

LESSON ONE

The Mission's Beginning

FOCAL TEXTS

Genesis 1:1;
Isaiah 46:5–9; Acts 17:24–31

BACKGROUND

Genesis 1:1;
Isaiah 44:6–28; 46:1–13;
Acts 17:22–31

MAIN IDEA

God's mission begins from the foundation that God's dominion is unlimited.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

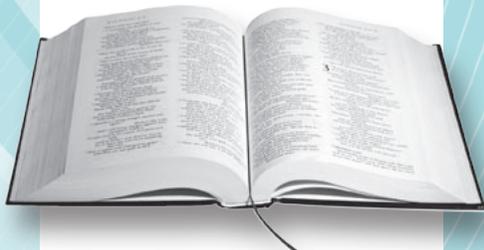
How big is your God?

STUDY AIM

To consider implications and actions that should follow from the biblical truth of God's unlimited dominion

QUICK READ

Our role in God's mission is grounded in proper worship of God alone.



“How great is the LORD,” declared the psalmist in an exclamation of praise (Psalm 48:1, New Living Translation). In starting this series of Bible studies, it might be appropriate to turn that declaration into a question for each of us. *How great is the Lord?* How great is your understanding and image of who God is? What is your mental picture of God? In your mind’s eye is God more active or more passive? How connected is God to day-to-day affairs here on earth?

GENESIS 1:1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

ISAIAH 46:5–9

- ⁵“To whom would you liken Me
And make Me equal and compare Me,
That we would be alike?
⁶“Those who lavish gold from the purse
And weigh silver on the scale
Hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
They bow down, indeed they worship it.
⁷“They lift it upon the shoulder and carry it;
They set it in its place and it stands there.
It does not move from its place.
Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer;
It cannot deliver him from his distress.
⁸“Remember this, and be assured;
Recall it to mind, you transgressors.
⁹“Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me. . . .

ACTS 17:24–31

²⁴“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed

anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; ²⁶and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹"Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

God's Unlimited Dominion (Genesis 1:1)

If our mission is truly rooted in God's mission, then to get our actions right we must start with our God whose rule is unlimited. The familiar opening phrase of Scripture establishes God's dominion: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The creating act of God grounds everything in him—heavens and earth. It also establishes the most fundamental distinction in the universe. God is Creator. All else is creation.

After establishing this unique position of God in the opening phrase, much of the rest of Scripture addresses the struggle of humanity either against this truth or to understand and comprehend it.

Israel's role was to obey and serve this one God of heaven and earth. This task would prove, however, a crucial point of tension in Israel's relationship with neighboring peoples and their local deities. Each group had their own god or gods, and the ancient mindset assumed that conflicts among peoples reflected the relative strength of their gods. In this context, many of the greatest events in Israel's history are part of a learning

process. We see this learning process in action as either Israel or Israel's neighbors/oppressors discovered the true God of creation.

How great is our God? As God said to Isaiah, "I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me. . . . Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none" (Isaiah 44:6, 8).

Since Genesis 3, humanity has struggled to grasp and retain the implications of the greatness of God. We have consistently limited God and revealed a lack of understanding of God's limitless rule and domain. If our God is too small, then we are offering what belongs to God to something or someone else. The name for our attempts to offer what belongs to God to any other person, entity, or thing is idolatry.

Idolatry in the Old Testament (Isaiah 46:5–9)

At its root, idolatry chips away at the distinction between Creator and creation. In the original order of things, humanity was to *worship* God and to serve as a steward in the care and *use* of created things. In idolatry

DO YOU REMEMBER?

Isaiah challenged the exiles, who might have been tempted to idolatry or despair, to "remember" what God had done (Isa. 46:8–9). The call to remember occurs throughout the Old Testament and was a crucial element of following God. For example, when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, finally entering the Promised Land, Joshua told them to take twelve stones from the river to form an altar. When future generations passed that place, the Israelites were to recall the great works of God (Joshua 4).

In both Scripture and life, failures in faith are often failures of memory. When hard times come and the memory of God's greatness and God's work in our lives fades, we are tempted to turn to other things—idols—to fill the gap. We can resist such spiritual amnesia through continued practices of Scripture study and prayer.

In corporate worship, together we sing and study the great acts of God. In addition, Jesus gave us a most profound aid for remembering—the Lord's Supper. "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19).

we reject God as Creator—or attempt to *use* God for our purposes—and we *worship* aspects of creation or the products of our hands.¹

The prophet Isaiah presents a sustained and devastating attack on humankind's idolatrous instincts in chapters 44—46. Beginning in chapter 40, Isaiah spoke of one of the lowest points in Israel's history: the Babylonian exile (597–538 B.C.). In this event, the unthinkable happened. The Southern kingdom of Judah had fallen. Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was leveled. The ark of God was lost from history. Nebuchadnezzar dragged the best and brightest of Judah as captives and exiles to Babylon. We could easily forgive the outside observer who might have assumed this was the last anyone would hear of Israel and their defeated God, *Yahweh*.

Into this situation, Isaiah made some remarkable claims. Rather than viewing the Exile as the defeat of *Yahweh*, Isaiah reminded the people of the greatness of the one God of creation. God had not been defeated, and neither had God's plan been thwarted. Instead, Isaiah presented one of the most profound and sustained descriptions of the greatness of God. God stands over the idols, over the wise, over creation, over political powers, and over history.

Given God's greatness, Isaiah reminded Israel to resist the allure of idolatry surrounding them in Babylon. The temptation would certainly have been strong. It appeared the Babylonians had won the decisive victory and that God's protection and care had failed. The old rules and ways contained in the Torah would not have seemed to apply to their current situation. They were living in a powerful culture that embraced idols. The temptation to join in this worship would have been highly appealing. Idol worship provides the great benefit of a god that is tangible. A statue-god is always there, right where you place it. With idol worship, the (false) hope was that if you make the right sacrifices—in some cultures that even meant child sacrifices—the god would respond with what the worshiper wanted. Idolatry thus provides an illusion of control over the divine—a control that is foreign to the worship of *Yahweh*. In these changed circumstances Israel faced in the Exile, *Yahweh* surely seemed far away, indeed.

In this context, Isaiah leveled his attack on idolatrous practices. In chapter 44 he highlighted the folly and deep irony of creating idols. In 44:9–17 he described the process of chopping down a tree, making a fire with part of the wood, fashioning a god with another piece, and

falling down in worship with the cry, “Deliver me, for you are my god” (Isaiah 44:17).

In chapter 46, Isaiah mocked the Babylonian idols, which not only failed to save, but also required a cart and pack animals to move them. Isaiah 46:2 pictures these idols in the back of a cart, showing the captivity of these powerless gods. In 46:5, God asked the rhetorical question about comparing him to such powerless things.

In an echo of chapter 44, Isaiah 46 again looks at the process of forming idols in another way. Instead of wood, precious gold and silver are taken to the silversmith, who forms them into a shape. The people fall down in worship of the result (Isa. 46:6). I can imagine them struggling to lift the burden onto their shoulders to stagger home with their immobile god. Presumably they consult with their wives about where it would look best in the house, as it certainly was not going to move on its own (Isa. 46:7). Then the family has a crisis and cries out to their statue. The language reflects Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. Elijah stood to the side, mocking their feverish efforts to coax a response with their cries to their so-called god. In the climax of 46:7, Isaiah highlighted the failure of such an idol to deliver—*Yahweh’s* key role in the Old Testament.

These gods are immobile, dependent, silent, and powerless. They stand in stark contrast to *Yahweh* and his works in speaking creation into being, forming a people, and performing great acts of deliverance. The antidote for such idolatrous tendencies comes in Isaiah 46:8–9: “Remember this,” “recall it to mind,” and “remember the former things.” The worship of *Yahweh* is relevant in any situation. No matter how distant God may seem, we are to retain the memories of God’s great acts of deliverance and move forward in confidence of God’s work to come.

Idolatry in the New Testament (Acts 17:24–31)

Idolatry continued in the New Testament, and Paul confronted it directly in the encounter with the philosophers in Athens while on his second missionary journey. Paul observed that Athens was filled with idols. Acts 17:16 reports Paul’s reaction: “his spirit was being provoked within him.” Verse 17 describes Paul’s ministry in Athens as “reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and

in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.” The former—the synagogue—was the setting for his typical ministry practice, but the latter depicts Paul as a first-century Socrates, walking through the marketplace, reasoning with people.

In the course of this activity, Paul encountered representatives of two of the prominent philosophical schools of the ancient world: Epicureans and Stoics. These two groups were very different from each other. Epicureans rejected the old Roman gods. If there was a god, they believed he was too far removed from people to make any kind of difference. The pursuit of pleasure was the main goal of life for them. The Stoics, on the other hand, believed God was everywhere—and reason dominated their view of the universe.²

Paul was not too impressed by Athens in this meeting, and these groups were underwhelmed by Paul. Some dismissed Paul as a “babbler”—an intellectual loafer who knew just enough to get himself in trouble. Others actually took the time to listen to the content of Paul’s message.

Verses 22–31 report Paul’s message. What Paul did serves as a crucial model for anyone seeking to convey the gospel. Paul did not simply proclaim religious jargon, and neither did he berate the Athenians for their religious ignorance. Rather, he took something they understood and used it as a bridge from their culture to the gospel. Paul referred to their shrine, inscribed “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (17:23) and used it as a platform to describe *Yahweh*.

In verse 24, Paul repeated the Genesis 1:1 declaration of God’s unlimited domain. I imagine Paul sweeping his hands toward the Acropolis and other great edifices of Athens with the comment that God “does not

RECOGNIZING THE BIGNESS OF GOD

- Take an honest inventory of your life to identify those things that may be idols for you.
- Make some practical and tangible changes in your time management and your budget to make sure God is over all.
- Commit to regular practices of Scripture study and prayer to enhance your spiritual memory of God’s greatness.

dwel in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). Further, rather than needing or being in some way dependent on our sacrifices, God is the One who provides all things for life (17:25). What God does desire is that we seek him, find him (17:27), and repent (17:30)—thus preparing us for the judgment to come. Verse 29 provides the corrective to idolatrous practices, returning to the picture from Isaiah of the shaping of gold, silver, or stone in creating idols that pale in comparison to the true, living God.

Implications and Actions: Idolatry Today

While citizens of twenty-first century American culture are unlikely to form statues and believe they bear the power of God, we still have our idols. We are just as likely as the exiled Israelites and the Athenian philosophers to offer what belongs to God to someone or something else. As God’s people we must preserve the *bigness* of God in our worship, lives, understanding, and imagination by guarding against idolatry.

Several years ago when leading a study of Isaiah 44—46 in our church, I distributed sheets of paper and asked those present to write down an idol with which our culture struggles. The top three responses were money, materialism/possessions, and television. Other responses were sports, family, pleasure/self-satisfaction, home, job, power, popularity, recreation, and sex.

What are other idols for us? One Bible scholar has suggested that the prime sources of idols lie in things that entice us, things we fear, things we need, and things we trust.³ Our idols may be our occupations and skills, science and technology, political affiliations, patriotism, or trust in our financial status. These may be good things—or even great things. When we take them out of their proper place, however, they take what belongs to God and reduce God’s greatness in our lives and worship.

The Isaiah and Acts passages also provide good examples for us in engaging with idolatry and properly dealing with it. Isaiah was speaking to Israel, God’s people, who should have known better. He directly and even provocatively critiqued the folly of it all. He was seeking to awaken Israel from their slide into idolatrous error. We should be ruthless with ourselves in rooting out our idolatries as believers. In engaging with the Athenians, however, Paul took a very different approach. He started with

3. In light of God's unlimited domain, what areas of life are you holding back from God's rule and lordship?

4. What are some bridges to the gospel for our unchurched neighbors or coworkers?

NOTES

1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), 165.
2. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Press, 1980), 284.
3. Wright, 165–169.