God's Wrath

But today I want to focus not on the psychology of the verse but the divine reality that makes the psychology work, namely, the reality of God's wrath. Paul says in verse 19, "Leave it to the wrath of God." Then the wrath of God is defined further as God's vengeance, "Vengeance is mine." So wrath is connected with God's response to something that deserves vengeance. And then it says, "I will repay." So God's wrath is treated as a repayment to man for something man has done.

2. Before reading the rest of the sermon, define the wrath of God in one sentence. After you have written your sentence, compare it to John Piper's definition in the next paragraph. Note any key differences that you see.

So just taking this verse alone, with its pieces, we could venture a definition of the wrath of God like this: the wrath of God is *God's settled anger toward sin expressed in the repayment of suitable vengeance on the guilty sinner.*

Four Characteristics of the Final Wrath of God

The reason I use the word anger to define part of what wrath is that the two words (*orge* and *thumos*) are used over a hundred times in the Bible side by side. Some of them are parallel so that you can hardly distinguish them. For example, Psalm 6:1, "O Lord, rebuke me not in your *anger*, nor discipline me in your *wrath*." Psalm 90:7, "We are brought to an end by your *anger*; by your *wrath* we are dismayed." Hosea 13:11, "I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath." Romans 2:8, "For those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury [anger]."

When you try to distinguish these words the closest you get is something like this from A. T. Robertson: God's anger (*thumos*) is his vehement fury or boiling rage. His wrath (*orge*) is his settled indignation or his settled anger. In other words, in God's anger the emphasis falls on the emotional, boiling intensity of it. And in God's wrath the emphasis falls on the controlled, settled, considered direction and focus of its application. But we dare not draw a hard line between them. God's *anger* is never out of the control of his wisdom and righteousness, and his *wrath* is never cool or indifferent, but is always a wisely directed fury. The wrath of God is never less than a perfect judicial decree, but is always more than a perfect judicial decree because it is always full of right and fitting fury.

3. According to John Piper and A.T. Robertson, what does the word "anger" (*thumos* in Greek) emphasize? What does the word "wrath" (*orge* in Greek) emphasize? Why are both of these words important and necessary for a right understanding of God's wrath?

And then we see from the word "repay" and "vengeance" that God's wrath is his response to sin. God does not take vengeance on the innocent. When he repays with vengeance, we know there has been sin—there is something to repay. And since he is meticulously just, that repayment will be a suitable vengeance, a proper vengeance. It will not be more or less than his perfect justice demands. So here is the definition again: The wrath of God is *God's settled anger toward sin expressed in the repayment of suitable vengeance on the guilty sinner.*

What shall we say then about this wrath? Perhaps in the limits of one message we can take note of four things. If we focus on the wrath of God that falls on human beings at the final judgment, we can say at least these four things about it: 1) It will be eternal—having no end. 2) It will be terrible—indescribable pain. 3) It will be deserved—totally just and right. 4) It will have been escapable—through the curse-bearing death of Christ, if we would have taken refuge in him.

1. The final wrath of God is eternal—having no end.

In Daniel 12:2 God promises that the day is coming when "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Jesus spoke of the eternity of God's wrath in numerous ways. Consider three. In Mark 9:43-48, he said, "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the *unquenchable fire*."⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life

lame than with two feet to be thrown into *hell*.⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into *hell*,⁴⁸ where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

So twice he calls the fires of hell “unquenchable” that is, they will never go out. The point of that is to say soberly and terribly, that if you go there, there will be no relief forever and ever.

Second, in Mark 3:29 Jesus says, “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” This is a startling statement. It rules out all those thoughts of universalism that say, even if there is a hell, one day it will be emptied after people have suffered long enough. No. That is not what Jesus said. He said that there is sin for which there will never be forgiveness. There are people who will never be saved. They are eternally lost.

Third, in Matthew 25 he told the parable of the sheep and the goats to illustrate the way it will be when Jesus comes back to save his people and punish the unbelievers. In verse 41 he says, “Then [the king] will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” And to make crystal clear that *eternal* means *everlasting* he says again in verse 46, “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” So the punishment is eternal in the same way that life is eternal. Both mean: never-ending. Everlasting. It is an almost incomprehensible thought. O, let it have its full effect on you. Jesus did not intend to speak this way in vain.

After the teaching of Jesus, the apostle Paul put the eternity of God’s wrath this way in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9:

The Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will suffer the punishment of *eternal* destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Destruction does not mean obliteration or annihilation, any more than the destruction of the enemy army means the defeated soldiers do not exist any more. It means they are undone. They are defeated. They are stripped of all that makes life pleasant. They are made miserable forever.

Finally, the great apostle of love, the apostle John, who gives us the sweet words of John 3:16, used the strongest language for the eternal duration of the wrath of God: “And the smoke of their torment goes up *forever and ever*, and they have no rest, day or night” (Revelation 14:11). And Revelation 19:3, “The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” These are the strongest phrases for eternity that Biblical writers could use. So the first thing we must say about the wrath of God at the end of the age that comes upon those who do not embrace Christ as Savior and Lord, is that it is eternal—it will never end.

4. Some theologians argue that the wrath of God is not eternal, but that even people in hell will eventually be saved. Have you ever encountered this teaching? If so, how have you responded in the past? How do the passages discussed in the previous section argue against this notion?

5. Some people argue that the images of fire and darkness as pictures of God’s wrath in the Bible are just symbols, and therefore, should not be taken too seriously. How would you respond to someone who made this claim?

2. The final wrath of God will be terrible—indescribable pain.

Consider some of the word pictures of God's wrath in the New Testament. And as you consider them remember the folly of saying, "But aren't those just symbols? Isn't fire and brimstone just a symbol?" I say beware of that, because it does not serve your purpose. Suppose fire is a symbol. Do people use symbols of horror because the reality is less horrible or more horrible than the symbols? I don't know of anyone who uses symbolic language for horrible realities when literal language would make it sound more horrible.

People grasp for symbols of horror (or beauty) because the reality they are trying to describe is worse (or better) than they can put into words. If I say, "My wife is the diamond of my life," I don't want you to say, "Oh, he used a symbol of something valuable; it's only a symbol. So his wife must not be as valuable as a diamond." No. I used the symbol of the most valuable jewel I could think of because my wife is far more precious than jewels. Honest symbols are not used because they go beyond reality, but because reality goes beyond words.

So when the Bible speaks of hell-fire, woe to us if we say, "It's only a symbol." If it is a symbol at all, it means the reality is worse than fire, not better. The word "fire" is used not to make the easy sound terrible, but to make the exceedingly terrible sound something like what it really is.

6. According to John Piper, what is the purpose of using symbolic language in the Bible? How can you use symbols and images in your own preaching in order to help people truly understand the wrath of God?

So Jesus says in Matthew 13:41-42, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (see verse 49). Then he adds at least three more terrible images of God's wrath besides fire.

- He pictures it as a master returning and finding his servant disobeying his commands, and he "will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:51). The wrath of God is like cutting someone in pieces.
- Then he pictures it as darkness: "The sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). The wrath of God is like being totally blind forever.
- Finally he quotes Isaiah 66:24 and says "Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). In Isaiah 66:24 God says, "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

In Revelation 6:15-16, the apostle John adds that the wrath of God—indeed the wrath of Jesus himself—will be so terrible that every class of human beings will cry out for rocks to crush them rather than face the wrath: Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the

Lamb."

The last picture of horror that I will mention is the final one of the Bible, namely, the lake of fire. It is called the "second death" in Revelation 20:14, "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." Revelation 2:11 says that those who conquer—that is, believers in Jesus—"will not be hurt by the second death," implying that those who do not believe will be. Revelation 20:15 makes that explicit: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Then verse 10 adds, "They will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Therefore, I consider it a gentle understatement to say, "The final wrath of God will be terrible—indescribable pain." And putting the first and second truths together: This terrible, indescribably painful wrath will last for ever. There will be no escape. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the day of God's patience. After you die, there will be no offer of salvation and no way to obtain it.

7. What four pictures or symbols of God's wrath does John Piper discuss? Explain why each one of these pictures of wrath is so horrible. How can grasping these different pictures help you as you preach the gospel to unbelievers and teach your own congregation?

3. The wrath of God will be deserved—totally just and right.

Paul labored to show this in the first part of this letter to the Romans. Let me remind you of how he said it: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18). Wrath does not come without warrant. It is deserved. The truth of God is known (Romans 1:19-20). And the truth is suppressed. And the fruit is ungodliness and unrighteousness. And on that comes wrath (Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6).

He says it even more explicitly in Romans 2:5, "Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." We are responsible. We are storing up wrath with every act of indifference to Christ. With every preference for anything over God. With every quiver of our affection for sin and every second of our dull affections for God.

Then he says it once more in Romans 3:5-6, "If our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world?" Nothing was clearer for the inspired apostle than that God is just and God will judge the world in terrible wrath.

And lest you think that your sins do not deserve this kind of wrath, ponder these four things:

- It was one sin alone that brought the entire world under the judgment of God, and brought death upon all people (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12). And you have not committed one sin, but tens of thousands of sins.
- Consider James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." Not only have you sinned tens of thousands of times, but each one had in it the breaking of the entire law of God.
- Consider Galatians 3:10, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" The wrath of God's curse falls on us for not obeying all that is commanded. One failure and the curse falls.

- Consider that any offense and any dishonor to an infinitely honorable and infinitely worthy God, is an infinite offense and an infinite dishonor. Therefore, an infinite punishment is deserved.
8. Summarize John Piper's argument for why our sins deserve the wrath of God.

Which leaves one last point to make. And Oh, how crucial it is! How precious it is. How infinitely beautiful it is.

4. At the end of the age, when the full and final wrath of God is poured out, it will have been escapable.

That means it is escapable now. You do not have to spend eternity under the wrath of God if you will receive God's Son as your Savior and Lord and Treasure. Why is that? How can that be? Because God so loved the world that he sent his own infinitely valuable Son to absorb the infinite wrath of God against all who take refuge in him. Listen with trembling wonder and gratitude and faith to this precious statement from Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'"

9. How does meditating on the true meaning of the wrath of God help us to appreciate Christ and his sacrifice even more?

Christ bore the curse of God's wrath for all who come to him and believe in him and glory in the shelter of his blood and righteousness. Come. Come. He is infinitely worthy.

Application

10. Take a few moments and think of a few people who are separated from God and under his wrath. Pray that God would open their eyes to the glory of Christ and the cross. Plead with God that he would cause them to repent of their sins and trust in Christ alone for salvation. Let the weight of this lesson fuel your prayers for the lost this week.

Lesson 4

The Deep Riches and Wisdom and Knowledge of God

Introduction

One writer has called Romans “the greatest letter ever written.” In chapter after chapter, Paul expounds on the gospel of God’s grace that saves hopeless sinners from God’s wrath. When Paul arrives at the end of Romans 11, he breaks into exclamatory praise to God. What caused him to erupt in spontaneous praise? What provoked this worship-filled interruption? This lesson will explore the attributes that Paul singles out as worthy of admiration. Our hope is that you too will see the deep riches of God’s wisdom and knowledge and join Paul in worshiping him forever and ever.

Romans 11:33-36

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

1. From your knowledge of Romans, what causes Paul to break into this exclamatory praise (look it up if you need to)? In this passage, what attributes of God is he celebrating?

2. Before you read the sermon, make a few notes on each of the following:
 - a. What does it mean that God is “deep” (*“Oh the depths...”*)?

 - b. What does it mean that God is “rich”?

 - c. What does it mean that God is “wise” and full of “knowledge”?

One of the highest points in my short, six-year teaching career in the Biblical Studies department at Bethel College was in the spring of 1977. I had spent the entire semester on Romans 9-11 leading about a dozen advanced Greek students through the rigorous exegesis of these three chapters. It was the final class of the year, and I was drawing the final “arcs ” on the board to sum up all the relationships between all the units. I drew one last arc over all three chapters, from one side of the board to the other, and underlined Romans 11:36 as the ultimate point of the entire section: “From him, through him, and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.” Before I could turn around, these twelve students—some of the brightest I ever had (including Tom Steller)—began to sing the doxology.

I didn't ask them to. I didn't plan it. It just came out. And that's the way it was for Paul when he wrote this. He comes to the end of these three chapters on the ultimate purposes of God to show the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, and he breaks into doxology as he closes. All theology, rightly grasped, leads the mind and the heart to doxology. The *story* of God is about the *glory* of God. All revelation of the ways of God leads to exultation over the wonders of God. That is what today's final section in Romans 11:33-36 show us.

3. In these two paragraphs, John Piper makes a crucial point about the goal of theology. What should all theology lead to? Have you ever experienced anything similar to what John Piper describes in these paragraphs?

Today we will focus on verse 33, and Lord willing, finish the paragraph next time.

"Oh, the Depths!"

Verse 33a: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!"

The riches and wisdom and knowledge of God are described here as indescribably "deep." *Oh, the depth!* means, The depth is very deep. It is so deep that it simply elicits from the inspired apostle, as he peers into the ravine of God's riches and wisdom and knowledge, an undefined "Oh!" The deeps here are indescribably deep.

Three things come to mind with this expression of the *depths* of God's riches and wisdom and knowledge.

1. Unspeakable Hiddenness

First, *hiddenness*. Daniel 2:21-22 says, "[God] gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals *deep* and *hidden* things; he knows what is in the darkness." Notice the connection between "deep" and "hidden." *Oh, the depth!* means, There are hidden dimensions to God's riches and wisdom and knowledge. They are *deep* in the sense that they are out of our sight, unreachable. We can't go down there. There will always be depths of God we do not know, because he is infinite and we are finite. We will always be seeing more forever.

2. Objective Reality

Second, after "hiddenness," "depth" implies *reality*. There is *something* down there. If there is nothing really down there, then the riches and wisdom and knowledge are not deep. They are a delusion. I mention this even though it is obvious because of how many public sophisticated denials of the obvious happen today. Friday night I heard on MPR an interview with a woman who with a sophisticated, authoritative air about her, say, "Theology is poetry." And the awed interviewer said, "That's a beautiful thought, say more about that." Which she was happy to do, concluding with, "After all, religion is a human art form." Frankly, I wanted to throw up. But when the moral nausea passed, I prayed that God would open their eyes so that they would no longer talk like three-year-olds who call their parents make-believe while they eat the supper daddy bought and mommy prepared. It was not a beautiful thought. It was a tragic and ugly thought. The riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God revealed in Scripture are not a human art form, and biblical theology is not a poetic product of human imagination. When Paul says, "Oh the depth!" he means there is something down there. He has revealed some of it. He knows there's more. He is speaking of objective reality—that God knows and we know in part.

4. What is your reaction to the statement: "all religion is a human art form"? What was John Piper's response, and why did he react this way?

3. Ultimate Foundation

Third, the words “Oh the depth!” signify that this reality is *foundational*. He could have said, “Oh, the heights of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” That would be true too. It’s the difference between the *deep* roots and the *high* branches of an infinite tree. It’s the difference between deep causes and high effects. It’s the difference between beginnings and goals. Here Paul is saying: God is at the bottom of things. It is true that God is also at the top of things. All things are rooted in God, and all things are moving toward God. As verse 36 says, “From him and . . . to him are all things.” The infinite depths are his, and the infinite heights are his. He is the foundation, and he is the destination of all things. There is no explanation beneath God. No matter how deep you go, there is only God. He is the last explanation whether you go down to causes or go up to purposes.

5. Consider the truth that there is no explanation or cause beneath God. What is your reaction to this truth? To aid in your meditation, read Job 38-42 in your own Bible. What is Job’s response when he encounters the reality that God is ultimately behind everything in creation?

So his initial words, “Oh, the *depth!*” signify at least: Unspeakable hiddenness, objective reality, and ultimate foundation.

Then Paul mentions the three things about God that elicit this exultation: riches, wisdom and knowledge. “Oh, the depth of the *riches* and *wisdom* and *knowledge* of God!”

“The Riches”

Take God’s “riches” first. God is rich in at least three senses.

1. God Owns All

First, God owns all that exists that is not God. Psalm 24:1 is the most familiar statement of this truth: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” But Deuteronomy 10:14 is far more sweeping: “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.” So not only does God own the earth and all that is in it, including you, but he also owns the reaches of space and the heavens beyond the heavens with all their angelic armies. In other words, nothing exists outside God that is not God’s. He owns it, and, as his possession, he may do with it as he pleases. Human wealth compared to God’s wealth is ridiculously tiny and laughable to boast in. Bill Gates is a pauper and has nothing compared to the poorest heir of God (Romans 8:17).

2. God Makes All

Second, God is rich in the sense that he made all that is and can make anything he pleases and as much as he pleases out of nothing. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 8:3; 104:24). In other words, his resources are infinite because the resources out of which he can make anything is nothingness, and there is an incalculable “amount” of nothingness. Or to say it more simply, if you can make what you please effortlessly out of nothing, then your riches are limitless, because your creativity is not limited by raw materials. You don’t need raw materials. God is infinitely rich, because he owns all that is, and because he can make more of anything that he pleases out of nothing.

3. God Is the Infinite Treasure of the Universe

Third, God is rich in the sense that he himself is the infinite Treasure of the universe. God does not have to create anything or to own anything in order to be rich. He is himself of infinite value. And since he exists as a

Trinity of Persons in one Godhead, he has been able to enjoy the riches of his own glory from all eternity existing in the other Persons of the Godhead.

When Paul speaks in other places of “the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7) and “the riches of his kindness” (Romans 2:4) and “the riches of his glory” (Romans 9:23), this is the main thing: God freely giving himself in grace and kindness to us for our enjoyment of his own all-satisfying glory forever.

Or the most personal and ultimate way to speak of God’s wealth is to call it “the unsearchable riches of *Christ*” (which Paul does in Ephesians 3:8)—not just riches that Christ *gives*, but the riches that Christ *is*. As Paul says in Colossians 1:27, “The *riches* of the glory of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory.” Christ himself is the present guarantee and the future gift of the glory of God. When Christ died, he *bought* and he *became* our greatest Treasure. He himself is the gift and the greatness of the glory of God.

6. How would you explain the reality that God is “rich” to a young child? What illustrations would you use? How would you emphasize each of the three points that John Piper makes?

“Wisdom and Knowledge of God”

And that leads us from the term *riches* to the terms *wisdom* and *knowledge* here in Romans 11:33, because in Colossians 2:3 Paul says that in *Christ* “are hidden all the treasures of *wisdom* and *knowledge*.” Part of what makes God so wealthy is the infinite wisdom and knowledge that he has.

What’s the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Sometimes in the Bible they are almost interchangeable. But generally *knowledge* is awareness of facts and *wisdom* is awareness of how to use those facts for good goals.

Paul says that God’s knowledge is unfathomably deep. He knows all recorded facts—all the facts stored in all the computers and all the books in all the libraries in the world. But vastly more than that, he knows all events at the macro level—all that happens on earth and in the atmosphere and in all the farthest reaches of space in every galaxy and star and planet. And all events at the micro level—all that happens in molecules and atoms and electrons and protons and neutrons and quarks. He knows all their movements and every location and every condition of every particle of the universe at every nano-second of time. And he knows all events that happen in human minds and wills—all volitional and emotional and spiritual events—all thoughts and choices and feelings.

And that includes past, present, and future. He knows every event that has ever happened and ever will happen at every level of existence: physical, mental, volitional. And he knows how all facts and all events, of every kind, relate to each other and affect each other. When one event happens, he not only sees it, but he sees the eternal chain of effects that flow from it and from all the billions of events that are unleashed by every other event. He knows all this without the slightest strain on his mind. That is what it means to be God. And Paul says that not only God’s knowledge but also God’s wisdom is unfathomably deep. God is infinitely wise. That is, he has always been able to conceive and carry out plans that have good goals and that make use of all that knowledge to bring to pass what he purposes. He knows how to use all the facts of the universe and guide all the events of the universe to achieve the best end, namely, the display of the fullness of his glory magnified in the white-hot worship of a blood-bought people.

7. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Make a list of 5 things that God *knows*, and a list of 5 things that demonstrate God’s wisdom. Be as specific as you can.

And all the treasures of this wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ Jesus (Colossians 2:3). Christ is the Creator of all created reality: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). And Christ is the sustainer of all created reality. Colossians 1:17, “He is before all things, and *in him all things hold together.*” And all created reality is for the sake of making Christ known and loved: “all things were created . . . *for him*” (Colossians 1:16).

8. Carefully read Colossians 2:3 (mentioned in the previous paragraph). What connections do you notice between Colossians 2:3 and Romans 11:33-36? List them below.

Therefore, all knowledge and all wisdom and all riches originate in him, and are held in existence by him, and are for the purpose of making him known. Therefore, Christ is the final and ultimate meaning of all reality. Which means that nothing can be fully or rightly known that is not known in relation to Jesus Christ.

“In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). Treasures. Wisdom. Knowledge. “Oh the depth of the *riches* and *wisdom* and the *knowledge* of God!” (Romans 11:33). The *riches* are finally Jesus Christ himself offered to us as our all-satisfying Treasure (Colossians 1:27). “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing [deeply, personally, joyfully knowing] Christ Jesus my Lord [my Treasure, my Riches]” (Philippians 3:8).

The *wisdom* of God is finally Jesus Christ himself, crucified and risen and reigning—a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are being called the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). Christ is God’s way, God’s truth, and God’s life. He is the wise end and goal of all things.

And God’s unfathomable *knowledge* is also in Christ Jesus. All facts and events arise from him. All facts and events are sustained by him. All facts and events point to him. He is the meaning of all knowledge. There is no true knowledge that is not related to Christ. Every thought in a human mind, or in the mind of a demon, about any fact or any event in the world, that is not truly connected to Christ, is a thought in rebellion against the Truth and against God. There is no true knowledge apart from Christ. That is how radically Christ-exalting all of life should be.

9. Imagine that the previous paragraph was read aloud on a university campus in your country. What do you think the reaction would be? Why would people react that way?

“Oh, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!” May the revelation of the Son and the revelation of his ways move you to stand in awe of him, and make him the beginning, the middle, and the end in all you think and feel and do. Oh, come let us worship and bow down!

Application

10. As you reflect on the deep riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, compose a short prayer expressing to God your response to these truths. Be specific and praise him for ways that you see his depth and riches and wisdom and knowledge.

Lesson 5

How Much Does God Love This Church?

Introduction

For over 30 years, John Piper has traveled the world preaching the biblical truth that God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. One of the foundational assumptions of his ministry has been that God makes much of Himself in everything that he does. To many people, this truth is liberating. No longer do they feel the need to find their deepest satisfaction in themselves. But not everyone responds this way. Many ask the question, “If God does everything for his own glory, does he really love me?” In this lesson, we will seek to carefully and pastorally answer this crucial question. Our hope is that after reading it, you will experience the wonder of being loved by a God-centered God.

I have two goals in this message. They both relate directly to Bethlehem, and they both feel pretty big to me. One goal is to *clarify* (or some might say *rectify*) something I have said for many years about God’s love for us. Hence, the name of the sermon, “How Much Does God Love This Church?” And I mean for you to take that very personally.

The other goal is to give you a strong encouragement that God intends to do very good things for you while I am away (on this upcoming eight-month leave). At root, both goals are the same. I want you to feel—and *feel* is the right word, though not the only word—more deeply and more firmly and more joyfully that you are loved by God personally as individual Christians, and corporately as a church with a love that is immeasurably great and eternally unwavering.

A Road Message Brought Home

Almost always when I go away from Bethlehem to speak, I give messages that are the overflow of what I have preached and taught here at the church. But at the end of February, when I went to Seattle, I worked out a fresh way of saying some things that I have been saying for a long time, which I hope will give a clearer sense of the biblical emphasis on God’s glory in the way he loves us. I refined that message by giving it three times, once at Mars Hill Church, once to some urban pastors in Los Angeles, and once in the chapel at Westmont College. I knew as I developed these thoughts that I wanted to find the right time to give the message here. And that’s what this is.

The Bottom of Our Joy: God, Not Self

Here is the question that I want to clarify. I have been asking audiences for years: “Do you feel more loved by God because God makes much of you, or because God, at great cost to his Son, frees you to enjoy making much of him forever?” The aim of that question has never been to deny that God makes much of us. He does. (Which we will see shortly.) The aim has been to help people relocate the bottom of their joy—the decisive foundation of their joy—from self to God.

1. Think carefully about the question posed by John Piper. What is the point of this question? How would you answer the question? How would the people in your community answer this question?

More Concerned About the Hell-Bound

Let me try to help you understand what shapes so much of what I say. A people ought to understand their pastor. I am more concerned about nominal hell-bound Christians who feel loved by God, than I am about genuine heaven-bound Christians who don't feel loved by God.

Please don't hear me as uncaring or indifferent to genuine Christians who don't feel loved by God. I do care, and this sermon is especially for you. At this point, I'm simply trying to give you a perspective on why I emphasize what I do. There are millions of nominal Christians who are not born again who believe God loves them and yet are on their way to hell. And the difference between them and a born again believer is this: What's the bottom, the decisive foundation, of their happiness? As you penetrate down deeper and deeper to the core, or the bottom, of what makes you happy, what is it?

2. As you think about your own church, do you see both of these groups represented (fake Christians who feel loved by God, and genuine Christians who don't feel loved by God)? Which of these groups is John Piper most concerned about? Which group are you most concerned about? How have you sought to address these two types of people in your own ministry?

Jesus Is Not a New Butler

Millions of nominal Christians have never experienced a fundamental alteration of that foundation of happiness. Instead they have absorbed the notion that becoming Christian means turning to Jesus to get what you always wanted before you were born again. So, if you wanted wealth, you stop depending on yourself for it, and by prayer and faith and obedience you depend on Jesus for wealth. If you wanted to be healthy, you turn from mere human cures to Jesus as the source of your health. If you wanted to escape the pain of hell, you turn to Jesus for the escape. If you wanted to have a happy marriage, you come to Jesus for help. If you wanted peace of conscience and freedom from guilt feelings, you turn to Jesus for these things.

In other words, to become a Christian, in this way of seeing things, is to have all the same desires you had as an unregenerate person—only you get them from a new source, Jesus. And he feels so loving when you do. But there's no change at the bottom of your heart and your cravings. No change in what makes you happy. There's no change in the decisive foundation of your joy. You just shop at a new store. The dinner is still the same; you just have a new butler. The bags in the hotel room are still the same; you just have a new bellhop.

3. Why does John Piper emphasize that God must be the bottom of our joy? What type of people is he concerned with? How have you seen this form of nominal Christianity in your own church?

A New Bottom for Our Joy in the New Birth

That's not what the new birth is. It's not having all the same desires that you had as an unregenerate person, and just getting them from a new source. The new birth changes the bottom, the root, the foundation of what makes us happy. Self at the bottom is replaced by Jesus. God, himself.

What makes the born-again person glad is not at bottom that they have God's gifts, but that they have God. This is what I am more concerned about than genuine Christians who are truly on their way to heaven, and don't feel loved by God. And my shorthand way of trying to awaken people to the dangers of feeling loved by God while being unregenerate is to ask: *Do you feel more loved by God because he makes much of you, or because, at great cost to his Son, he frees you to enjoy knowing him and treasuring him and making much of him?*

4. According to John Piper, what is the new birth and what does it change?

Why God Makes Much of Us for His Own Glory

But today I am jealous that this concern of mine not undermine the immeasurable way God loves you who are born again, including by making much of you—indeed, making much more of you than you ever dreamed. So here is my new way of coming at this issue. I ask: *Why does God perform all his acts of love toward us in a way that reveals he is loving us for his own glory? Why does God relentlessly reveal his love to us by telling us in the Bible that he is loving us for his own name's sake?* It is an urgent question because there are so many who say or feel that it isn't love if God's aim is to magnify his own glory. Or they feel: You say he is making much of me, but in fact he isn't making much of me if his design is that he be made much of in making much of me.

5. Compare John Piper's new way of asking the question to the old way referenced earlier in this sermon. Try to describe the difference between the two ways of asking the question.

I tremble just to say those words. It isn't so. I want to show you—I want to help you see and feel—that you are more loved by God when he loves this way. He makes much more of you when he makes much of you this way. Please don't turn this off. Ask God to help you see what we are about to see in the Bible.

Examples of God Loving Us for His Own Glory

Just a few examples of what I mean by God performing all his acts of love toward us in a way that reveals he is loving us for his own glory:

1. God shows his love for us by predestining us for adoption into his family.

He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of his glorious grace.* (Ephesians 1:5–6)

God loved us in eternity before we were created, and he planned to make us his children by adoption. And the aim of this love was “to the praise of the glory of his grace.” He loved us this way that we might praise his grace. A regenerate person loves to praise God's grace in our adoption. A nominal Christian simply loves the natural benefits of adoption.

2. God shows his love for us by creating us.

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created *for my glory*. (Isaiah 43:6–7)

God loved us in bringing us into being that we might enjoy forever all the good he plans for us. And he did it, he says, *for his glory*.

3. God shows his love for us by sending us a Savior.

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “*Glory to God in the highest*.” (Luke 2:10–14)

We get the Savior; he gets the glory. We get the “great joy”; God gets the praise. That is God’s design in sending his Son.

4. God shows his love for us when Christ died for us.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but *for him who for their sake died and was raised*. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)

Christ loved *us*, died for *us*; and the aim was that we might live for him. He pursues *his* glory through *our* salvation. And if you wonder why we read Psalm 79 at the beginning, it was because of one verse, verse 9: Help us, O God of our salvation, *for the glory of your name*; deliver us, and atone for our sins, *for your name’s sake!* (Psalm 79:9)

Born-again people pray like this. They see their salvation primarily as a gift of the ability to see and savor and show the glory of God.

5. God shows his love for us in the way Jesus prays for us.

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, *to see my glory* that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)

“With” him. He prays that we be with him. And why does that make us happy? O he will give us many things. But the bottom of our joy, the decisive foundation of our happiness will be this: *We will see his glory*. Our Savior, not our self, will be the bottom of our joy.

6. Which of these five expressions of God’s love is most meaningful to you write now? What do these five passages teach us about God’s love for us?

The point of those five texts is to show that throughout the Bible, God performs all his acts of love toward us in a way that reveals he is loving us for his own glory.

Why does he do it this way?

How Much God Does Make of Us

Before I answer, it's crucial in this message to emphasize that God's love for us includes making much of us in ways that take our breath away. They are so over-the-top that we are scarcely able to believe how much he makes of us. A few examples of what I mean:

1. God makes much of us by being pleased with us and commending our lives.

Alan Jacobs said that C. S. Lewis' greatest sermon was "The Weight of Glory." And in that sermon, what is the weight of glory that every true Christian will bear? To hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is. ("Weight of Glory," 1965, p. 10)

2. God makes much of us by making us fellow heirs with his Son, who owns everything.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

The promise to Abraham and his offspring [is] that he would be heir of the world. (Romans 4:13)

Let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. (1 Corinthians 3:21–23)

3. God makes much of us by having us sit at table when he returns and serving us as though he were the slave and we the masters.

Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. (Luke 12:37)

4. God makes much of us by appointing us to carry out the judgment of angels.

Do you not know that we are to judge angels? (1 Corinthians 6:3)

5. God makes much of us by ascribing value to us and rejoicing over us as his treasured possession.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. . . . Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29–31)

The Lord your God . . . will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)

6. God makes much of us by giving us a glorious body like Jesus' resurrection body.

He will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:21)

The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Matthew 13:43; cf. Romans 8:30)

7. Most amazingly God makes much of us by granting us to sit with Christ on his throne.

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Revelation 3:21)

The church . . . is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22–23)

We are destined to share in the governing of the universe with divine-like authority.

Let it be known loud and clear, *God makes much of his Son's bride, the church*. God loves the church with a kind of love that will make more of her than she can ever imagine. All this is yours, if you belong to Christ (Romans 8:9).

7. What does it mean that God “makes much of us”? Explain this concept in a way that ordinary people can understand.

8. Which of the seven ways that God makes much of us is most striking to you at this point in your life? Did any of the seven sentences surprise you?

Why God Reminds Us That He Loves Us for His Glory

The final decisive question is: Why does God, who loves so much, and who makes much of us so extremely, remind us again and again that he does all this for his own glory? Why does God remind us over and over that he makes much of us in a way that is designed ultimately to make much of him?

The answer is this: *Loving us this way is a greater love*. God's love for us, that makes much of us *for his glory*, is a greater love than if he ended by making *us* our greatest treasure, rather than himself. Making himself our end is a greater love than making us his end.

Self Will Never Satisfy

The reason this is greater love is that *self*, no matter how glorified by God (Romans 8:30), will never satisfy a heart that is made for God. God loves you infinitely. He sent his Son to die that he might have you, and that you might have him (1 Peter 3:18). He will not let you settle for wonderful and happy thoughts of self. Not even a glorified self. He will not let your glory, which he himself creates and delights in, replace his glory as your supreme treasure.

9. Why does God remind us again and again that he loves us for his own glory?

God's Greatest Gift

Bethlehem, I leave this truth with you while I am away for these months. Glory in this. Take heart from this. Rejoice in this. Be strengthened by this. You are precious to God, and the greatest gift he has for you is not to let your preciousness become your god. God will be your God. God alone forever. And this is infinite love.

Application

10. How has this lesson changed the way that you think about the love of God? Contrast the way that you used to think about God's love with what you have learned in this lesson. Some time this week, explain this change to someone that you know.

Lesson 6

Sex and the Supremacy of Christ Part 2

Introduction

This lesson is different from the other five. Each of the other five focused on distinct attributes: holiness, mercy, wisdom, wrath, and love. This climactic lesson draws attention to the manifold perfections of God. Instead of celebrating one attribute, we will celebrate dozens. This message was originally delivered at a conference called “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ.” The aim of the conference was to demonstrate that how we think and feel about the supremacy of Christ will govern and guide how we think and feel about sex. This message still needs to be heard today. However, the supremacy of Christ does not only govern our sexuality; it also governs everything else. Our hope is that this lesson will awaken in you a desire to keep the supremacy of Christ at the center of your life so that every area of your life is affected by it, to the praise of the glory of God’s grace.

[NOTE: The sermon below is the second of two messages delivered at the 2004 Desiring God National Conference on the theme *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*. The first message (“Sex and the Supremacy of Christ, Part 1”) may be found at the Desiring God website by performing a title search.

On Friday night I waved a banner over this conference with two convictions written on it:

The first was that *sexuality is designed by God as a way to know Christ more fully*. And the second conviction from Friday night was that *knowing Christ—the supremacy of Christ—more fully is designed by God as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality*. And when I speak of knowing Christ, I mean it in the fullest biblical sense of grasping great truth about Christ, and growing in fellowship with Christ, and being satisfied with the supremacy of Christ.

What I would like to do this morning, by God’s grace, is to help you experience that second conviction. I would like to help you know the supremacy of Christ more fully and show you a couple ways this will affect your sexuality.

My conviction is that the better you know the supremacy of Christ the more sacred and satisfying and Christ-exalting your sexuality will be. I have a picture in my mind of the majesty of Christ like the sun at the center of the solar system of your life. The massive sun, 333,000 times the mass of the earth, holds all the planets in orbit, even little Pluto, 3.6 billion miles away.

So it is with the supremacy of Christ in your life. All the planets of your life—your sexuality and desires, your commitments and beliefs, your aspirations and dreams, your attitudes and convictions, your habits and disciplines, your solitude and relationships, your labor and leisure, your thinking and feeling—all the planets of your life are held in orbit by the greatness and gravity and blazing brightness of the supremacy of Jesus Christ at the center of your life. And if he ceases to be the bright, blazing, satisfying beauty at the center of your life, the planets will fly into confusion, and a hundred things will be out of control, and sooner or later they will crash into destruction.

1. What analogy does John Piper give to illustrate the relationship between knowing the supremacy of Christ and our sexuality? List other areas of your life that could be illustrated with this analogy. Are there any areas of your life that are out of control because the supremacy of Christ is not the sun at the center of your heart?

We were made to know Christ as he really is. (Which is why biblical doctrine is so important.) We were created to comprehend—as much as a creature can—the supremacy of Christ. And the knowing we were made to experience is not the knowing of disinterested awareness—like knowing that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, or ancient Gaul was divided into three parts—but the knowing of admiration and wonder and awe and intimacy and ecstasy and embrace. Not the knowing of Hurricane Jeanne by watching TV but by flying in the eye of the storm—sometimes even hang-gliding!

We were made to see and savor with everlasting satisfaction the supremacy of Christ. Our sexuality points to this, and our sexuality is purified by this. We are sexual beings that we may know something more of the supremacy of Christ. And we must know the supremacy of Christ—we must know *him* in his supremacy—in order to experience our sexuality as sacred and sweet and Christ-exalting—and secondary, quietly, powerfully secondary.

2. In these two paragraphs, John Piper distinguishes two types of 'knowledge.' Explain the difference between the two types of knowledge in such a way that a child could understand it. Which type of knowledge is John Piper (with God's help) seeking to create through this sermon?

My prayer for this conference, and for all of you one by one, is that you will see and savor the supremacy of Christ—married or single, male or female, old or young, devastated by disordered desires or walking in a measure of holiness—that all of you will behold and embrace the supremacy of Christ as the blazing sun at the center of your life, and that the planet of your sexuality, with all its little moons of pleasure, will orbit in its proper place.

There are many practical strategies for being sexually pure in mind and body. I don't demean them. I use them! But with all my heart I know, and with the authority of Scripture I know that the tiny space ships of our moral strategies will be useless in nudging the planet of sexuality into orbit, unless the sun of our solar system is the supremacy of Christ.

Oh, that the risen, living Christ, therefore, would come to us (even now) by his Spirit and through his Word and reveal to us

—the supremacy of his *deity*, equal with God the Father in all his attributes—the radiance of his glory and the exact imprint of his nature, infinite, boundless in all his excellencies;

—the supremacy of his *eternality* that makes the mind of man explode with the unsearchable thought that Christ never had a beginning, but simply always was; sheer, absolute reality while all the universe is fragile, contingent, like a shadow by comparison to his all-defining, ever-existing substance;

—the supremacy of his never-changing *constancy* in all his virtues and all his character and all his commitments—the same yesterday, today, and forever;

—the supremacy of his *knowledge* that makes the Library of Congress look like a matchbox, and all the information on the Internet look like a little 1940's farmers almanac, and quantum physics—and everything Stephen Hawking ever dreamed—seem like a first-grade reader;

—the supremacy of his *wisdom* that has never been perplexed by any complication and can never be counseled the wisest of men;

—the supremacy of his *authority* over heaven and earth and hell, without whose permission no man and no demon can move one inch, who changes times and seasons, removes kings and sets up kings; does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; so none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

—the supremacy of his *providence* without which not a single bird falls to the ground in the furthest reaches of the Amazon forest, or a single hair of any head turns black or white;

—the supremacy of his *word* that moment by moment upholds the universe and holds in being all the molecules and atoms and subatomic world we have never yet dreamed of;

—the supremacy of his *power* to walk on water, cleanse lepers and heal the lame, open the eyes of the blind, cause the deaf to hear and storms to cease and the dead to rise, with a single word, or even a thought;

—the supremacy of his *purity* never to sin, or to have one millisecond of a bad attitude or an evil, lustful thought;

—the supremacy of his *trustworthiness* never to break his word or let one promise fall to the ground;

—the supremacy of his *justice* to render in due time all moral accounts in the universe settled either on the cross or in hell;

—the supremacy of his *patience* to endure our dullness for decade after decade; and to hold back his final judgment on this land and on the world, that many might repent;

—the supremacy of his sovereign, servant *obedience* to keep his Father’s commandments perfectly and then embrace the excruciating pain of the cross willingly;

—the supremacy of his *meekness* and lowliness and tenderness that will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick;

—the supremacy of his *wrath* that will one day explode against this world with such fierceness that people will call out for the rocks and the mountains to crush them rather than face the wrath of the Lamb;

—the supremacy of his *grace* that gives life to spiritually dead rebels and wakens faith in hell-bound haters of God, and justifies the ungodly with his own righteousness;

—the supremacy of his *love* that willingly dies for us even while we were sinners and frees us for the ever-increasing joy in making much of him forever;

—the supremacy of his own inexhaustible *gladness* in the fellowship of the Trinity, the infinite power and energy that gave rise to all the universe and will one day be the inheritance of every struggling saint;

3. Carefully meditate on this list of attributes and John Piper’s explanation of each. As you do, record any thoughts or reactions you have in the space below.

4. Are there any other attributes of God and Christ that you could add to the list above? Try to think of at least three additional attributes and write a sentence like the ones above for each of them.

And if he would grant us to know him like this, it would be but the outskirts of his supremacy. Time would fail to speak of the supremacy of his severity, and invincibility, and dignity, and simplicity, and complexity, and resoluteness, and calmness, and depth, and courage. If there is anything admirable, if there is anything worthy of praise anywhere in the universe, it is summed up supremely in Jesus Christ.

He is supreme in every admirable way over everything:

- over galaxies and endless reaches of space;
 - over the earth from the top of Mount Everest 29,000 feet up, to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean 36,000 feet down into the Mariana Trench;
 - He is supreme over all plants and animals, from the peaceful Blue Whale to the microscopic killer viruses;
 - over all weather and movements of the earth: hurricanes, tornadoes, monsoons, earthquakes, avalanches, floods, snow, rain, sleet;
 - over all chemical processes that heal and destroy: cancer, AIDS, malaria, flu, and all the workings of antibiotics and a thousand healing medicines.
 - He is supreme over all countries and all governments and all armies;
 - over Al Qaeda and all terrorists and kidnappings and suicide bombings and beheadings;
 - over bin Ladin and al-Zarqawi;
 - over all nuclear threats from Iran or Russia or North Korea.
 - He is supreme over all politics and elections;
 - over all media and news and entertainment and sports and leisure;
 - and over all education and universities and scholarship and science and research;
 - and over all business and finance and industry and manufacturing and transportation;
 - and over all the internet and information systems.
5. Carefully read through this list of things that Christ rules over. Which ones are particularly striking to you at this time? Make a list of five more items to add to this list that reflect your own life, your own context, and your own time in history. Be as specific as possible.

As Abraham Kuyper used to say, “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”^[1] And rule with absolute supremacy. And though it may not seem so now, it is only a matter of time until he is revealed from heaven in flaming fire to give relief to those who trust him and righteous vengeance on those who don't.

Oh, that the almighty God would help us see and savor the supremacy of his Son. Give yourself to this. Study this. Cultivate this passion. Eat and drink and sleep this quest to know the supremacy of Christ. Pray for God to

show you these things in his Word. Swim in the Bible every day. Use the means of grace. Like God-centered, Christ-exalting books. Don't go home without books to help you in this. Get John Owen on the glories of Christ^[2] and the mortification of sin.^[3] Get Mahaney on the Cross^[4] and the glory of God in marriage.^[5] Get Powlison^[6] and Patterson^[7] and Edwards.^[8] And with all your getting—whatever it takes—get the all-satisfying supremacy of Christ at the center of your life.

This is the *blazing sun* at the center of your solar system, holding the planet of sexuality in sacred orbit. This is the *ballast* at the bottom of your little boat keeping it from being capsized by the waves of sexual temptation. This the *foundation* that holds up the building of your life so that you can build with strategies of sexual purity. Without this—without knowing and embracing the supremacy of Christ in all things—the planets fly apart, the waves overwhelm, and the building will one day fall.

6. What three illustrations does John Piper use to describe knowing the supremacy of Christ in relation to sexuality (and every other area of our lives)? Choose one of these illustrations and explain it in more detail.

The Main Obstacle to Knowing the Supremacy of Christ

So here we are as sinners. All of us. None is righteous, no, not one. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We don't know him, we don't trust him and treasure him the way he deserves. So what stands in the way? What is our main obstacle to knowing the supremacy of Christ, with a deeply satisfying and sexuality-transforming knowledge?

7. Before reading any farther, how would you answer the last question in this paragraph? How do you think members of your church would answer this question?

The biblical answer to that question is: the absolutely just and holy wrath of God. We cannot know God in our sin because the wrath of God rests on us in our sin. What we deserve in our sin is not the knowledge of God, but the judgment of God. And since we are cut off from the knowledge of God by the wrath of God, we are cut off from sexual purity and holiness. God doesn't owe us purity, he owes us punishment. Therefore we are hopelessly depraved and hopelessly condemned.

Except for one thing: the good news that Christ has become for us the curse to bear God's wrath and the righteousness to meet God's demand. This is the heart of the gospel. And without it, there is no hope to escape God's wrath, no hope to know Christ's supremacy, and there is no hope for sexual purity. But here it is for everyone who believes: Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" We were under the curse of God's wrath. But Christ became a curse for us. And here it is again: Philippians 3:9, Paul's testimony that he is "found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." God's demand was that we be perfect. We cannot, in our sin, fulfill this demand. But Christ has. And by faith in him that perfect righteousness is imputed to us.

Therefore, since it is true that Christ has absorbed all the wrath of God that was aimed at me, and since it is true that Christ has performed the perfect righteousness that God demands of me, there is now for me no condemnation. Instead every thought of God and every act of God toward me in Christ Jesus is mercy. The

way is open to know him and all the beautiful supremacy of his Son. The cross of Christ has made the supremacy of Christ knowable.

The best gift of the gospel is not the forgiveness of sins. The best gift of the gospel is not the imputed righteousness of Christ. The best gift of the gospel is not eternal life. The best gift of the gospel is seeing and savoring the supremacy of Christ himself. The greatest reward of the cross is knowing the supremacy Christ.

8. What is the main obstacle standing between us and knowing and being satisfied with the supremacy of Christ? How has God overcome this obstacle?

How Then Does the Knowledge of the Supremacy of Christ (Opened to Us by the Gospel) Guide and Guard and Govern Our Sexual Lives?

How does it make our sexuality sacred, satisfying, and Christ-exalting? Of all the ways this works, I will only mention two.

First, knowing the supremacy of Christ enlarges the soul so that sex and its little thrills become as small as they really are.

Little souls make little lusts have great power. The soul, as it were, expands to encompass the magnitude of its treasure. The human soul was made to see and savor the supremacy of Christ. Nothing else is big enough to enlarge the soul as God intended and make little lusts lose their power.

Vast starry skies seen from a mountain in Utah, and four layers of moving clouds on a seemingly endless plain in Montana, and standing on the edge of a mile-deep drop in the Grand Canyon can all have a wonderfully supplementary role in enlarging the soul with beauty. But nothing can take the place of the supremacy of Christ. As Jonathan Edwards said, if you embrace all creation with goodwill, but not Christ, you are infinitely parochial. Our hearts were made to be enlarged by Christ, and all creation cannot replace his supremacy.

My conviction is that one of the main reasons the world and the church are awash in lust and pornography (by men and women—30% of internet pornography is now viewed by women) is that our lives are intellectually and emotionally disconnected from infinite, soul-staggering grandeur for which we were made. Inside and outside the church western culture is drowning in a sea of triviality, pettiness, banality, and silliness. Television is trivial. Radio is trivial. Conversation is trivial. Education is trivial. Christian books are trivial. Worship styles are trivial. It is inevitable that the human heart, which was made to be staggered with the supremacy of Christ, but instead is drowning in a sea of banal entertainment, will reach for the best natural buzz that life can give: sex. Therefore, the deepest cure to our pitiful addictions is not any mental strategies—and I believe in them and have my own (see [A N T H E M\[9\]](#)). The deepest cure is to be intellectually and emotionally staggered by the infinite, everlasting, unchanging supremacy of Christ in all things. This is what it means to *know* him. Christ has purchased this gift for us at the cost of his life. Therefore, I say again with Hosea, let us know, let us press on to know the Lord.

9. According to John Piper, why are so many people in bondage to sexual sin? What is the key issue? What is the deepest cure for this incredible problem?

Finally, the only other way I would mention that knowing Christ serves to save our sexuality from sin is that it empowers us to suffer.

Knowing all that God promises to be for us in Christ both now and for endless ages to come with ever-increasing joy, frees us from the compulsion that we must avoid pain and maximize comfort in this world. We need not, and we dare not. Christ died to make our everlasting future bright with the supremacy of his own glory. And the effect he means for it to have now is: glad-hearted suffering in the path of love.

Matthew 5:11-12, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, *for your reward is great in heaven.*” Yes, namely, seeing and savoring the supremacy of Christ himself. That’s the reward, and that’s the power to suffer.

Luke 14:13-14, “When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. *You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.*” Yes, namely, seeing and savoring the supremacy of Christ himself. That will be your repayment, and that is the power to do the hard thing and serve the poor.

Hebrews 10:34, “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” Yes, namely, seeing and savoring the supremacy of Christ himself. That is the better and abiding possession, and the power to be plundered with joy in the path of love.

Hebrews 13:13-14, “Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” Yes, the city where “glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23), and we will live in the light of his supremacy forever. That is the better city, and that is the power to go outside the camp and bear reproach.

Therefore, knowing all that God promises to be for us in Christ is the power to suffer with joy. And here’s the link. We must suffer in order to be sexually pure.

When Jesus says in Matthew 5:28-29, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell”—when Jesus says this, he means suffer whatever you must in order to win the war with lust.

Knowing the supremacy of Christ, being satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus, gives us the power to suffer for the sake of loving people and being pure.

Therefore, in conclusion, I say again with Hosea: Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord. It will not be easy. It may cost you your life. But if you keep the supremacy of Christ before your eyes as an infinite prize, you will find the strength to suffer and press on to love and purity, with joy.

[1] Abraham Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

[2] John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1, ed. W. H. Goold, 24 vols. (1850-1853; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965).

[3] John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 6.

[4] C. J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2003); C. J. Mahaney, *Christ Our Mediator* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2004).

[5] C. J. Mahaney, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004).

[6] David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Philipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003).

[7] Ben Patterson, *Deepening Your Conversation With God: Learning to Love to Pray* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2001); Ben Patterson, *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

[8] See the recommended resources in John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: Jonathan Edwards 300 Years Later* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004).

[9] See John Piper, *Pierced by the Word* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2003), 107-111. This is also available as a [Fresh Words](#).

Application

10. Prayerfully consider whether John Piper's view of the root of sexual sin is true in your life. Or, if you have a greater struggle with a different sin (greed, envy, pride, anger, bitterness, etc), substitute that sin instead. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Do you fill your life with trivial and unimportant things that cause your soul to shrivel up?
 - b. Is the supremacy of God in Christ the blazing sun at the center of your universe?
 - c. How has learning about and meditating on the attributes of God in these lessons enabled you to grow in holiness and fight against sin?
 - d. Which attribute of God has had the greatest effect on your life?