

God: In Light Inaccessible

Isaiah 40:12-28

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Last week, we briefly introduced the topic of God. Today we start the adventure of groping after knowledge of this One. For such knowledge IS eternal life (cognition), it is the end and goal of our existence, and thus, it is to be our singular overriding pursuit.

And it's a pursuit that is full of twists and turns, joys and delights, shocks and surprises, of desire fulfilled, and yet deferred, of small bits of knowledge gained and oceans of ignorance uncovered, of dark unfathomable depths and brilliant unapproachable light.

Some of this, I forewarn you, is difficult. Some of it will hurt your head. Some of it you will think is wrong, some of it will seem crazy or impossible (in the series). For this God is anything but boring and tame and predictable. There is, I contend, nothing wilder, nothing more mysterious, nothing more interesting, nothing more intellectually stimulating or challenging, nothing more frustrating of our idolatrous (that is, our natural) modes of thought, nothing stranger and – in many ways – counterintuitive, than the Christian God.

Today, I want to begin with two Scriptural assertions (which will be the two points of the Sermon). God is incomparable and, following from this, that God is incomprehensible. Incomparable and Incomprehensible.

Incomparable

We can see what we are getting at here by taking the word apart. In-comparable. The meaning is: not able to be compared. Not fit for comparisons. It's an assertion made repeatedly in Scripture – often from the mouth of God himself.

Listen to God speak through Isaiah beginning in the great 40th chapter. In this chapter, J. Gresham Machen says: “the prophet celebrates especially the awful transcendence of God, the awful separateness between God and the world.” And here, transcendence and separateness are basically synonymous with what we mean when we call God incomparable.

Isaiah 40. Verse 18: To whom then will you *liken* God, or what likeness *compare* with him? An idol – something made by a human craftsman?

As Paul puts it in Acts 17: we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Isaiah 40 again, Verse 25: To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? Says the holy One. He continues: I am the transcendent creator, lift up your eyes on high and see all of these stars.

Isaiah 46:5: To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?

It's as if God actually dares us to compare him to something else. To anything else. And the reason for this is NOT merely that God would win the comparison, that he would be better or greater or higher than any other thing or being.

The reason is – and please get this – that God is in-comparable. Now this word – incomparable, as its used here, does not mean really great, or outstanding, or the best in the field, the way one might say – this music is incomparable. Or Michael Jordan is incomparable.

Here, incomparable means – unable to be compared to anything else. Unable to be a term in a comparison. God is not comparable to any being or any thing.

Let's think about what it means to compare two things. For the comparison to be meaningful, the two things must share something in common. So, even though we have a saying: you should not compare apples and oranges, they can, in fact, be compared, because they are both things, they are creatures, beings, they are both fruits, they are both subject to decay, they can both be used in a fruit salad (so I've heard). In other words – and if you're a biologist, or a philosopher you will understand this language – they are in the same genus (higher level category).

So if the genus is fruit: apples are one species and oranges are another. They share a genus. Therefore, they can be compared. You can compare things very different as well. You might compare ants and angels. Now they are very different, but they share a genus – they are both creatures. They share another genus – they are both sentient beings (living things with some sort of awareness). So they can be compared.

But God is incomparable. And this means that God is *qualitatively different from all other beings* – all other things. Not quantitatively different. God is not what you would get if you took some angel or man and made them bigger, better, smarter, more powerful – if you took created attributes and just multiplied them.

For instance, if you took human goodness and made it really, really, good. God is not merely a much bigger, better version of human beings or qualities. Here the church has used the word super-eminence. Things (qualities) exist in God in a higher, fuller, purer, limitless, categorically different way, than they do in creatures.

Now, there IS a kind of likeness between creatures and God, otherwise we could say nothing at all about him – we will return to this – but for now – we must grasp that God is in no way a creature writ large (amplified). (No likeness between God and creatures. A statute is like a man but not vice versa). Nor is God the best being in the class of beings, or the best God in the class of Gods. Like there's a category called: "gods of various religions" and our God is the greatest of all those gods. That's nonsense.

There is no category, no genus, which God shares with any creature. Not even the category of thing or being or existence. God is not in any genus. Again: There is no category in which God and creatures are enveloped or embraced. Not even the categories of all beings. Why? Because God utterly transcends all that exists. He is not a being as we are beings. He is being itself. He is "ISNESS." I am who I am. He is the source of all (created) being. Thus, God is qualitatively different. He does not exist alongside of the world, or as a complement to the world. He is radically other. He is not different in degree. He is different in kind. Our failure to grasp this clearly, is a kind of perpetual cognitive idolatry.

Another way to put this is to say that God is singular and unique, infinitely transcendent above even our most basic categories, above all things visible and invisible.

Here's Isaiah 55:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And here, God is not saying, "hey, I'm a lot smarter than you. Much, much smarter." "As the heavens are higher than the earth" is an idiom which means not "a lot different" but infinitely, radically different.

God lives and thinks in ways which are infinitely different from us, and which belong to him alone. Even saying he's in a different category is problematic. As if there was a concept called categories and God was a member of one category and we were members of another category. God simply IS his own unique transcendent category and the source of all other created categories. As such, the incomparable God transcends our knowledge, and would be utterly unknowable to us, apart from the fact that he stoops, and he chooses to make himself known.

And this brings us to our second point.

Incomprehensible

God dwells, our NT lesson from 1 Timothy 6 says, in unapproachable light. What a word – unapproachable! So different from the casual, user-friendly, super-approachable God so popular these days.

Unapproachable light, Paul says. So forbidding, so prohibitive is this light, that Paul says, quite provocatively of this God:

That no one *has* ever seen him, or CAN ever see him. No man, God tells Moses in our OT text, no man, sees my face and lives. *He dwells, as our opening hymn puts it: in light in accessible, hid from our eyes. The Almighty, Job says, we cannot find him.*

So not only is our God In-comparable. He is incomprehensible. Now, this does not mean, of course, that God is unintelligible, or that he is incoherent – we are not using incomprehensible in that sense -- for God is light – in him there is no darkness, no dissonance at all. He is, in one sense, pure intellect. In fact, the very radiance, the splendor of God's being, his majesty, his glory – this is makes him unapproachable. As the hymn puts it with great insight: 'Tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

God is so replete with (intelligible) light that to us, he becomes an unapproachable, dark mystery. As a careful reading of the Psalms would show – God is both clothed in light and covered in clouds of thick darkness. So what we mean here is, that while God is comprehensible, his is not fully so. That, even in grasping God, there remains an infinite ocean that remains un-grasped. That we know in a cloud of unknowing. Here Scripture speaks of God as being unsearchable. The book of Job says God does things great and unsearchable, it asks: Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is only the fringes, the outskirts of his ways that we grasp. To turn our hearts and minds to this God is to launch out into unfathomable depths.

The great 40th chapter of Isaiah (which if you take nothing from this series other than to read, mark, learn, inwardly digest and cherish that chapter, that would be more than enough).

There, the prophet says: Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

Psalm 147 says the same thing: his understanding is beyond measure. And Psalm 145:3 says: Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, his greatness is unsearchable.

In his greatness, (and greatness is) a kind of meta-attribute, greatness embraces all of God's god-ness. And in his greatness-- he is unsearchable.

Now, I want to pause and make a few things clear. We should not think that we are left with no ability to know or grasp God. We CAN know things about God because he has made himself known (if he hadn't made himself known, we would not know even that he is incomprehensible).

Everything we have said today, we say, because God has revealed it. And we can even reason about God from the created order. (Because he is the Creator, and we are made in his image). So we CAN say God is like a rock, in that rocks have the property of being strong, and sturdy and reliable, and God is – in his own way – strong and sturdy-faithful.

To use technical language, there is an analogy between God and a rock, a point of some likeness between the creator and what he creates, between the effect (rock), and the cause (God). But still – God is infinitely different than rocks, and all the similarity we might discern between God and a Rock, is set against a backdrop of infinite dis-similarity – and forgetting this will shrink your conception of God. Flatten it out – until God seems like a big, really great Creature.

And even in what we do know, we always know it as creatures. We do not know God as he knows himself. For, as Jesus says: no one knows the Father, except the Son. He can reveal the Father to us, but the Son knows the Father in a unique, divine way. Or as Paul puts in 1 Corinthians 2: For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we know, we know as creatures, we know in part, and we see through a glass darkly.

Now, of course, since God has now taken up our flesh and revealed himself in Jesus Christ, we can see and know him in new and more intimate and easily accessible ways. But none of that – glorious as is – none of it changes the incomparable and incomprehensible nature of God. You might say we can now see more -- yet still through a glass darkly.

Three practical takeaways from these truths.

Humility

Our thoughts of God are too human and often too base. We think we have him wired or basically figured out. Just listen to us pontificate with certainty. We need

deep intellectual chastening. We need to clasp our hands over our mouths. We need to confess that our minds are perpetual idol factories.

What Martin Luther said to Erasmus in the 16th c. applies to us today: Your thoughts of God are too human. It takes real labor, deep demanding work, to think properly about the Christian God. It requires perpetual cognitive repentance and humility, for there is something unnatural and non-instinctive about. And we are nothing, if not people who tend to trust our instincts. Christians regularly, perpetually, walk around with low, distorted, base, ignoble, erroneous, and in many cases, clearly heretical conceptions of the Triune God and the mystery of Christ. For our reason is defiled and is still in the process of being healed.

Now, since we are called to love the Lord our God with all our minds – all of our minds – to think wrongly about God, is itself sinful. It is one of the great acceptable sins in our circles. We need repentant reason. For we are conceptually defiled. Seeing this One should induce deep rational brokenness, dependence and humility.

Comfort

The incomparable God, unsearchable in his greatness, is your God. He may, in many ways, elude our grasp, but we never elude his. This one is unrivalled, and thus he can keep and guard all that you entrust to him. We cannot receive true and lasting comfort from gods made in our image. This God, the only God, is our only comfort in life and death.

Worship

No one should be disheartened by any of this. That our God is incomparable and incomprehensible is intrinsic to his glory. He is ineffably sublime, and that is crucial to making him worthy of worship, of the highest praise. A tame and tepid vision of God leads to tame and tepid praise. A human and sentimental vision of God leads to human and sentimental praise. Only the incomparable biblical God is worthy of perpetual, full throated, high praise from every creature in heaven, and on earth and under earth, forever. Of him we confess, with joy, the great Pauline doxology:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

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

Amen.

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