

# Is your God too small?

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Preacher: Bob Akroyd

[ 0 : 0 0 ] J.B. Phillips, one of the great translators of the Bible in the 20th century, wrote a small book in the 50s entitled, *Your God is Too Small*. And he opened that book with this observation, we can hardly expect to escape a sense of futility and frustration until we begin to see what he is like and what his purposes are. God will inevitably appear to disappoint the man or woman who is attempting to use him as a convenience, a prop, or a comfort for his own plans. God has never been known to disappoint the person who is sincerely wanting to cooperate with his own purposes.

So my question to you this morning is, is your God too small? And the answer has to be yes, because whatever your estimation and whatever my estimation of God is, by definition, it is too small. Our estimation, our knowledge, our awareness, our appreciation is inadequate, because it is God that we are considering. There are examples throughout the history of the church of those whom God has endowed with great intellects. In the 17th century in Oxford, one of those big minds was John Owen. And John Owen put it this way, we speak much of God. The truth is that we know very little of him. We know so little of God because it is God thus to be known. God is so great. God is so majestic. God is so glorious that this subject is so big that whatever our estimation of him is by definition inadequate, insufficient. I'd like to just make a few observations on the passage Isaiah 6.

We'll look briefly at Isaiah 52, 53. And then we'll consider some of the data in the New Testament. Because the Bible is a book of 66 books. It was composed roughly over a period of 1,500 years, 1,600 years. And yet there is a continuity and a coherence from beginning to end, from old to new.

The themes that are introduced are developed and applied. So as you read this book, this book holds together. I want to notice first that God is great in his glory. Chapter 6 of Isaiah, in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and exalted, seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. God is great in his glory. And I don't think it's a coincidence. I don't think that Isaiah is just giving us a date here. He is. 738, give or take, is the date of Uzziah's death. So we have a point in time when this encounter occurred. But I think Isaiah is doing something more, or rather God through Isaiah is doing something more. Uzziah died. King Uzziah died. Isaiah saw the Lord. Now, in Judah, the history of Judah, remember we have the northern kingdom of Israel, we have the southern kingdom of Judah. The kingdom has been divided into two parts. This is a golden age of Judah. This is, this is the going is good, folks. Politically, strong, stable. Economically, vital. Militarily, secure. So Uzziah had a long and a prosperous reign, and yet that reign came to an end. So this golden age came to an end. Now, in the ancient Near East,

Uzziah was a big deal. I'm not going to speak on your behalf, but I can go weeks, even months, without thinking of King Uzziah. You know, he's a footnote in history. He was significant in the 7th century, 8th century BC, but he's insignificant. He's a footnote today. But what do we see? We see the Lord. And the Lord is not finite. The Lord is not limited. The Lord has no beginning. The Lord has no end. And we see him in his glory. And we're told that the Lord, it's not that he filled the temple.

[ 4 : 5 7 ] We're not told that his robe filled the temple. But we're told that the train of his robe, or in some translations, the hem of his robe filled the temple. So God is so big. It's not that he fills the space.

It's not that his robe, his outer garment fills the space. But the very hem of his garment fills the space. One of my tasks this week, I had a pair of trousers. And the hem had come out. You know what the hem is. It's this little part at the end of the trousers. The hem comes out. I should have the ability of sewing a hem. I don't. I take it to Stitches and Brunsfield. My friend will return those trousers in a week with the hem sewn. But it's a small part of the trousers. It's the very bottom of the trousers. Almost insignificant. This very hem of the robe fills this huge space. Isaiah has this encounter with the greatness of God in his glory. And if the vision wasn't enough, the angelic chorus would seal the deal. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.

Not only does the hem of his robe fill the temple, the whole earth is filled with his glory. God is majestic. He's high. He's lifted up. God is great in his majesty. Great in his glory.

The second observation comes from that angelic chorus that I just read is that God is great in his holiness. The idea of holy is something which is set apart. Set apart from and set apart for.

So if you're a Christian, you are a holy person. You are set apart from this world and you are set apart for God. That's one of the definitions of a Christian. You are a holy person. You're set apart from the world and you are set apart for God and for his service. If you know the scenes of the Old Testament, again, one of the very vivid scenes, Belshazzar's feast in Daniel chapter 5. Remember, there was writing on the wall, quite a dramatic scene. But the key in that story is that Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, is throwing a party. And Belshazzar says, we're not going to use the ordinary glasses. We've got some goblets. We brought them from Jerusalem. We brought them from the temple of God. They'd be perfect to use in our party. So Belshazzar wanted to impress his nobles, his wives, his concubines. And they began to drink and to make toasts with these goblets to gods of gold, silver, bronze, wood, and stone. Mistake. Belshazzar, that was a mistake. That's something you shouldn't have done. These goblets were holy. They were set apart for God. They were not for your party. And just like goblets and people are set apart, God is a holy God. He is set apart from this world. He is the creator of the world. He's the creator of us. And he's distinct from and separate from the world that he has created. He's not just part of it. He is set apart wholly. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.

[ 8 : 35 ] I mean, we could spend all of our time on that little phrase there. Whenever the Bible repeats something, the repetition is for a purpose. Now, as a teacher, sometimes I set an essay, 2,000 words on, and I give a topic. Now, you can tell pretty easily when somebody has 1,800 words and they fill out the 200, you know, they're repeating themselves or, you know, fluffing it. I can, I understand that.

God is not adding extra words because he doesn't have anything else to say. When the angels say, holy, holy, holy, it is a way of emphasizing and underscoring and highlighting this truth.

Just like when the Lord Jesus says, verily, verily, I say to you, or literally, amen, amen, I say to you. He's saying, you can take my word to the bank. You can trust what I say, completely reliable, completely trustworthy. So, when there's repetition, the repetition is always for a reason.

And notice here one of the many titles that we have, the Lord Almighty. Lord is the personal name of God. Almighty emphasizes that he has all power, all authority. What he says goes, what he wants to do? What happens? He is not contingent. He is not dependent. He is not reliant. You see, you and I are contingent, reliant, and dependent. We need oxygen, for example. We are dependent upon a supply of oxygen. We are dependent upon water and upon food. God is not a contingent being. He requires nothing.

He needs nothing. He needs nothing. He is completely self-sufficient in and of himself. He doesn't need us. He doesn't need the world. He doesn't need the universe. Whatever he does, he does graciously, not dependently. He has no limits, and he has all power and all authority. And isn't that an encouragement?

[ 10 : 48 ] Because when we pray, we are speaking to the one who has all authority and power, who is all wise, all good, all holy, all great. So he is both willing to help, and he is able to help. He has the authority. He has the power. And what he says goes. God is great in his glory. God is great in his holiness. And God is great in redemption. What I love is that so often in the Old Testament, we have picture. We have a picture that's painted that describes the gospel so vividly. Because when we have this encounter, right, you have Isaiah going to the temple. Whatever he expected, his expectations were blown out of the water.

He sees the Lord high and lifted up. He hears the angelic chorus. He doesn't step back and say, wow, this is wonderful. This is great. I never expected this. No. What is his reaction? Because not only do you have the angelic chorus, you have the doorpost and the threshold shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. Woe to me. Woe to me. I am undone. I am in trouble. This is not good news for me. Why? I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty, the Holy One, and I'm not holy. I am not a holy person. We are not a holy people.

And I have encountered the Holy One with my eyes. Therefore, I am in trouble. I am ruined. I am undone. That is a vision or a picture of the problem. When we come into the presence of the Almighty God, who is great and holy and good and awesome, we are not great and holy and good and awesome.

We are ruined. We are undone. And in this particular case, Isaiah emphasizes lips. Isaiah is a preacher, a prophet, a spokesman, and he's very much aware that as a spokesman, the organ of his speech, his lips, that he is unclean. And he represents a people that are equally unclean.

So the problem is ours, but notice the solution is God's. That's why this picture is so vivid and so true because the problem is ours and the solution is God. Isaiah doesn't suggest a problem. Isaiah doesn't solve the problem. All Isaiah can do is recognize the problem. Then one of the seraphim, one of these angelic creatures, flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it, he touched my mouth and said, see, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for. The motion is from the altar to the person. That's the gospel, from God to us.

[ 14 : 08 ] It is not what we do for God. It is not our commitment to God. It is not our resolutions to God. It is not our recognition of sin. None of that. The gospel, the good news, the atonement is what God does for us and what only God can do for us. Isaiah says, I've got unclean lips, God, and I live among a people who are unclean. Their lips are unclean too. And God says, I've taken away your sin. Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for. As an educator, I'm reminded of the three R's.

We're told that, particularly in primary education, the three R's are reading, writing, and arithmetic. Now, I know writing has a W and arithmetic really begins with an A, but it's a handy saying, reading, writing, and arithmetic. These are the three R's of education. One of the great preachers of the 19th century was a man called D.L. Moody, a great evangelist. And Moody had this ability of summarizing the gospel quite memorably. And he says there are three R's of the gospel. The first R is that we are ruined. Same language as Isaiah 6. Ruined by the fall. Sin has messed up everything, and sin has messed up everyone. We are ruined. Secondly, we are redeemed. Redemption, God is great in redemption.

You see, redemption is the payment of a price. We are redeemed now by the blood. And Moody went on to say this. He said, there is nothing, my friends, that brings out the love of God like the cross of Christ. It tells of the breadth, length, height, depth of his love. If you want to know how much God loves you, you must go to Calvary to find out. And the final of those three R's was regenerated by the Spirit. Every dead soul brought to life must be brought to life by the power of the Spirit. The idea of educating people into the kingdom of God is not the way. You may educate them and educate them, but they will be as far from conversion as ever. The Holy Spirit must quicken. We are ruined by the fall, we are redeemed by the blood, and we are regenerated by the Spirit. God is a redeeming God. Now, some of the older people here among us will remember that when you used to buy iron brew or other soft drinks, you can maybe still do this, you would pay for the iron brew, 59p, let's say, but you would be charged 79p because there was a 20p deposit on this bottle. Because the vendor, the shopkeeper, wanted the bottle back and they would send the bottles back and they would come, you know, you get the idea.

So when you drank your iron brew or your red cola, you didn't throw the bottle away. You took it back to the shop where you bought it and they gave you 20p. They paid you for the bottle back. That's what we call redemption. They redeemed the bottle, the payment of a price to get something. Now, when we're looking at the gospel, the payment of a price was a big payment and a big price. You see, your sin and my sin, my guilt, my shame, your guilt, your shame, required a price to be paid. And that price was the life and the death of Jesus. He died, his blood was shed so that your sin and your guilt could be atoned for. That's why our God is great in redemption, great in his glory, great in his holiness, and great in his redemption. It's just remarkable, isn't it? What God has done. The problem is ours, but the solution is his and his only. There's no joint effort here. There's no cooperation here. There's no kind of, okay, God, you'll do this and I'll do that. No, absolutely. Isaiah has nothing to offer and we have nothing to offer. We come to God with empty hands. We come to God with guilt. We come to God with sin.

He alone saves. He alone redeems. He alone sets free and he alone can make us alive. So this is the great God. The God who we underestimate. The God who we undervalue. The God who is far greater than we could ever imagine. Now in this greatness, we come to verse 8. And this is quite remarkable. Verse 8 says, then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send and who will go for us?

[ 19 : 04 ] It doesn't make sense. God is great. He's almighty. He's holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is filled with his glory. And he says, I am sending ordinary people. I need someone to go for me. I need someone who'll speak. I need someone who'll serve. I need someone who'll go, who'll go. Isaiah said, here I am, send me. The great God who is great in glory, great in holiness, and great in redemption, he uses ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary purposes. Why he does that, I do not know.

But I think when he uses ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results, the obvious conclusion must be, it's him. It's his strength, not my strength. It's his wisdom, not our wisdom. It's his grace. It's his power. It's his authority. So you have the great God who says, I'm going to use an ordinary person to speak to speak to this people. And God continues to use ordinary people. I mentioned D.L. Moody a moment ago. D.L. Moody was educated to the fourth grade, which P4 at age 10 in the United States. He had a very, to begin with, he had a very limited ability to read, a very limited ability to pronounce difficult words.

And yet he had a passion. He said, I have one passion. I want to serve Jesus Christ. I want to tell people about him. Now, if you have a passion to serve God, if you have a passion to make Jesus known, watch out.

Because God can take an ordinary person like you and do extraordinary things through you. So this ordinary man, D.L. Moody, and one of his great quotes was, can God use ordinary people? And his answer was, of course. Because most of us are ordinary. There are very few extraordinary people. And just to round out the picture, the ordinary D.L. Moody wasn't well-educated, didn't know the Bible to begin with, poor pronunciation, somewhat rough habits. By the end of his life in 1899, God had used him to preach in person to 100 million people. That's not bad. Not bad for an ordinary person. Not bad for an uneducated person. What does that say about D.L. Moody? Not much.

What does it say about God? Quite a bit. God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary purposes. Now, before I close, I want to just highlight a few things here. Because we could stop with Isaiah 6, and we'd be quite content to stop with Isaiah 6. There's plenty here for our consideration. But I want you to notice those opening, that opening verse of Isaiah 6, in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and exalted, seated on a throne. Turn with me for just a moment to Isaiah chapter 52 and verse 13. This is the beginning verse of the four servant songs.

[ 22 : 23 ] In the Bible, the chapter numbers and the verse numbers were added many years later. So, the 53 in Isaiah 53 is not well placed, because it separates the fourth and final servant song. The fourth servant song begins at 52.13. It doesn't begin at 53.1. Because if you look at 52.13, see, my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Interesting.

The same language of 6.1 and 52.13, identical. Exalted, highly lifted up. But you say, as I read the rest of that song, it doesn't seem like he is exalted, it doesn't appear as if he's lifted up. Why? Because he is pierced. He is crushed. He has been beaten. He is suffering. There's nothing attractive about him.

And you would not necessarily put 52, 53, and 6 together. These are two different images. Here's the high and exalted one in chapter 6. And here is the low and humble one in 52, 53. But no, the same language, the same honor is given to them both. So that, in some profound way, the Lord who is high and exalted in chapter 6 of Isaiah is the same Lord who is high and exalted in his suffering, in his sacrifice, in his being pierced and crushed and giving his life as a ransom, that same honor and that same glory is afforded to the same character. He is one in the same.

Now, you don't just have the internal evidence of those two chapters in Isaiah, but when we turn to the New Testament, when we turn to the New Testament, the most quoted book of the Bible, Old Testament book in the New Testament is the book of Psalms. That's not surprising. There's 150 Psalms. So it's not surprising that the biggest Old Testament book is the biggest, most frequently quoted book in the New Testament. But the second most quoted book was the book of Isaiah. And when you look at the four gospel writers, Matthew and Mark and Luke and John, each of those gospel writers quotes Isaiah chapter 6 and Isaiah chapter 52, 53 as fulfilled in Jesus.

I mentioned earlier in my time of prayer, this could be a coincidence, each of the four gospel writers quoting the same two portions of Isaiah. I don't think it's a coincidence. I think each of the four gospel writers gets that Isaiah 6 is Jesus and gets that Isaiah 52, 53 is Jesus, that his glory, his honor, and his majesty, and his suffering, and his sacrifice, and his death are equally worthy of our praise, glory, and honor. So just to prove the point, if you look at Matthew, we'll just choose Matthew because it's most obvious in Matthew because Matthew name checks Isaiah. If you look at Matthew chapter 8, so Matthew chapter 8 at verse 14, when Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all who were ill. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah.

[ 26 : 18 ] He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases. Isaiah 52, or 53 in this case. But again, here's an insight into hermeneutics, how we read the Bible. If the New Testament quotes a portion of an Old Testament song or Old Testament chapter scene, it's not just the verse that's being quoted, but it's the whole scene that's being quoted. So if I were to just say offhand that we will fight on the beaches, you might think, okay, right, I've heard that before. Right, Churchill, House of Commons, 1940, we will fight on the beaches, on the landing feet, you know, we will never surrender.

If I were to say, you know, just kind of as an illusion, I have a dream. You might, okay, I've heard that before, 1963, summer, Martin Luther King, Lincoln Memorial, I have a dream. Right? So that little reference references a speech. It references a scene. So what Matthew is doing is he's referencing a portion of Isaiah 53 and saying, that's Jesus. The whole servant song is Jesus. The whole four servant songs are Jesus. And then you move a few chapters ahead in chapter 13, Matthew 13 at verse 10.

The disciples came to him and asked, why do you speak to the people in parables? People just weren't getting it. Right? He replied, because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 13 verse 11. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

This is why I speak to them in parables. Though seeing, they do not see. Though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. You will ever be hearing, but never understanding. You will be ever seeing, but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused.

They hardly hear with their eyes. They have closed their ears. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them. So, Matthew is quoting from the second half of chapter 6, Isaiah, but he's quoting the whole scene. The high and lifted up one, holy, holy, holy, glory, redemption, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John quotes Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53. Either it's an unusual coincidence, or they are all saying with one accord God that God that you view in Isaiah chapter 6, and the suffering servant you see in 52-53 is none other than Jesus Christ. That's what Paul described his ministry. We preach Christ crucified. That's the source of our hope. That's the source of our comfort. The one who is high and lifted up has become low.

[ 29 : 14 ] The one who is majestic has suffered. Why? So that we might be a people whose guilt has been atoned for. That we might be a people who are forgiven, who have been redeemed, who have been ransomed, who have been renewed, who have been restored. J.B. Phillips, in his book, *Your God is Too Small*, put it this way. He said, many people who have a vague, childish affection for a half-remembered Jesus have never used their adult critical faculties on the matter at all. They hardly seem to see the paramount importance of his claim to be God. Yet if for one moment we imagine the claim to be true, the mind almost reels at its significance. Jesus Christ is God. Jesus is worthy of all honor because he's God. Jesus is full of glory because he is God. Jesus is God and he does the work of God. And Jesus does all things well. So this morning we have a vision of the one who is high and lifted up and the one who was suffering. And this Jesus is the Jesus who has come to seek and to save the lost. This is the

Jesus who has come to pay a price to set you and me free. This has nothing to do with us. This has everything to do with him. And because he is who he is, we can place our lives in his hand. We can place this church in his hand. We can place this city in his hand, this nation, this world, because he is almighty, all-powerful, all-glorious, all-holy, and what he purposes and plans, he achieves, not 99% of the time, but 100% of the time. And he uses people like us to achieve his perfect, his powerful plan.

Amen. And may God bless his word to us. Let's pray. Father,