

The Incomparable 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: 07 January 2007

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Well, thanks, Matt, and please keep open that Bible reading and that page, 140, 41, and let's pray.

Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word today. Write it on our hearts that we may believe it and obey it and know that you are alone the God of this universe.

There is no other. Help us, therefore, to obey your statutes and commandments for the glory and honor of your Son. Amen. We'll visit India, as I did last year, and you cannot miss them.

Pictures, statues of Ganesh and other Hindu gods all over the place in India. Or in Thailand, if you go there, then it's Mr. Buddha, who seems to be fairly ubiquitous wherever you go in Thailand.

In the Middle East, it's a little bit different. I was sitting in the main square of Damascus a few months ago, and they don't have Buddhas around the place, as you would imagine, nor Ganesh or other Hindu sculptures or pictures.

[1 : 0 7] But many of the men, even a majority of the men, were playing with their beads. And I believe saying various bits of the Quran as they move each bead around.

It's a bit similar. Of course, there's nothing new in that modern sort of religious practice. Step back two and a half thousand millennium, ancient Greece.

You visit Athens or other ancient cities of Greece, and you go up and you see the ruins of the majestic temples. Often, of course, they've been denuded over the centuries by what was in them.

But you go to the National Archaeological Museum in Athens or other museums in Corinth or Piraeus or wherever, and you see what was there. Absolutely glorious and gorgeous statues of all the gods, all the whole pantheon of the gods of the Greeks.

The same, of course, in ancient Rome as well. And, of course, if you go to the Middle East and you look in the archaeological museums, they may not be quite as glorious in their sculptures, but there are still significant numbers of ancient statues and idols that people would have bowed down to and worshipped.

[2 : 1 8] For Christianity, I guess where we come close are the plethora of paintings in various traditions of Christian practice, the statues of the Pietas and Christ and Mary, the big frescoes in some of the churches, the relics that people bow down to, seek to touch or honour in different ways in different churches, the various rosaries that seem to come so close to the Middle Eastern Islamic beads.

Just today, a new Christian asked me, is it right to pray with a rosary or not? And, of course, in some Christian traditions, the icons, the pictures of saints of Christ of Mary and others.

I remember many years ago now when I was first an ordained minister, we had in our church a mission team visiting us and one of the students stayed with me and he had icons.

And he was in a spare room by the spare bathroom and somebody who had visited me during the week and had used the bathroom was very worried, apparently I later discovered, because they thought that I had icons in my house.

Well, in spiritual things, what is visual is often very significant and often quite powerful for people. And whether it's in India or Thailand or the Middle East, whether it's modern or ancient or in strands of Christian practice, what is visual often dominates the spirituality of people.

[3 : 47] We see it in our own secular society as well, with the infiltration of not just Eastern, but other sorts of spirituality and religious iconography and other things as well.

There's certainly that we see that in the trend for people to say that their religious experience has been heightened by their observations even in nature, let alone with religious statues or drawings or artifacts of different sorts.

It certainly seems to me that in more recent decades, even in the Protestant strand of Christian churches, there is a drifting, if I can use that word, into visual practices, whether it's icons or statues or paintings or even dry ice or other sorts of things in Christian worship and devotion.

The book of Deuteronomy is full of an emphasis on seeing. And we saw that last Sunday night with the emphasis on Moses saying to the people of Israel, the new generation about to inherit the land, see what has happened in the past and the land before you and so on.

But we saw last week that the right seeing is seeing with the eyes of faith, where God is in the equation. So instead of seeing the giants and the enemies in the land, you see that God is greater than them.

[5 : 13] That's the right sort of seeing. But even here in chapter 4, this emphasis on seeing is significant. Chapter 4, verse 3, You have seen for yourselves what the Lord did with regard to the Baal of Peor, or an episode that had only just happened within a year or two of these words being spoken, where the people of Israel, the last of that first generation, had actually committed idolatry and immorality and died out under punishment from God.

All the way through Deuteronomy, there is an emphasis on seeing. But despite that emphasis, the priority is always on hearing.

That is, though there is both the audio and the visual, the audio is of paramount importance. And the visual is subservient to what is to be heard.

Now, Deuteronomy is not alone in that emphasis in the Bible, of course. We're never told really in the Bible what God looks like. It's not what he looks like that matters, it's what he says that matters.

So that it's hearing God, not seeing God, that is of fundamental importance for life now on earth. The seeing God, in a sense, will come when we arrive in the New Jerusalem.

[6 : 33] When you see the visions of God in the Bible, whether it's Isaiah 6 or Ezekiel 1 or even in Revelation 4 and 5, though there are descriptions, it's very hard to describe what God is like when you look at those visions, because it becomes so vague as it approaches the throne or the heart of the vision.

What matters is what God says, not what he looks like. And nowhere is that more evident than at Mount Sinai, where Israel came just a few weeks after their exodus from Egypt, an event which Deuteronomy consistently harks back to, in this chapter, chapter 4, as well.

Mount Sinai, where they came and gathered for several months, were given the Ten Commandments, a variety of other laws, where they built the tabernacle, where they committed a sin with a golden calf, is the supreme audiovisual event, in a way, for ancient Israel in the Old Testament.

In some senses, the event of Mount Sinai makes the sort of audiovisual bonanza of the Commonwealth Games opening or the New Year's Eve fireworks pale into insignificance.

This was a mountain cloaked with cloud, with noise, fire, lightning, thunder, trumpet sounds, etc. A very significant event. But at its heart, and what is most important, is the voice of God speaking.

[8 : 0 0] So in chapter 4, verse 11, You approached and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds.

What a spectacle to see. But, verse 12 says, Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. That's what's important.

All the visual stuff is to lend weight or focus to the audio stuff. God speaking out of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form.

Yes, you saw clouds and lightning and so on. But you don't see God. You hear His voice. And that's what matters.

And it's not just hearing God's voice that matters. It's hearing in order to heed God's voice that matters. So, verse 12 goes on. After speaking that the Lord spoke to you out of the fire, you heard the sound of words, but saw no form.

[9 : 0 0] There was only a voice. And He declared to you His covenant, that is His commandments in effect, which He charged you to observe. That is the Ten Commandments. And He wrote them on two stone tablets.

And the Lord charged me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you're about to cross into and occupy. 40 years on, Moses is speaking the words of Deuteronomy.

They've left Mount Sinai 38 or so years before. Now they've come to the border of the land at the plains of Moab. Israel doesn't need to make a pilgrimage back to Mount Sinai to get another visual representation of what was going on there.

It doesn't need a hajj like the Muslims do to Mecca. What matters is that the voice still speaks. It still speaks through the words of Moses in this book, as it did to this next generation, so it does to us today.

We don't have to go to Israel, to the plains of Moab or Mount Sinai, in order to sort of get an experience of God. Our experience of God is just as significant, just as clear, just as profound from the words of this book as it was for Israel at Mount Sinai all those centuries ago.

[1 0 : 1 7] You see, what matters in spirituality is hearing and heeding God's words. And we are no worse off today in Australia than the people of Israel were hearing Moses or Christians in any other place at any other time in effect have been when they've had the word of God, as we do in the scriptures to us.

One of the struggles of churches in the world, in our society, is how to engage with society. For the liberal strand of the Christian church, their general view would be our engagement of society is to become like society so that it's easy for society to sort of slip over into the church.

The Bible's view is very different from that. The Bible's view is that the people of God will be significantly unlike society, counter-cultural, in all sorts of profound and deep ways.

But in being counter-cultural, it doesn't, in a sense, shun society, but ultimately is to be still an attraction for society. And that's the model that Deuteronomy chapter 4 has in verses 5 to 8.

You see, for us, it's tempting to be ashamed or even perhaps embarrassed at the demands of God ethically on us. And it's tempting when we engage with society somehow to want to play down the Bible's high standards of sexual morality or honesty or generosity or spiritual devotion or whatever it is.

[11 : 55] Sometimes we might cringe a little bit at some of those things that our society feels are so different from the values of our society. We want to do that sometimes to perhaps, in a sense, subconsciously, because we want to be, we want God's standards to be a little bit more acceptable.

But Deuteronomy's view is very different from that. See verses 5 to 8. Just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you're about to enter and occupy.

You must observe them diligently for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, that is the nations, who when they hear all these statutes will say, surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people.

For what other great nation has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to Him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I'm setting before you today?

Well, there is no doubt that in the ancient Near East, the law of the Old Testament was more humane, more just, and more egalitarian than any other ancient law.

[13 : 10] It had deeper demands of compassion, of fairness, and supremely of love for each and every member of the community of God's people than any other legal system of any other religious or political grouping in the ancient world.

The Old Testament, by comparison, had much more restrained levels of punishment and retaliation. It had more limits to vengeance. It had more radical economics to care for the poor and to prevent the rich from exploiting the poor.

It had stricter sexual demands than other countries and legal systems. And it also had greater recognition of the need for obedience to flow from the heart and mind than just to be a sort of external slavishness to some laws and decrees of some king.

associated with that comes the Old Testament promise of blessing to the nation as a whole when it would be obedient. As a result of all that package as a whole, God says through Moses to Israel here in these verses, other nations will in effect marvel not only at Israel but at the God of Israel.

that is the motivation to obedience in these verses is that the nations will come to God. That's always been part of God's plan.

[14 : 47] He's always wanted the nations to come to Him and His whole point of choosing Israel to be distinct from the nations was to attract the nations not to repel them. That is, the whole law and covenant of God to Israel is meant to be in some senses evangelistic.

that is, as the nations will see a people practicing and obeying the laws as a whole they will be attracted to the God who prescribed those laws and that covenant.

The problem for Israel as well as for us is not actually the laws the problem is us and our inability to keep them as fully as we ought.

you think of it and how often in churches or in Christian lives our failure scandalizes God rather than honors Him or attracts the nations to Him.

When we think that the Christian rates of divorce are very similar to the secular society's rates of divorce that is a shameful thing in the sense that it brings scandal to God and brings His name into disrepute.

[15 : 59] If our practices were obedient as they ought to be then society would pay more notice and bring more glory and honor to God.

That's in effect what's being said in this paragraph early in chapter 4 here. It's an encouragement to obedience not just for personal gain and blessing but ultimately for the honor of God amongst all the nations.

it's encouraging us to hold fast to the laws that God gives us and not to water them down or weaken them or sideline them in some way out of embarrassment but rather to uphold the biblical standards that run through the whole package of the covenant law that God gives to His people through old and into New Testament times as well.

That's why these commands are so stringent. See verse 9. Take care and watch yourselves closely so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life.

You see literally that says keep yourselves guard yourselves watch yourselves be vigilant be alert to your level of obedient faith to the covenant commands of God.

[17 : 25] The reason for the strength of language at the beginning of verse 9 is we don't do it naturally. It doesn't come easily to us.

If we don't pay attention for the sake of obeying with faith then we won't obey with faith. We will slip away we'll be disobedient and faithless as indeed Israel's track record both before and after these words were spoken shows.

And as indeed probably if we reflect on our own lives our own track record shows as well. That is we're not naturally geared because we're sinful fallen people to obey God with faith.

Yes God's working in us by His powerful Spirit but we won't be fully perfected till the final day. And so we have responsibility an urgent responsibility to take heed to ourselves to take care to watch ourselves to guard ourselves so that we don't forget and fall away.

Now we might think well I'm never going to forget and I'm never going to forget what God has done. I'm never going to forget that Jesus died on a cross for me. Well spiritual amnesia is a bit more significant than just forgetting facts.

[18 : 45] You see spiritual amnesia forgetfulness is in effect parallel with disobedience. Yes we may well never forget of course the name of the person who hung on a cross for us.

We may never forget why he died for us. That is cognitively but forgetfulness as it's exhorted not to forget here in verse 9 so as neither to forget the things is not about a sort of cognitive amnesia or an early dementia rather it's about spiritual obedience.

If we ignore the commands and covenant promises of God then we are forgetting. Later on we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper together. When Jesus celebrated that the first time with his disciples the night before he was crucified he said do this in remembrance of me.

We do it in remembrance of him. Not because somehow we might forget that Jesus had that meal and died on a cross. We'll probably never forget that the rest of our days.

But the remembrance that Jesus was exhorting was precisely this sort of remembrance that is the remembrance of obedience and faith. Not just a cognitive memory what was his name who died on a cross.

[20 : 02] So that's what Moses is exhorting here. Make sure that your remembrance flows into action of obedient faith. Take heed then.

Be careful. Watch yourselves and guard yourselves that that will happen. In particular forgetfulness leads to idolatry.

And we see that in this paragraph from verse 9 and through into the next paragraph of verse 15 as well. remember what you saw is part of that paragraph but what you saw was not God.

In effect remembering what you saw is that I didn't see God. So when he goes on to say in verse 10 or verse 9 neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen.

He could as well have said what your eyes did not see. What you saw might have been some cloud and thunder or lightning and and so on. But you didn't see God.

[21 : 13] The argument here is remember carefully what the event of Mount Sinai was like. That great audio visual spectacular. You didn't see God.

And so the argument flows from verse 15 since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Take care and watch yourselves closely so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves.

Again notice the emphasis on take care. It's easy to make an idol. It's easy to drift into visual spirituality as my opening illustrations gave some example of that.

Our sinful nature means that we keep slipping from biblical spirituality and we keep wanting to somehow mediate God with pictures or statues or depictions or whatever it is.

Some visual representation. We see that not just in the pagan religions but in all sorts of Christian practices as well. the warning is you did not see any form of God so do not make an idol in any form of anything the verses that follow 16 onwards to 19 because God is not in such a form.

[22 : 43] The verses 16 to 19 pick up the first commandment of the 10 commandments which come in the next chapter and I'll deal with them on Wednesday night in our series. The seriousness of this warning cannot be underestimated.

You and I are probably sitting here thinking I'm hardly likely tonight to go home and take out my I'm not a carpenter as most of you would know so I wouldn't know what tools you actually use to get a bit of wood into the shape of something like an animal.

But you know what I mean. If my garage has none of those tools but some of yours might. I doubt that you're likely to go home and take a screwdriver or whatever it is to carve an animal.

Now if I wanted to carve an animal it's probably a screwdriver that I'd use because I can never tell as my father used to remind me the difference between a screwdriver and whatever the other thing that looked like a screwdriver is but does the job.

The point is though that we're hardly likely to go home and make an image tonight. But the point is that we drift into idolatry and visual representations in all sorts of ways without screwdrivers or whatever the other things are.

[23 : 55] The seriousness of this warning is seen in the fact that several verses are given to what depictions you're not allowed to use. Verses 16 to 19 21 to 23 recount the fact that Moses is not going to enter the land.

So if even Moses isn't going to enter the land because of sin, how much more careful we need to be that we don't fall into the sins that are being proscribed here. And furthermore, verses 25 onwards give quite a bit of detail about what will happen if you do fall into this sort of sin.

Now I haven't got time to go through each of those verses here. My point is the significance of the warning and its length and its content show us that we are in danger and vulnerable here.

We may not think we are, but idolatry rears its head and it tempts us even today, 2,000 years after Jesus Christ and 3,500 years nearly after these words of Moses.

Part of the warning comes in verse 24 to summarise perhaps some of it. The Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God. Not jealousy in the sense of envy, jealousy in the sense of right desire for what exclusively belongs to God.

[25 : 14] It's the jealousy of a husband for his wife. That is for the exclusive right marital relationship between the wife and the husband and vice versa as well.

That's the jealousy of God to us because our relationship to him is to be an exclusive one and not shared with other idols or other gods at all. But note that the Lord your God is a devouring fire.

You see when we commit idolatry we play with fire and we of all people in a very hot and dry summer know how dangerous that is physically speaking, how much more dangerous it is spiritually.

the punishment of exile follows in verses 25 to 28. You'll lose the land. All the blessings that God is promising you, you'll forfeit those if you go down the path of forgetfulness that leads to idolatry.

The irony is in verse 28, you'll end up in exile and there you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell.

[26 : 25] So often in the Bible the punishment fits the crime. Commit idolatry and you'll end up in a place that has idols and you'll serve them and it'll be complete waste because those idols they can't see or hear or eat or smell.

They're inanimate, they're useless, they're impotent. There's scathing sarcasm actually in this verse, verse 28. There's a real mockery in fact of idolatry. Idols are visible, but they're dumb.

Yahweh the God of Israel is invisible, but he speaks and he alone is the God to follow. The last bit of this paragraph verses 29 to 31 almost looks a little bit like a contradiction.

If I can just pick out the final verse of that, verse 31, the Lord your God is a merciful God. And some of the commentaries will say what an odd juxtaposition and in fact contradiction between verses 24 and 31.

God who's a jealous devouring fire, God who's a merciful God. And some of the commentators in their stupidity think that there are different writers who actually contribute these two different ideas.

[27 : 44] It's very sad, I think, when people can't see the very important and consistent biblical theme that God is indeed a jealous God, a devouring fire. At the same time, he is a merciful God.

We saw it last Sunday night when we looked at chapter 1, where we saw that, yes, God does bring punishment that is right and severe on ancient Israel, but his mercy means that his covenant promises still stand and the next generation will enter the land.

And of course, the theme of God's devouring fire, jealousy or wrath and God's mercy culminate in their perfect union on Good Friday, on the cross of Christ, where wrath and mercy meet at Calvary.

It's not a contradiction for God to be a jealous God and a merciful God. Indeed, for him to be both and both fully and consistently and at the same time actually exposes the depths of God's heart to us, in the deepest place really, in the whole of history.

Why is it that people tend towards idolatry? I suspect there are a number of reasons. One is we want control. You see, idols are stupid.

[29 : 09] We can carry them around, we can put them where we want, we can hide them away when we don't want them. They're in one sense under our control, even if we pretend that they're not. There's a sense in which we're in control.

And that's related, I think, to the main reason why we drift into idolatry. We do it because we want to escape the ethical rigor of God's commands.

That's why I think there is so much experientialism in modern Christianity, that spirituality is seeking experience and visual experience because it actually wants to be deaf to God's voice.

It doesn't like God's authority and his ethical authority over us. And that's why ancient Israel drifted. It shunned God's voice because it didn't want to obey and uphold his ethical standards.

But true spirituality is always ethical. It's not an escape from ethics. Idolatry is the escape from ethics. And the path of idolatry is a foolish one, whether ancient or modern.

[30 : 19] Yes, we may not go home and place all our little statues on a mantelpiece and bow down to them, but our vulnerability to idolatry is just as significant, whether it's the idolatry of money or houses or cars or clothes or families or jobs or whatever it is, most of which is visual in some form or other anyway.

In order to hammer home this point, Moses raises some profound rhetorical questions in verses 32 onwards. It balances the rhetorical questions of verses 7 and 8 at the beginning of this section and in a sense it brings it to its climax and close.

The audience is invited to do a cosmic research project. It's invited to research the extremes of time and space.

to the beginning and the end of time, to the highest point of heaven, to the lowest point of earth. For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth.

Ask from one end of heaven to the other, that's the space. Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of?

[31 : 33] That's the basic question. What is this thing so great that that verse describes? The next two questions are the subsections of it.

Has any people ever heard the voice of a God speaking out of afar as you have heard and lived? And secondly, has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation by trial signs, wonders, war, mighty hand, outstretched arm, terrifying displays of power as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

By phrasing it as rhetorical questions, Moses is expressing his absolute certainty and confidence that there is no other God, nothing else like this, nothing else comes anywhere near matching what God has done both in speaking and in saving the two events going together.

By using rhetorical questions, the answer begged is no, there is nothing else. like this, what God has done in speaking and saving Israel or speaking to and saving Israel from Egypt is unprecedented, unparalleled, unequalled in place or time, anywhere or anytime.

thing is no, no one else has done that. No other God has come anywhere near doing what God has done.

[33 : 01] Verse 35 then draws a conclusion from that as does verse 36 with it. To you it was shown literally you were caused to see and that balances in verse 36 from God caused you to see this.

God caused you to hear this. That's the great thing that verse 32 was asking about. Which verses 33 and 34 explain a bit more fully. You didn't see God.

But you saw his actions. You heard his voice. That's never ever happened in history. Neither God has come anywhere near doing that.

And so therefore the climax is drawn in verses 39 and 40. Echoing verse 35. There is no other. Acknowledge today and take to heart.

That the Lord is God in heaven and above. In heaven above and on the earth beneath. There is no other. He's unique. Incomparable.

[34 : 27] And whilst it's not totally a philosophical statement of monotheism. In effect it practically is. There is no other God. Other nations will worship gods and carve gods and idols.

But they're nothing. They don't hear or see or smell or eat. They are nothings. Actually is often how the Bible describes them literally. There is only one God.

There is no other. There is no other. He is incomparable. He is unique. And therefore. Verse 40. Keep his statutes and commandments.

That I'm commanding you today. That is. Keep the words that you hear. Because the audio. Takes precedence over the visual. Hearing.

Takes priority. Over seeing. And then. And then. Only then. Will as verses 5 to 8 said. The nations also marvel.

[35 : 28] And see. That God is God. And there is no other. So let us pray. That we will acknowledge. And take to heart.

What Moses exhorts of ancient Israel. Lord our God. Write this your word in our heart. That we may hear it.

Heed it. Believe it. And obey it. That we may acknowledge. In both word and deed. That you alone are God.

There is no other. And as we your people. Heed your word. In your mercy Lord God. Bring the nations to see you.

To acknowledge you. As the one true God. Amen. Well let's sing.

[36 : 28] As.