

4G'S (TIM CHESTER)

HOW GOD IS BETTER THAN IDOLS

PREACHING TO OUR HEARTS

We need to become preachers. We need to learn to preach to our own hearts. The psalmist says, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103: 2). To whom is he speaking? The answer is to himself. The famous preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?”⁴ We need to take every thought captive (2 Corinthians 10: 3– 5). Our problem, says Sinclair Ferguson, is that “we think with our feelings.”⁵ We don’t always feel joy in God, but by faith we can tell ourselves that he is our joy. When we find ourselves tempted to engage in sinful behavior, or when we find that our emotions are getting the better of us, we need to speak truth to our hearts. Say the truth to yourself repeatedly so that it sinks in: “God is all I need.” Say it slowly: “God . . . is . . . all . . . I . . . need.” Say it out loud. Say it back to him: “You are all I need.” C. S. Lewis says, “The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job of each morning consists in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”⁶

It helps if you can identify the specific lies behind your sin and the corresponding truths that will set you free. But you don’t have to be able to analyze your heart in detail. It’s the truth of the gospel that brings change. This is how John Newton describes the liberating power of Jesus’ name:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer’s ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.
It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
’Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And gives the weary rest.

Dear name! The rock on which we build;
Our shield and hiding-place;
Our never-failing treasury, filled
With boundless stores of grace.

I want to identify four life-changing truths about God. Psalm 62: 11– 12 says, “Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and that to you, O LORD, belongs steadfast love.” The key truths that God declares about himself are his greatness and glory (“ power belongs to God”) and his goodness and grace (“ to you, O LORD, belongs steadfast love”).

1. God is great— so we do not have to be in control.
2. God is glorious— so we do not have to fear others.
3. God is good— so we do not have to look elsewhere.

4. God is gracious— so we do not have to prove ourselves. There's much more to be said about God than is covered by these four truths, but they offer a powerful diagnostic tool for

1. GOD IS GREAT— SO WE DO NOT HAVE TO BE IN CONTROL

Traveling at the speed of light (186,000 miles a second), you would encircle the earth seven times in one second and pass the moon in two seconds. At this speed it would take you 4.3 years to reach our nearest star and 100,000 years to cross our galaxy. There are thought to be at least 100,000,000,000 galaxies in the universe. It would take 2,000,000 light-years to reach the next closest galaxy and 20,000,000 to reach the next cluster of galaxies. And you have still only just begun to explore the universe.

All this was created when our God simply spoke a word. In fact, Isaiah tells us that he marked off the heavens with the breadth of his hand (Isaiah 40: 12). It's a spatial metaphor for a God who exists outside space, but it gives us a sense of the scale of God: the whole universe fits into his hand. Hold your hand up: the universe is that big to God! Hebrews 1: 3 says Jesus sustains it all by the power of his word. He "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1: 11). In a mysterious way that involves human freedom, God orders every event and determines every action: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he wills" (Proverbs 21: 1). Even evil actions are part of his plan. The conspiracy that sent Jesus to the cross was the result of evil choices by human beings. Yet "they did what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4: 28, NIV). From the movement of atoms to the complexities of human history, God sustains and rules all.

I wonder if you've ever lost work on a computer because it crashed. It happened to me the other day. I let out a loud "Nnoooo!" as my head hit my desk. To whom was I speaking? The reality is, though I might not have admitted it, I was crying out a "no" to God and his sovereignty. I was rejecting his sovereign rule over my life. "No, God, you don't know best. Your rule is not good. Otherwise why would you let this happen?"

Alan is sitting on the train. Inexplicably it's stopped just outside the station. He's getting angry because it looks as if he'll miss his hospital appointment.

Beth is stressed. Replacing the family car has wiped out their savings. Now she's worried that they won't have enough money at the end of the month. When her husband comes home with an expensive-looking bunch of flowers to cheer her up, she just bursts into tears.

Colin's getting very frustrated. He's trying to get a new community project going, but everything seems to be going wrong. As a result, he's getting irritable with his children.

Dorothy's lying awake at night thinking about her friend Eileen. Eileen seems to be slipping into postnatal depression. Dorothy's looked after Eileen's baby a couple of times, but she has her own responsibilities. She wishes she could do more.

In Mark 4: 35– 5: 43 Jesus displays his control over the natural world, over the spirit world, over sickness, and even over death. The stories are told to highlight Jesus' complete authority. He brings a girl back from death as easily as you or I might rouse someone from sleep. All the time Mark presents the alternatives of fear and

faith. The disciples are afraid in the storm. Among them are experienced fishermen, so this is no irrational phobia. Yet Jesus rebukes them: “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4: 40). The people see the demon-possessed man in his right mind and fear the power that tamed him (5: 15). The sick woman comes before Jesus with “fear and trembling” (5: 33). But Jesus speaks a word of peace to her. Because of her faith, she has no need to fear God. Jesus’ word to Jairus is the punch line of the section: “Do not fear, only believe” (5: 36). God is greater than all the things we fear. These stories don’t teach that we’ll never face sickness or death. Instead they teach us that we needn’t fear the circumstances of life because the circumstances of life because God is in control. He works good for us in every circumstance. He’ll bring us safely home to glory. Death is not the last word: the last word is “Talitha cumi!”—“ Little girl, I say to you, arise” (5: 41).

What happens when you don’t truly trust God’s sovereign control? You might try to take control yourself in harmful ways, through manipulation or domination. You might wear yourself out with busyness or frustration. You might make your security and wealth a bigger priority than God’s kingdom (Luke 12: 22–31). Or you might worry (Philippians 4: 6–7). We become preoccupied with the bills, and money becomes our main obsession. All because we don’t believe our Father knows what we need. Jesus goes straight to the heart of the problem— our little faith:

Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? . . . O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. (Luke 12: 25– 31)

We often associate the sovereignty of God with theological debates. But for all of us it’s a daily practical choice. For me, the issue is escapism. I have to choose between a fantasy in which I’m sovereign and the real world in which God is sovereign, between my false sovereignty and God’s real sovereignty. When I feel like running away, I have to choose to find refuge in God.

2. GOD IS GLORIOUS— SO WE DO NOT HAVE TO FEAR OTHERS

One common reason why we sin is that we crave the approval of people or we fear their rejection. We “need” the acceptance of others, and so we’re controlled by them. The Bible’s term for this is “fear of man.” “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe” (Proverbs 29: 25). Ed Welch, in his book *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, 8 says fear of man has many symptoms: susceptibility to peer pressure; “needing” something from a spouse; a concern with self-esteem; being overcommitted because we can’t say no; fear of being exposed; small lies to make ourselves look good; people making us jealous, angry, depressed, or anxious; avoiding people; comparing ourselves with others; and fear of evangelism. 9

Our culture tries to overcome this problem by finding ways to bolster self-esteem. But this actually compounds the problem. We become dependent on whatever or whoever will boost our self-esteem. In reality, low self-esteem is thwarted pride: we don’t have the status we think we deserve. We elevate desires that are

often good in themselves (a desire for love, affirmation, or respect) to the level of needs without which we think we cannot be whole. We talk of “needing” the approval or acceptance of others, but our true need is to glorify God and love people.

The answer to the fear of man is fear of God. We need a big view of God. To fear God is to respect, worship, trust, and submit to him. It's the proper response to his glory, holiness, power, love, goodness, and wrath. The appearances of God are often described in the Bible in terms of brightness, fire, and brilliance. Think of the heat of the sun, with nuclear reactions within it creating a blinding brilliance even millions of miles away. Yet there's an intensity and substance to God's glory far beyond that of our sun. God wraps majesty and splendor around him like a cloak (Psalm 93: 1). “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One” (Isaiah 40: 25). For the Christian, the fear of God no longer involves terror. He's our Father, and we come before him with confidence through Christ (Hebrews 4: 14– 16). But we can never get chummy with him. He remains a consuming fire. “My flesh trembles for fear of you,” says the psalmist. “I am afraid of your judgments” (Psalm 119: 120).

So, if you are controlled by people's expectations, then you need to learn the fear of the Lord, for the fear of God can be taught and learned (Deuteronomy 4: 10; 17: 18– 19; 31: 12; Psalm 34: 9– 11). Meditate on God's glory, greatness, holiness, power, splendor, beauty, grace, mercy, and love. Often, in Psalms 18 and 34, for example, this is what the psalmist is doing. In the face of some threat, he's speaking the truth about God to himself. He's reminding himself of God's glory so that fear of others is replaced by trust in God. Whenever you see someone whom you fear or whose approval you crave, imagine God next to him or her. Which of them is more glorious, majestic, holy, beautiful, threatening, and loving? Whose approval really matters to you? “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” says Jesus. “Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10: 28). Fear in the face of a threat is natural. But natural fear needs to be regulated by faith in God. Your boss may be a bully, but he or she isn't bigger than God. David had good cause to fear others at various points in his life, but he could say:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27: 1– 3; see also Psalm 56: 3– 4)

The fear of God is liberating. We take people's expectations seriously because we want to love them as God commanded. But we're not enslaved by them. We don't serve them for what they can give us in return— approval, affection, security, or whatever. By submitting to Christ's lordship, we're free to serve others in love (Galatians 5: 13).

3. GOD IS GOOD— SO WE DO NOT HAVE TO LOOK ELSEWHERE

I recently heard the story of an elderly widow in Russia who has taken a job cleaning the stairwells of a grim apartment block. Her state pension covers her own needs, but she wants to earn extra money for missionaries working in Mongolia. What makes someone do that for people and churches she'll never see in this life? The answer is joy. She is like the man who finds treasure in a field and “in his joy goes and sells all he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13: 44). The invitation of the Bible is not to dreary abstinence. It's a call to find in God

that which truly satisfies. It's believing that we find lasting fulfillment, satisfaction, joy, and identity in knowing God, and nowhere else. Whatever sin offers, God offers more, for God offers us himself. God isn't just good, he's better— better than everything else— and the true source of all joy.

In John 4, Jesus turns a request for water from a Samaritan woman into an offer of living water. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (vv. 13– 14). This living water is God himself communicated to his people through the Holy Spirit (John 7: 37– 39). Every longing in us is a version of our longing for God. That longing may be a distorted version of our longing for God, but it's still a longing for the God we were made to know.

One of our problems is that we think only of moments. In the moment, we think the pleasures of sin are real and the joy of God is insubstantial or distant. But in truth it's the other way around: every joy we experience is but a shadow of the source of all joy, which is God. Marriage, for example, is a reflection of the joy of union with God, adultery a distorted reflection. If you idolize marriage or commit adultery, then you've settled for less than living water. Sin is like the distorted reflection of a beautiful sunset that shifts with every movement of the breeze across the water. God is the sun itself in all its beauty and glory and energy. C. S. Lewis says, "There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our hearts of hearts, we have ever desired anything else. . . . It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want." 10

This is why nothing but God satisfies— only he satisfies in a true and lasting way. If you look for satisfaction or fulfillment, meaning or identity, anywhere other than in Jesus, you'll be left empty. There may be a moment of refreshment or pleasure, but you'll soon be thirsty again. Jesus asks the woman to fetch her husband. This looks like a tangent, but in fact it leads straight to her heart. The truth is that she's had five husbands and the man she's now with is not her husband. She's been looking for meaning, satisfaction, and fulfillment in marriage, sex, and intimacy. But they're like water that leaves her thirsty again. No doubt there was real pleasure. But it didn't last. It wasn't the real thing. It left her thirsty.

There was a clear pattern in her life. The math tells the story: five husbands plus another man. What are the patterns in your life? Are the words "If only . . ." a refrain? What comes after the "If only . . ."? Do you really believe God is good?

When the woman tries to draw Jesus into worship controversies, Jesus redefines worship (vv. 19– 24).

Worship is not about location. It's an attitude of the heart: you worship in spirit and in truth. Worship is about what you desire most, what you think has most worth.

Every time you look to God to satisfy your longings, you worship him in spirit and truth.

Every time you look elsewhere, you commit idolatry. Even our good works can be idolatrous acts. If we don't delight in God for his own sake, finding him beautiful and glorious in our eyes, then we'll serve him for what we get in return: reputation, security, escape from hell. In so doing, we reveal that our greatest love is our reputation, our security, our self-preservation, ourselves. 11

It's easy for us to think of obedience as the price we pay for entry into heaven. It would be better for us, we suppose, to be living for pleasure, but as Christians we have to live for God. But the life of obedience is not the bad or sad life. It's the good life. Life with God and for God is the best life you could live. Change is about enjoying the freedom from sin and the delight in God that God gives to us through Jesus.

God is not only better than anything sin offers— God is forever. The Bible talks about the “pleasures of sin,” and there's no doubt many sins do bring pleasure. There's no point pretending otherwise. But the Bible also tells us that the pleasures of sin are only for “a short time” (Hebrews 11: 25, NIV).

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. (Hebrews 11: 24– 26)

We're called to look beyond the present moment to eternity. “The wages of sin,” says Paul, “is death” (Romans 6: 23). There is always a price to pay. Often those consequences are in this life: broken relationships, damaged bodies, a shamed conscience, addictive habits. Always there are consequences for the life to come. “Sin when it is fully grown,” says James, “brings forth death” (James 1: 15). We often focus on the temptation. It starts to fill our minds, and we lose sight of the bigger picture. One person I know broke the cycle of sin he was caught up in after visiting a Christian friend who was dying in a hospice. Suddenly he was confronted with the bigger picture and forced to look beyond his sin.

Think about Moses. We know from the pyramids and sphinxes that Egyptian rulers were extremely wealthy. This was as good as it got anywhere on earth at that time— the equivalent of today's multi-millionaire lifestyle. As a child of the royal court, Moses had it all. But he gave it all up, choosing to be ill-treated with the Hebrew slaves. This was because he recognized that Christ was better than all the treasures of Egypt. The Egyptians locked up their treasures in pyramids in an attempt to take them with them into the afterlife. But they couldn't do it. In fact, many of their treasures ended up in the British Museum. Moses, however, “was looking [ahead] to the reward.” He realized that what God offered for all eternity was better by far than anything sin could offer in this life (Mark 8: 34– 36).

G. K. Chesterton suggests that at present we pursue variety because we're so easily wearied. But what if a man's “life and joy were so gigantic that he never tired of routine?”

A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again.” . . . Perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but he has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore. 12

We so easily grow bored with life. We are weary with sin-induced futility. But God is never bored by life. He is life. His joy and life are so gigantic that he never tires of sunrises and daisies, of beauty and life and joy. In Proverbs 8: 30–31, Jesus, personified as Wisdom, speaks of his delight and joy in creation. Jesus says, in effect, “I was filled with fresh delight day after day, always laughing in God’s presence, playing in every corner of his world and delighting in humanity.”¹³ We worry that eternity will be boring. But that is because we are dead and tired. We look for joy in sin, and we are quickly bored and always moving on in search of more. We grow weary in our futile pursuit of ever-greater excitement. But in eternity there will be a rush to life running through our veins. Our life and joy will be gigantic, so that each moment will bring fresh ecstasy; each daisy will be a fresh delight, each sunrise a fresh wonder. We will cry to God, “Again, again, do it again.” Now we are old and tired and cynical. But then we will be young again, forever young, forever delighting in God.

4. GOD IS GRACIOUS— SO WE DO NOT HAVE TO PROVE OURSELVES

I lay awake long into the night, replaying the conversation in my mind. The next morning the brooding continued. Our team meeting had developed into what my daughter later described as “war.” Same place, same time, but the night before that, a woman in our church had come to me with a profound pastoral crisis. That night I’d slept soundly.

How crazy! I could forget a genuine crisis, happy to leave it in God’s hands. But an argument about nothing had totally preoccupied me. My desire to be vindicated had consumed me. That’s why I’d played a role in creating the conflict in the first place. I wanted to be proved right, so I fought on. What set me free from my self-centered brooding was the truth that God is gracious. I didn’t need to justify myself. I couldn’t justify myself. But God graciously justifies me through the finished work of Christ. God is “ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Nehemiah 9: 17).

The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 reveals the remarkable grace of God. Asking for his inheritance was tantamount to the younger brother saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.” Selling off that inheritance was shameful because it meant losing the family’s land. Moving to another city was a rejection of his family. And we haven’t even got to the wild living yet! Feeding pigs was as low as you could go for a good Jew, because pigs were unclean. And as for wanting to eat their food . . . ! This son is a picture of you and me. We’ve wished God dead, rejected his love, moved as far from God as we can. We’ve tried to break free from love and ended up in the pigsty, longing to be satisfied with rubbish.

But the gracious behavior of the father is even more shocking. This would have left Jesus’ hearers gasping. If a son asked his father for his inheritance while the father was still alive, he would be disinherited. If a son tried to break free of his father’s rule, he’d be beaten. If a son left home to indulge in wild living, he’d be disowned. But this father runs to meet his returning son. He doesn’t wait for his son to honor him. He honors the son with a robe, a ring, and a party. This is our God— embracing, welcoming, and honoring us.

I used to think that when I let God down I would probably have a bad day or my prayers would go unanswered. I assumed God would act in the way I act when people let me down, giving them the cold

shoulder. Or I thought I could atone by having a miserable day or sweating it out in prayer, as if the death of Jesus didn't quite do the job. And so we stand at a distance from God. And all the time he's looking for us, ready to embrace us, ready to welcome us home. Indeed, as the other parables of Luke 15 remind us, he takes the initiative to bring us home.

If the story of the younger brother reveals God's grace, in the older son we see many characteristics of not truly believing God is gracious.