

Behold your God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 August 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] This is what the Lord says, Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches. But let him who boasts boast about this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.

Words that we find as we were sharing with the children in the prophet Jeremiah, and they remind us that there is no higher knowledge than the knowledge of God.

There is no greater experience than to know God. And yet, as we would proceed this morning to know God, to know something of him as he reveals himself to us, there is a word of caution delivered by the psalmist that we have just sung in Psalm 145.

Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, his greatness no one can fathom. In our inquiry into who God is, as we would seek to know God, we do so recognizing that we will not fathom God. We will not exhaust God. But we do recognize that God has chosen, graciously and lovingly to make himself known. And it is to that revelation of himself that we turn.

Where then are we to start if we are to know God? Well, there is no better place than God's revelation of himself in the Bible. And we turn to it in dependence on God's help to understand this revelation.

[2 : 1 4] Where in the Bible are we to turn? Well, a good place are the words of invitation delivered by God himself to his people, where he invites them to behold himself. We've read in Isaiah chapter 40 these words, behold your God, or as they are translated in the church version of the Bible, here is your God.

But I prefer this morning to hark back to the more familiar words, perhaps for many of us, in which that phrase is translated from the Hebrew, behold your God. And this is our text this morning, behold your God. We're going to consider this text one word at a time. And just to be contrary, we're going to do it backwards. We'll begin with God, then we'll follow on to consider your, and then we will finish with the word behold.

As we think, first of all, of God, what we want to do is to examine the portrait of God that is given to us immediately following these words of invitation, behold your God.

There in Isaiah chapter 40, we find there in verse 9, behold your God. And then there follows this portrait, this self-portrait that God grants to us. So God, a portrait of God to examine.

And explore. But then your, and that word your speaks of a relationship with God. It suggests the possibility of knowing God, of having this God as your God, as my God. And we want to think about the implications of that. And then as we go backwards, the word behold, a challenge from God.

[4 : 0 6] So we have a portrait of God in this passage. We have a relationship with God that is presented as a possibility for us. And then we also have this challenge from God. Let's think of each in turn.

Behold your God. God. A portrait of God in this passage that we have read. And as I just moments ago mentioned, immediately following these words of invitation, of challenge, behold your God, we are given this thrilling portrait of God. And before we do fleetingly really consider this portrait, there is an important question to pose and to answer very quickly. Who is it that paints this portrait of God? Is it Isaiah? Is it the prophet who one day sat down and said, well, I wonder what God is like?

And this was his attempt to describe God as he imagined God might be. Is that what we have here? No, that is not what we have here. This portrait is given to us by God Himself. This is a self-portrait.

It is a self-portrait revealed through the prophet Isaiah, delivered in a manner and in language that we can, at least in a measure, understand. But it is God's portrait of Himself, delivered through the prophet to us.

Now, it is difficult, more than difficult, it is impossible to do justice to the grandeur and beauty of the self-portrait that we are given in these verses. And at one level, I might think, well, it is better simply to invite you to read and to ponder and to enjoy simply in the reading of these words.

[5 : 55] And we also recognize that as we consider this portrait that God gives us of Himself, there is always the temptation, the danger of being overly analytical and attempting to systematize the data in a way that provides us with neat categories to understand and describe God.

And we can't put God into categories. We can't limit God into our own ideas or our own measures. But while we recognize that danger, there is, of course, merit in considering this portrait that God has granted to us.

of Himself. Now, as I read the portrait, and we've read the passage already, and I'm thinking especially of the words that follow from these words, behold your God, from verse 10, really through to the end of the chapter. As I read these words, as I read this portrait, there is one word above all others that certainly impresses itself upon me, and it is the word power.

We have here a portrait of the power of God, of the God who is all-powerful. Indeed, this is the first truth concerning God that is expressed following the words of invitation or challenge, behold your God.

Notice what follows in verse 10, see the sovereign Lord comes with power. And in all that follows, this is the overwhelming truth that is being portrayed to us, that this God is a powerful God. This is a God who enjoys power.

[7 : 43] Now, what is power? Well, power is the ability to act in a given way. And let me suggest that this portrait that we have before us presents four aspects of God's power. We have here presented to us very vividly, very powerfully, if you'll forgive the use of the word, very dramatically, we have presented to us the truth concerning God's power to create, God's power to decide, God's power to rule, and God's power to love. And let's think of these.

We're thinking of this portrait of God. We're suggesting that the overwhelming impression that this portrait gives is as of a God of power. And I'm suggesting that what we find here is this power that is displayed or involves these different aspects. First of all, power to create. In verse 12, who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand or with the breadth of His hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket or weighed the mountains and the scales and the hills in a balance? And then Isaiah comes back to that same truth concerning God's creative power in verse 26. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls them each by name because of His great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Now, there is a majestic simplicity to the language there in verse 12 and indeed also in verse 26. And yet, it conveys a great deal concerning God's power to create. We limit ourselves for the moment there to what we read in verse 12. In this verse that speaks of God's power to create, it also gives us an insight into aspects of that creative power. We see the totality of His involvement in this creation. The waters in the hollow of His hand, the heavens marked off by His hand, the dust of the earth in a basket, the whole of the created order, all of it, the totality of it, the product of God's creative power. We have presented to us the precision with which this creative work has been carried out.

Measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, marked off the heavens, weighed the mountains on the scales. There is a precision to this creative work of God, this creative power of God, everything just as He intended it to be. As we go on to verse 26, the picture of God placing the stars in the firmament, each and every one, just precisely where it was intended to be. He names them all. You know, in the scientific community, in the community of astronomers, there's great excitement when a new star is discovered, and a name is given to it. Perhaps the the scientist, the astronomer who first detected this new star, not a new star, of course, but discovered for the first time, great excitement. And then we turn to God's Word, and we speak, and we read of the One who created the starry host, who calls them each by name, who placed each of them just precisely where He intended them to be. There is the totality of His power to create, the precision of it, but also, as we read these verses, I'm struck by what I would call the effortlessness of it, the effortlessness of it. This wasn't a difficult task for God to perform. There is an effortlessness in the language that we read. The oceans are in the hollow of His hands. The heavens are measured by the breadth of His hand, from the little finger to the thumb. He can simply place His hand and say, well, that's it.

It's all there. Not a difficult task for this great, immense God to create this great, immense universe. This is a God with power, power to create. And the intention is that we be struck by the contrast.

We are creatures. We are small, and He is immense. Indeed, God is beyond immense. The universe is immense, because the universe is immense. Maybe some of you are interested in these things, and quite rightly so, to explore this amazing universe. And, you know, the figures are just mind-boggling when you hear of the distances and the vastness of the universe, and surely we can say that this universe is immense.

[12 : 32] And yet, the picture that we have painted here is that its immensity is as nothing as it rests in the palm of God's hand. This is a picture, a portrait that rebukes us for our foolish attempts to domesticate God or mold Him according to our fancy. This is a rebuke that God delivered through the psalmist. We sang in Psalm 50 in verse 21, you thought I was altogether like you. And God says, I am not like you.

I am the creator. I am the creator. You are the creature. But this power to create and this portrait of His power to create is a portrait that is intended to encourage us. A firm grasp and appreciation of God as the all-powerful creator is intended to serve as an anchor for our faith. Not to frighten us, not to terrify us, but as an anchor for our faith that in the most desperate circumstances, in all seems lost and all seems impossible, we can listen to the logic, if you wish, of the prophet Jeremiah. Listen to what Jeremiah says. Ah, sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power an unstretched arm. And then he says, nothing is too hard for you. You see the connection between the two statements. Jeremiah says, you have created all of this, therefore, nothing is too hard for you. No situation too difficult, no problem too intractable, nothing that cannot be solved, nothing that is impossible for you. You have done all of this. So as Jeremiah appreciates God as creator, that cultivates, that feeds, that anchors his faith. This God, my God, who has created all of these things, these problems that I am facing, these difficulties as a nation we face there, has nothing for him. Nothing is too hard for you. And I would encourage you, Christian, believing friend, to go away with this security. Nothing, nothing is too hard for your God. Consider his power to create your problems, your difficulties. They're not too hard for him to help you with and in. Power to create, but also the portrait that is painted by God himself is of him enjoying the power to decide. Very particularly verses 13 and 14 we read, who has understood the mind of the Lord or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him? And who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? In creating, God enters into no discussions with other deities, and in providence, his permanent ordering of all things, he and he alone decides. And if anybody were to pose the question, why this absence of debate or consultation? Well, the answer of the portrait we have here is that

God has no need to consult. God has no needs, period. Needs is a creature word. We as creatures have needs. We have multiple and manifold needs. God has no needs, and he certainly has no need to consult.

No need to consult with me, no need to consult with you, no need to consult with the leaders of the nations, no need to consult with other purported deities. He has the power to decide. He has the power to determine and to act on the determinations that he makes. God has and exercises his power to decide.

Now, while that is true, it is also true that God in his condescending love, and I use the word condescending there in a very positive sense, God in his condescending love listens sympathetically as we cry out to him, why? Why are you acting in this way? Why have you decided to act in this way?

[16 : 48] Or when we are so bold as to question his ways in our own lives or in the world that we live in. But as he listens in condescending love, he does so not because he contemplates even the possibility of being better advised or directed by our creaturely notions. No, it is in his patience and his love that he listens to us. But he has the power to decide, and he decides perfectly. Who could possibly stand up to the plate and reasonably challenge God and his power to decide and act as he pleases? Now, many do, but who could do so reasonably? No one. It is a ludicrous thing for any to purport to be able to challenge God as to the decisions that he takes. You know, the portrait speaks of having presented to us this power to decide, this absolute power to decide. The passage goes on to speak of the nations and of the idols. Could the nations challenge God? Well, what do we read in verse 15? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket. They are regarded as dust on the scales. In verse 17, before him all the nations are as nothing. They are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.

They certainly couldn't advise God or challenge God. What about the idols, other gods, other deities? Well, the very suggestion is ridiculous. Crafted by an artisan, inanimate objects, or those gods that we create in our own imagination. God, the powerful one, power to create, power to decide. But the picture we have here, God's own portrait, is of a God who has the power to rule. As we move on to verse 21, do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. See, the picture painted here for us is of this heavenly throne where God exercises His power to rule. And the power that He exercises is absolute power. There is no corner of the universe.

There is no rebellious heart that can evade His power to rule. Now, you say, well, that is contradicted by observation. And I say to you, yes, there are many who would seek to rebel against His rule. There are many who challenge His authority and indeed mock the very notion of His existence. But though that is so, is this a sign of weakness in God, is this evidence that His rule is anything other than absolute? By no means. If God, exercising His sovereign prerogative, allows the grasshoppers that are spoken of here to describe the likes of us, if God, exercising His sovereign prerogative, allows a grasshopper to stamp His feet and make a scene like a child in a supermarket aisle, well, that's up to Him. If He chooses to allow us to do that, that's His prerogative. He doesn't take anything away from His power. He doesn't in any way threaten or challenge His power. His power to rule is absolute. His power to rule is permanent and active.

The picture that we have painted here is of an active and permanent exercise of power. God is no absentee landlord, distant and indifferent to what goes on down here. God is a hands-on God.

Verse 23, He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, and then He blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

[21 : 01] He brings princes to naught. Have you seen the images of Hosni Mubarak? Pathetic images really being trolled into the court in Cairo. This man who enjoyed absolute power as he understood it over this great nation of Egypt for decades, and yet he's been brought to naught. Brought to naught by what forces. The Arab Spring, the spring uprising, a secondary cause. This is the work of God.

He brings princes to naught, those who are high and exalted, brought low. He blows on them and they wither. The great civilizations of time with delusions of grandeur. Where are they now? The holy Roman Empire, the great British Empire upon which the sun never set, the thousand-year Reich.

Where are they now? All blown away by the breath of God. What about today? The greatest, most powerful, most wealthy nation that the planet has ever known, the United States of America.

I want you to listen to something that President Obama said recently, following Standard & Poor's downgrading the credit worthiness of the United States from a triple A to a double A or a 2A plus.

Listen to what he said in an address to the nation. This is the United States of America. No matter what some agency may say, we've always been and always will be a triple A country. Now, let's not be too bothered about the economics of this, but this astonishing statement, I have nothing against Barack Obama. He seems a fine fellow to me. But it's very especially what he says, let's forget about his is unsure grasp of history. We have always been. Let's just forget about that. Let's be charitable about that. But let's focus on what he says, we will always be a triple A country.

[22 : 58] Well, wake up and smell the coffee, Mr. Obama. No, that is not so. There is no civilization on earth that lasts forever, and neither will yours, and neither will ours. Because God, who reigns on high, blows. He blows. He blows his breath, just a gentle blow. And the civilization is brought to naught when and if he chooses, in the manner that he chooses, by the means that he chooses.

Because this is a God who has power to rule. Should we be terrified by this absolute power of God? Is it not said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Well, the immediately following verse, where it speaks of this power of God to bring to naught the nations and civilizations, provides all the assurance and comfort that we could need. Notice there in verse 25, having presented this portrait of himself as enjoying such absolute power, listen to what God says. To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal, says the Holy One.

This revelation of this description of God as the Holy One provides us confidence and assurance that this absolute power will be exercised in holy, just, and righteous ways.

You see, his holy nature regulates or characterizes the exercise of his absolute power. God, by nature, is incapable of corruption. Power to create, power to decide, power to rule, and wonderfully, power to love. In verses 27 and following, you see, the whole purpose of this self-revelation of God is pastoral. In the midst of the troubles that were facing the people of Israel, they could rest assure that God was able and willing to help and succor them. See, this is the whole point of what we read there from verse 27. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel? My way is hidden from the Lord. My cause is disregarded by my God. See, they're complaining. They think that God doesn't care, that God isn't interested. And they're reminded, remember who he is. Remember who he is. He is the God who is the creator of the ends of the earth. This is a God who is more than able to help you, more than able to respond to you in your time of need. And we too must draw this same inference. You see, the wrong inference from an appreciation of God's power is that he is too great to care. And that is the mistake we often make. He's so big, he's so great, how could he be interested in me? That's a wrong inference. What we're being told by this passage is that the right inference is that he's too great to fail. He cannot fail you. He cannot fail to keep his promises. He cannot fail to provide for those he loves. He cannot fail to deliver you from any and every affliction when you cry out to him for help. And so, the passage goes on to speak of the manner in which he provides for his people, giving strength, increasing the power of the weak, renewing the strength of those who have lost it. Power to love. And then as we backtrack to the beginning and to verse 11, immediately following these words of challenge, behold your God, we have this tender picture of God as the shepherd. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young.

You're almost tempted to ask, is this the same God? Is this the same God that is then is described in such glorious and majestic terms in the verses that follow? And the answer to the question, is this the same God? The answer is yes, yes, wonderfully yes. A God with the power to love the weak and the vulnerable. A God with the power to love personally and passionately and with the power to love you. And so, I say to you, behold your God. Behold your God. Behold this glorious portrait, self-portrait of God. But as we work backwards, and we will speak for a much more shorter time in the next two words. But as we go backwards from behold your God to the second word in that statement, your, that as I suggested at the beginning, speaks of the possibility of a relationship with God. You see, I say to you this morning, behold your God. And you could answer, well, is he my God? Or maybe you could protest, he's no God of mine. This God you describe, he's no God of mine. Many would answer in that way. What is the significance of the possessive pronoun, behold your God? Well, it reveals a wonderful opportunity that God provides for us, the opportunity to enjoy a relationship with him. Let's be clear. If we avail ourselves or not of the opportunity, it makes not a whit of difference to who God is. He is no less God because his gracious advances are rejected, no less God in the face of childish protests of independence or indifference on our part. But the opportunity to enjoy a relationship with God is graciously provided by God.

[28 : 38] And in this passage, the word your is present precisely because those addressed were God's people in distinction to those who were not God's people. And so I say to you, what about you?

Is he your God? This God who presents himself, who reveals himself in the pages of Scripture, is he your God? Are you part of God's people? Are you part of God's family? How can he be your God?

What determines if he is or he is not? Well, the good news of the gospel is of how God has opened up a way for all to become part of his family, of his people, of his flock. This way to a relationship or friendship with God has been blocked by our sin and rebellion. But God himself, this God, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, came to remove the blockades, to deal with your sin. Jesus died on the cross in the place of sinners. He bore the punishment and condemnation your sins deserve. And having paid the price and conquered death, he now offers you a way back to God. He invites you to put your trust in him as your Lord and Savior. And as you believe in Jesus, so you are granted that relationship with God that is restoration, that is reconciliation with God. Listen to the words of God as found in the first chapter of John's gospel. Yet to all who received him, to all who received Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. This great God, this immense

God, this God with the power to create, with the power to decide, with the power to rule, with the power to love, is he your God? Believe in Jesus. Put your trust in Jesus as your Lord, as your Savior. Receive Jesus, if you as yet have not done so, as your Lord and Savior. As you come to him confessing your sins and repenting of them and asking him to be your Savior. But finally, and very briefly, the last word of this text, behold your God. We thought about the last word, the second word, and we backtrack to the first. Behold, a challenge from God, a challenge from God. This challenge is directed really in the first instance to his own people, hence the possessive pronoun, behold your God. And I think we can see it as a threefold challenge. In the first place, it is a challenge to God's people to contemplate the greatness of God, that our souls might be richly fed and strangely warmed as we contemplate God, as we admire God, as we celebrate God, as we enjoy the revelation that he grants of himself.

Behold your God, I say to you, believer. Behold your God in the busyness of life, as everything else seems more important. Stop for a moment and behold your God. This is the first element of the challenge.

[32 : 01] But the challenge is also that you would invite your fellow believers to this same enterprise. And let us encourage one another with these words, behold your God. Let us do that as we gather together for worship on the Lord's day. Let us do so as we gather to study the Bible together and to pray together that we would encourage one another, behold your God. But there is a third element to this challenge, the challenge to invite those who do not know God to behold him. To whom will we direct the invitation? Well, let us remind ourselves of what we read there in verse 9. You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. Go up on a high mountain to declare these words, behold your God. The picture is of a declaration that is heard by all on a high mountain that all may hear.

How will we deliver this clarion call? We're told with a shout, without fear. Lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up. Do not be afraid. Let us deliver this message of who God is and of what he has done in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us do it with a shout and with confidence. Not timorously. Not afraid of the rejection that we might endure.

Endure. But no, with confidence. With boldness. With authority. So I say to my soul, behold your God. I say to you, believing friend, behold your God. But our response to God's challenge does require more. That we would leave this place. That we go out into the city and this world and cry to all who care to hear and indeed to all who recoil in repugnance as we shout.

Behold God. Behold God. Behold God. The God who will be your God if you would but believe in Jesus Christ. Let us pray.