

SERMON NOTES

SERIES: Paradoxology | Following Jesus into the Tensions of Life

TITLE: The God Who is Near and Far

SCRIPTURE: *Selected Scriptures*

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PASTOR: Charlie Boyd

Following Jesus is not always easy. Most Christians want their faith journey to be simple and clear — either/or, black/white, yes/no. However, life with God is often found in both/and tensions or paradoxes. The essence of a paradox is bringing together two seemingly contradictory statements, and the Bible is full of them. God is one; God is three. Jesus is God; Jesus is man. To save your life, you should lose it. To be mature, you should become like a child. And following Jesus into tensions like these is where faith is meant to flourish. Embracing seeming contradictions like these leads to doxology—a life of intentional worship.

This week we will look at another paradox we in Scripture—the fact that God is both near and far—present and distant at the same time. The fact is—God has chosen to be up-close-and-personal with us, but at the same time, he has chosen to reveal himself as One who is utterly distinct from us. Psalm 139:7-12 tells us that there's nowhere we can go to and God not be present with us. God is near and available to us. But sometimes, God feels so distant. Why is that? There was a time in David's life when he prayed: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in trouble (Ps10:1)?" There were other times he experienced the closeness of God: "God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Obviously, he experienced the paradox—God is "far away, so close" as the U2 song *Stay* puts it. Krish Kandiah, in his book, *Paradoxology* calls this the "Moses Paradox." Moses knew the presence of God, but he also knew the distance of God, and the Exodus story is full of examples of this paradox.

- We see this paradox in Exodus 3:4-6, in Moses' first close encounter with God at the burning bush. The fire drew him close, but God told him to not come too close.
- Another time we see this paradox is in Exodus 19:16-25 after God rescues his people Israel from Egyptian slavery. As God commanded him, Moses leads the people to Mt Sinai—the place of the burning bush. They are brought near, only to be told "stay away."
- Then, God gives the people laws and instructions for how to build him a Tabernacle—a special tent where his presence would dwell (Ex25:8). But then he instructs Moses to place the tent outside the camp. They build the Tabernacle as a year-round reminder of God's presence among them, but access to the actual "presence of God" was limited to one man, once a year. —???— Why does God come near, but then keep his distance? It's a paradox—God is personal and present *and* God is distant and distinct.

In theological language, the two words that describe this paradox are immanence and transcendence—God is immanent and God is transcendent. Immanence means that God is near. He is up-close-and-personal and available to us. The immanence of God means he is everywhere present in all of creation. He permeates the whole of creation, but he must not be confused with his creation.

As creation's Creator, he is also transcendent. God is holy, distinct/separate from, other than any created thing. Transcendence means that God is different in essence and being from all of creation. He is bigger,

greater than all that he's created. King Solomon understood the tension between this God who is near and at the same time far. In 1 Kings 8:27 Solomon rightly recognizes that a transcendent God cannot be contained in a box or a building. But in building the Temple, Solomon also acknowledges that God had chosen to be there in that place even though he could not be contained in that place.

Like the tines of a tuning fork, the immanence and transcendence of God must both vibrate as 100% true in order to ring true. Each side offers part of the truth, but none of the truth, if one side is held in isolation from the other or if one side is emphasized more than the other. *If we overemphasize the immanence* (the nearness of God), we run the risk of worshipping the creation instead of the Creator. Also, we run the risk of becoming over-familiar with God and bringing him down to our level. This can seriously hinder our prayer life, especially in times when we ask God for something and we don't get it. We can think: "If God is a personal God then why doesn't he give me the help I need? Why doesn't he do for me what I need him to do? We do live in a personal relationship with God, but that doesn't mean God is your personal assistant. *If we overemphasize God's transcendence* (the holy otherness of God), we run the risk of not involving God in the mundane things of everyday life. We reserve God for special occasions like church or Sunday or times of crisis. That can lead to our relationship with God becoming cold and formal. That can also affect our prayer life in a negative way because we may think: "Well, God's going to do what he wants anyway, so why pray?" But God has invited us to pray and ask him for things. If we don't get what we pray for, we rest in his transcendence, knowing that God's greatness and goodness and wisdom is greater than what we ask for, and we trust his will to be done.

Chew on this—God is personal in his transcendence and transcendent in his persons. That is, God is never impersonal in his transcendence—like "The Force" in *Star Wars*—and he's never so personal that he minimizes his transcendence—like God is never your buddy or pal.

Here are a couple of other ways to see this paradox. Jesus tells us to call God *Abba* Father and *Heavenly* Father—close, personal father *and* holy Father. We also see this paradox in the two pictures of Jesus we find in the Bible. We have the earthly Jesus of the Gospels *and* the transcendent Jesus of Revelation 1:12-18.

Maybe the reason God chose to reveal himself to Moses and the children of Israel by fire is because fire is a good picture of the true nature of God. Fire draws us close by its warmth and at the same time it warns us not to come too close. It's for our protection that God keeps his distance, but its for our salvation that he comes near. God with us, God for us—and—God above us, God beyond us. Immanence calls us to draw near--transcendence calls us to bow low. Jesus helps us make sense of all this because now, because of what Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection we have personal access into the presence of Holy God. Eph2:18 says, "All of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us." That means, we *already live in* God's loving, holy presence, *but not yet fully in* his presence—(another paradox). Until the day we find ourselves in God's total, tangible, intimate, holy presence, we will live in the tension of experiencing God as near and far—present and distant.

For Discussion —

Have someone describe the paradox of the presence and distance of God in their own words. How does a tuning fork help us understand why holding these two truths in tension are important to understand who God has revealed himself to be? Discuss how the Moses and the Exodus story illustrates God revealing himself as near and far at the same time. Ask someone to define immanence; ask another person to define transcendence. How might overemphasizing immanence affect our prayer lives? How might overemphasizing transcendence affect our prayer lives? When rightly understood how should God's transcendence impact how we worship God? Discuss how "fire" might help us understand these two important truths about God. How might this distinction help--God is immanent so draw near—God is transcendent so bow low. Ask: Is it hard for you to hold these two truths about God in 100% tension? If so, why is it hard? Which one is hardest for you to hold on to?