

July 2, 2006

Sermon: *Bold Print In The Final Chapter*
Scripture: II Chronicles 36:15-23
Speaker: Pastor Dick High

Introduction: Today we find ourselves between two sermon series. Last week Pastor Mike concluded our consideration of Revelation chapter 2 and 3. He did so by presenting an eighth letter – to the angel of the First Free church family in Wichita. I would encourage you to go to our church website to listen to or read that message again. Please pray for our elders as they strategize in the coming weeks about the implementation of that message’s challenge to our church family.

Next week Pastor Mike returns to the pulpit and begins a series on “tough questions” that believers can face as we journey through life. Please use the bulletin insert to invite others to join us in seeking God’s counsel for whenever we face these questions.

It is not my intent today to connect with either of those series. Rather, we will use this time to walk through a passage of Scripture that allow us a concentrated look at significant aspects of God’s character. While God should always be our focus when we gather for worship, I believe it is valuable on occasion to specifically state and pursue that focus. My desire today is that our worship is enhanced as we deliberately direct our attention to God.

So I begin with a question; “How big is God?” Obviously the answer is not something that is measurable in terms of size. There is no valid measurement for that which is infinite. And even if we can appropriately find a way to use the term “size” in reference to God, there would be at least two aspects to any answer. First, there is a factual answer. God is eternal, infinite, all-knowing, etc. That is Biblically stated truth. But secondly there is what I will call an experiential answer. The question is that case is “How big is our God?” That question is asking how much we allow God to really impact our life. Or it could be asked in this way. What is our level of understanding of God’s character and how extensively is that truth woven into the fabric of our life? How does that truth affect how we think and live?

Consider these words from J. B. Phillips. *We shall never want to serve God in our real and secret hearts if He looms in our subconscious mind as an arbitrary Dictator or Spoil-sport, or one who takes advantage of His position to make us poor mortals feel guilty and afraid. We have not only to be impressed by the “size” and unlimited power of God, we have to be moved to genuine admiration, respect, and affection, if we are ever to worship Him.*

As we progress through this morning’s sermon please keep in the back of your mind these two questions. “How great is my God?” “What impact does that have in my life?”

Initial Background

The passage of Scripture that I invite us to open to this morning is the last half of the final chapter of II Chronicles. It would be my suspicion that this is an area of Scripture that many of us don’t often read. So let me give some background information. The first half of the chapter is primarily historical. It covers over 22 years. It records the end of a downward moral and national spiral for the southern kingdom of Israel. As we move into the second half of the chapter we are confronted with the reality of God’s judgment. Yet, in that context we are also given a concentrated look at significant aspects of God’s character. As you read through these verses those aspects of God’s character stand out as if they were recorded in bold print! They capture our attention. They throw needed perspective into the midst of what was a chaotic time. Because there are a

number of aspects of God's character that are observable here we will need to move at good pace through the passage.

Snapshots Of God's Character

Let's begin with the first half of verse 15. The aspect of God's character that is emphasized here is His faithfulness (or His persistence). *The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again...* Even as the downward moral spiral progressed God chose to continue to speak to His people. He did so "again and again," over and over, repeatedly. In the words of II Timothy 2:13, *if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.* Using personal messengers who spoke on His behalf, God continued to challenge His people about their sin and need for repentance, to urge their response of obedience and the pursuit of holiness, and to warn them of impending judgment. God is great in His faithfulness and persistence.

Let's take a few moments to expand that statement. In Psalm 32 David records his testimony to God's faithfulness and persistence in convicting him of sin. In Acts 26 Paul acknowledges God's persistence in seeking to draw Paul into relationship with Himself, even though Paul acknowledges that he "kicked against the goads." In I Thessalonians 5:19 we are warned against quenching the work of the Spirit of God in our lives. And in Ephesians 4:30 we are challenged to not grieve the Holy Spirit. These latter two passages imply God's faithfulness in His continual effort to draw us to regular obedience to Him. His persistence is clearly demonstrated in the words of Christ recorded in Luke 13:34. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing!*

This morning I invite us to respond to the faithfulness and persistence of God in one (or all) of four ways. First, to acknowledge and confess to God our stubbornness, lack of interest, and failure to listen. Second, to pray for and pursue active listening and obedience to God's word. Third, to accept repetition. Have you ever considered how often God repeats Himself? In our sinfulness we may respond that such repetition is boring! If that is our conclusion then we have seriously missed the point. God repeats Himself for our sake because we regularly demonstrate that we do not listen to and obey His word. That repetition comes from and evidences His faithfulness. Finally, it is important that we thank God that He persists in seeking to draw people to relationship with Himself and to live in active obedience before Him.

Let's move on to the second half of verse 15. A parallel aspect of God's character is His mercy. The words written here reveal one motivation behind God's faithfulness; *...because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place.* The word "pity" expresses the desire to have compassion on someone and thus spare them from impending difficulty. In Exodus 2 it describes the response of Pharaoh's daughter upon seeing the infant Moses along the Nile River. History would suggest that such a response may well have been out of character for her. But it is always God's character to be merciful. One demonstration of God's mercy can be observed in His patience. I Peter 3:20 states that He, *waited patiently in the days of Noah.* II Peter 3:9 tells us that *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

I suggest that we respond to this truth about God's mercy by expressing to Him our praise and thanksgiving for the greatness of His mercy. How great is God's mercy? Ephesians 2:4 describes God as one who is rich in mercy. I Peter 1:3 states that, *In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* The Message translation of Lamentations 3:22-23 speaks of God's mercy in these words; *God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness!*

Beyond such praise we also need to ask God to help us grasp anew how much sin grieves His heart. There is the danger that we would presume upon His mercy. We won't take the time today to read the entire chapter, but Hosea 11 allows us a look at the agony that God's heart of mercy experiences at times over His people. The chapter begins with these words: *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.* The chapter then continues to describe the unfaithfulness of God's people, even in the face of impending judgment. In verse 8 we're given a glimpse into God's heart as things continue. *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?* And later in that verse God says, *My heart is changed within me; **all my compassion is aroused.*** May God keep us from confusing or mistaking His mercy as weakness, lack of concern, or as an inconsistent righteousness.

As we continue uncovering the aspects of God's character found in II Chronicles 36, it is important to remind ourselves that we must not look at the individual aspects in isolation from the others. That reminder is very evident by what is addressed in verse 16 (especially as an immediate follow up to verse 15). In verse 16 we can observe His justice, especially through the consistency with which He keeps His word. As we consider this aspect of His character we need to remember that it is equally great! The people's response to God's faithfulness and mercy is summarized in three words; "mocked," "despised," and "scoffed." Together those words convey that God's people responded to His message and messengers with active contempt. They viewed the message as something of little worth, value, or substance! God's ultimate response was one of wrath. He did not spare them. His perfect justice was enacted. The people of God knew His word, His commands. They ignored His word. They experienced consequences for that response. The repeated testimony of Scripture is that God always keeps His word, regardless if that is a promise of blessing or judgment.

A specific illustration of God's unchangeable commitment to His word is found in verse 21. The Levitical law (Leviticus 25) established a seven year cycle for tillage of the ground. The land was to lie idle every seventh year. This regulation was neglected with great frequency over seven centuries. While there is little direct evidence of any immediate consequence, God eventually kept His word. The land lay idle through seventy years of captivity! God is consistent in taking His word seriously and He is just in responding, in wrath, to disobedience.

Ten days ago I was one of seven staff and volunteers who participated with 31 Middle School Students in four days of camp. One of the messages we heard was drawn from Matthew 19:16ff. Two distinct points linger in my mind following that sermon. First, Christ did not come to make bad people good. Second, he came to made dead people alive! That is necessary because apart from Christ, we are spiritually dead, under the wrath of God! According to Ephesians 2:3, *we were by nature objects of wrath.* That confirms what is stated in the final verse of John 3 (36). *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.* These verses are a pointed reminder to me that God is fully justified in every expression of His wrath. That does not negate His faithfulness or mercy. It is not so much a matter of balance as it is of perfection. All aspects of His character are perfect. There is a perfect interface or harmony throughout all aspects of His character.

As I consider a response to this reality of God's character, these thoughts come to mind. First, I need to soberly acknowledge how quickly I can begin to minimize God's word. I might protest that I don't mock or scoff at God's word. But the reality is that I take it far too lightly. How that contrasts to Christ's word in Matthew 5:18. *I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.* May we ask God to help us be like the people in Nehemiah 8 who at the mere opening of God's word stood, both in respect of and anticipation of hearing and obeying what it said.

Before we encounter another aspect of God's character, let's take a moment to restate the question with which we began today. "How great is our God?" II Chronicles 36 leads us to answer that He is great in His faithfulness, He is great in His mercy, and He is great in His justice. He is each of those and all of those in continual perfection. Certainly a response of "WOW" is appropriate! In the words of Rich Mullins, "Our God is an awesome God..."

Those words actually lead us to the next aspect of God's character that is found in II Chronicles 36; His sovereignty. We find that in verse 17. The verse begins and ends with statements about God's sovereignty. To the unobservant eye the events described in this verse may convey no more than military or historical fact. However, the verse twice states God's active involvement in, and direction and oversight of these events; "He brought" and "God handed."

I want to present four quotes from different authors that help me begin to get my mind around this astounding aspect of God's character.

- First, consider these words from Arthur Pink. *Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent: God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him.*
- The second quote is from A. W. Tozer. *God's sovereignty is the attribute by which He rules His entire creation, and to be sovereign God must be all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely free. ...He must be free to do whatever He wills to do anywhere at any time to carry out His eternal purpose in every single detail without interference.*
- The third quote is from R. T. France. *This is no easy teaching to accept. It takes a very big and a very trusting conception of God to see His hand behind the destruction of your own nation, especially when perpetrated by a godless and wicked nation. It is not by questioning the wisdom of God, but by trust in His sovereignty and His justice, that the righteous shall live (Habakkuk 2:4).*
- A final quote comes from the pen of J. I. Packer. *The central truth which Daniel taught Nebuchadnezzar in chapters 2 and 4, and of which he reminded Belshazzar in chapter 5, and which Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged in chapter 4, and which Darius confessed in chapter 6, and which was the basis of Daniel's prayers in chapters 2 and 9, and of his confidence in defying authority in chapters 1 and 6, and of his friends' confidence in defying authority in chapter 3, and which formed the staple substance of all the disclosures which God made to Daniel is chapters 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, and 11-12, is the truth that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men."*

I can only respond by again saying WOW!!!! Who needs Fourth of July fireworks?! I can only respond in the words of Romans 11:33-36. *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

Two very practical applications of God's sovereignty are encapsulated in the "relax" (see Psalm 37:7) and in the word "rest" (Psalm 4:8 – *I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.*) As we understand, believe in, and act upon the truth of God's sovereignty, it should have that impact in our life.

Quickly let's return to II Chronicles 36. I want to identify one other aspect of God's character. He is a God of restoration. It is a very common feature of Old Testament writing to place conversation about judgment in close proximity with discussion about restoration. Neither minimizes the other aspect of God's character. Both exist in completeness and perfection within God's being.

The Scriptures present us with multiple examples of people who have experienced God's restoration. Here are just a few of those examples. Peter, after having publicly denied relationship with Christ on three occasions. David, after having committed adultery and murder. Nebuchadnezzar, after his prideful boasting and statements of self-sufficiency, followed by God's active humbling. Job, after experiencing irretrievable loss. And Joseph, after being sold into slavery by his jealous and angry brothers.

There are two more names that I want to add to this list; mine and yours! If you have come to the point in your life of professed faith in Christ, your name belongs on this list. II Corinthians 5:17 states, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* Through Christ God has restored you (and me) to relationship with Himself.

Is your heart in need of that restoration today? Do you hear the voice of the great and infinite God inviting you to humbly and honestly confess to Him your need of restoration? I invite you to accept God's gift of forgiveness of all your sins through faith in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. How appropriate that we respond to that reality with praise, worship, and rejoicing.

Closing Reflections

There are two concluding thoughts with which I want to finish today.

- First, it is the believer's privilege to live in constant relationship with this great God! That is a truth that we need to actively grasp with regularity. That is a truth that should stimulate our praise, worship, and rejoicing.
- Second, I extend this invitation: Let's make it our prayer for one another and ourselves that we may know God better (and better). Here is how such a prayer is stated in Ephesians 1:15-17. *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*