



TRANSFORMATIONS, PART III TRANSFORMING MY UNIVERSE

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40. Am I now officially a middle aged man? Of all my birthdays, I ask you, why did it have to be this one that fell on a Sunday? I don't need the public abuse and all the attention given to how old I'm getting. Actually, it doesn't feel nearly as old as it used to sound. I've been told that 40 is the new 30, so I'm going with that.

It's definitely a milestone that makes you think about your life, where you've been, what you'd like to do with the second half. That's why so many people go through the proverbial mid-life crisis. You wake up one day and go, "How did I end up here?" A sense of panic can set in. "Life is going by too quickly and I haven't done enough yet." You can experience depression and disorientation as you try to figure out what your life is all about. So you see people at 40 or 50 grasping for the new sports car, new people in their lives, a new hairstyle, a new wardrobe or a new job – trying to find something fulfilling. It's easy to become obsessed with finding your place in the world.

I think it would be good for everyone facing that kind of crisis to read through the book of Psalms. Actually, it's a good exercise for any of us, regardless of our stage in life. But when you're in a spot where you are completely absorbed in figuring out your own identity, the Psalms are just the thing you need, for one simple reason: They constantly remind you that you're not the center of the universe.

We've talked about a lot of ways that the Psalms shape and change us – from our feelings to our doubts to our past. Those all deal with changes inside of me. But one of the biggest lessons the Psalms have to teach us is that life is not all about me.

That is a foreign concept to our ears. We naturally evaluate everything in light of how it affects us. We live in a society where we are encouraged to look out for our own interests, to consume as much as possible and to get as far ahead as we can. Just watch any reality show for a few minutes and you will see examples of people whose entire decision making process is based on what's in it for them. It's human nature and it is catered to by our culture.

Just this week, I saw an article in Time magazine that said there are now personal brand consultants who help you come up with an image and marketing strategy FOR YOURSELF!! How do you want to be perceived in the world? They will help you come

up with a tagline and some messaging that will help you stand out from the crowd. Everything seems to revolve around ourselves. We're the reference point.

Even the way we connect with God is often driven by the way we feel or what we need. We pray to God when we're in a pinch. We're motivated to go to him to ask for wisdom or forgiveness or peace or healing or a job or a spouse. We might even be eager to grow spiritually and become better people. And that is all good and fine. God invites us to do that. But it's not all there is. There's more.

Today, I want to look at a Psalm with you that has NOTHING to do with you. Okay, it does have something to do with you, but not in the way we're used to. Psalm 97 invites us to consider God for who he is – not just for how he applies to our lives. This morning, for a few minutes I'm hoping we can put our agendas for God aside and just bask in who he is. I like how The Message version of the Bible translates Psalm 46:

Psalm 46:10

Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything.

Isn't that good? That's a fitting reminder in this week full of politics. Just as I'm not the center of the universe, neither is Washington D.C. We can't pin our hopes on elected officials or party platforms. God is above and beyond human agendas.

When my kids were babies, sometimes when I was holding them I would try to stare at them as hard as I could to just burn the memories of them into my brain. I felt so much love for them and wanted to keep those moments in my heart.

And in a spiritual way, we need to just stare at God sometimes and try to take him in. If we say we love him, we will want to try to think about him as more than just the answer to our prayers.

I'm not very good at doing that on my own. I don't know how to think about God in the right terms. How do I go about it? What am I even supposed to have in mind? That's where the Psalms come in. Writers who knew God well and loved him passionately gave us the words we don't have. They put the focus on him in a way that takes us out of ourselves. They transform our universe, putting God dead center.

We'll look at a few different Psalms, but Psalm 97 will be our starting point.

Psalm 97

*The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice.
Clouds and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.
His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles.*

*The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.*

There's an old joke that takes the scene from the bible where Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and puts it in a modern context. Instead of the disciples, Jesus is talking with theologians and seminary professors. And Jesus said unto them, "Who do you say that I am?" And they answered, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being. The kerygma in the humanizing process." And Jesus said unto them, "What?"

That's funny stuff because you have no idea how many books I come across that describe God in EXACTLY those kinds of terms. They are technical, scientific, schoolbook style words that make God sound dry and boring.

It's a good thing they didn't write the Psalms. Because the Psalm writers took a whole different approach. They painted pictures. They give us this incredibly visual description of God. They come up with a whole new vocabulary for him, and it is anything but boring. The God of the Psalms is a god of rolling thunder and horsepower. He's a god of decibels and megawatts. He shakes things up.

The creative way David and the rest of the authors honor God is staggering. It is the fuel for our own spiritual imaginations. We would not conceptualize God the way we do if it weren't for the Psalms. You look at our worship songs, and every one of them owes its existence to the Psalms. This is where we get many of our basic ideas about God himself. This is where we're forced to confront God on his own terms instead of ours.

These people knew and saw God with a clarity that makes me feel very small in comparison. But I don't care. I will take what they saw and knew and make it my own. Their wisdom greatly expands my understanding of God in so many ways.

Let's break down this little section of Psalm 97 and see what it has to say about God.

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice.

The first thing the Psalm writer wants us to remember is that

God is in charge.

The old fashioned word for this is that God is sovereign. He calls the shots. Nothing happens without his knowledge. There is no corner of the universe where things are out of his control.

There are three alternatives to God being in charge, none of which is very appealing: First, there could be nobody in charge. The universe could just be operating on its own with no supervision, no grand plan. Ultimately, that option leads to despair, because that

would mean there's no purpose to anything. We all have a built in need for purpose. It is wired into us that we want our lives to matter.

The second option would be that someone less trustworthy than God is at the helm. Some supernatural force or person that doesn't love us and that is not at its core good and holy. That's another frightening scenario, because just like we have a built in need for purpose, we have a built in sense for the way things ought to be. We know right from wrong, and even though we don't always act like it, deep down we want to see right win.

The third scenario is one I sometimes think I want, and that is to be in charge of myself. In the movie Bruce Almighty, Jim Carrey's character was given the chance to fill God's shoes temporarily. He was angry at God for the way his life was going, so God handed him the keys and said, "Okay, you drive." And of course, Bruce wasted the opportunity on himself and made a complete mess of things.

We all want to be masters of our own destinies. At times we act like we have the final say. But even then, God is patiently working out his own purposes, which are much better than anything you or I would come up with.

So there's a comfort and a claim when we say the Lord reigns. And that's a good thing. The Psalm writer says "rejoice." Someone who is both powerful and pure is orchestrating events. Someone who is wise and loving is on the throne.

It doesn't always look that way. It looks like the devil is having his run of the place, wreaking havoc everywhere. The Bible even calls him the prince of this world, acknowledging that he has a degree of power. But that power is limited and temporary, and the Higher Power has already sealed his doom. Jesus said,

John 12:31

Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.

"Driven out" through what Jesus did on the cross. God sent Satan into exile. He dealt the final blow to his power. Although the world still looks like the devil is having his way, he's already been defeated. The Psalm writers remind us with total confidence that God is on the throne, and he's bringing relief from the local power we've lived under for so long. He has a plan to restore order and bring hope and new life. Let the distant shores rejoice – the Lord reigns.

In the next phrase, the Psalm writer tells us something else about God.

Clouds and thick darkness surround him;

Is that surprising? We usually think of God as light. 1 John tells us there's no darkness in him at all. But he's often described as being surrounded by dark shadows. When he came down on Mt. Sinai to meet with Moses, it says a cloud covered the mountain.

When he led the Israelites by day, it was by a pillar of cloud. When Isaiah saw his vision of the throne room in heaven, it was filled with smoke. Ezekiel also saw the throne of God and describes it as surrounded by a cloud.

So what is the point? I think the clouds represent the fact that

God is beyond our grasp.

As the nuns in *The Sound of Music* would say, “How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?” You can’t. A cloud is a swirling mist that defies you to grab hold of it. You can’t put it in a box. And it blocks your vision of what’s on the other side of it.

Back in the 14th century, an anonymous monk wrote a devotional called “The Cloud of Unknowing.” And he made an important statement about this idea that God is surrounded by a cloud we can’t penetrate. He said, “Our intense need to understand will always be a powerful stumbling block to our attempts to reach God in simple love...and must always be overcome. For if you do not overcome this need to understand, it will undermine your quest. It will replace the darkness which you have pierced to reach God with clear images of something which, however good, however beautiful, however Godlike, is not God.”

The author went on to say that God can’t be thought, but he can be loved. It is a safeguard for us that God is wrapped in a cloud, because it keeps us always pursuing him, always discovering there is still more to discover about him. God knows that if we thought we had him totally figured out, we would worship our idea of him rather than who he really is.

That isn’t to say God can’t be known. He specifically sent Jesus to reveal himself to us. We can know all we need to know. But we can’t overstep our bounds. I know Bible professors who have such a tightly defined idea of God that they think they know what he will do in the future, and that there are certain things he has stopped doing in the present. That’s forgetting the cloud. John Marks Templeton was the editor of a book called “How Large is God?” In it he stated “...as a member of the board of trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary for thirty-nine years, I gradually realized that most people – even highly trained theologians – seem to have various, restricted views of who God is...”

When we forget that he is surrounded by clouds, we miss out on the chance to see what he’s doing. We get so caught up in our own view of him that we can’t recognize his presence when he does something unexpected. And that’s part of what makes God so dynamic – he does the unexpected all the time. He is a constant surprise.

At the same time, he is amazingly consistent. The Psalm writer pointed out that

righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

To me, this speaks to the fact that **God is true north.**

Everybody knows that a compass points north. But did you know that it doesn't point to true north? It points to something called magnetic north, which changes depending on where you are. So if you wanted to get to the exact North Pole, you could end up being several degrees off course if you tried to use a traditional compass to get there. And if you're in a boat, the engine may throw things even further off.

If you're looking for true north, you need a GPS system. That doesn't fluctuate due to magnetic fields. It uses a completely different method to find north. Satellites can give a level of precision a magnetic compass never will.

Most of us try to navigate through life and do our best. But even our very best is going to be off. Only God is capable of finding true north.

The kingdom of God is built on the fact that he is inherently good. Nothing about him can be tainted by corruption or questionable motives. That's righteousness – a commitment to all that is true and good and pure.

His justice takes it one step further – it looks to enforce that same goodness and truth and purity in the world at large. God seeks to establish order. He restores the fortunes of the oppressed. He sees the burdens of the afflicted and he has the power to do something about it.

What's more, God is 100% consistent in that. He doesn't waver in his attitude.

Psalm 33:4-5

For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

In some religions, the god or gods can be fickle. They change their mind and become angry and abusive, simply because they had the power to do so. Sometimes we look around and all the evidence suggests that's how things operate. We see plenty of injustice all around us. But the Psalm writers remind us over and over again that God is a god who loves what is right. He loves seeing justice done. He will have the final say in the end. The entire framework of the universe rests on that truth. And that is a huge comfort.

In the end, no one will want to stand in the way of God's justice. Look again at what Psalm 97 says next:

Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.

God is overwhelming.

Are you familiar with the concept of Yin and Yang? It's the ancient belief in balance in the world. Dark and light are in balance and complementary to each other. Cold winters

are balanced by hot summers. Long sermons are balanced by short naps. The idea is that there is symmetry in life.

We sometimes try to apply that to God, thinking that the devil is somehow his equal match, that the dark side of the force is as powerful as the light side of the force. I've got news for you: There is no balance. In the final analysis, God will completely overwhelm any and everyone who opposes him.

God is the Almighty. He is unstoppable. You cannot resist him and expect to win. You will either be broken or won over in the process.

So often we reduce God to the role of our pal or our crisis solver or our magic genie, and we forget how awesome and forceful and strong and dangerous he is. He is the God of heaven and earth. We treat him like a house cat and forget he's not a pet. As the animals said about Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia, "He's not a tame lion." God cannot be tamed. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.

His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles.

Have you ever watched a really big lightning storm? Karin and I were in Chicago one time, and we happened to be in the top of the Sears Tower during a lightning storm. It was an incredible experience. It was in the evening, and everything looked dark. The rain was pelting down and you could barely make out anything below us. But then these streaks of lightning coming down that would light up entire sections of the city and the sky above it. It was amazing what we could see from that vantage point.

The Psalm writer wants us to know that **God is brilliant**. The light he pours into our lives when we are sitting in the dark illuminates everything. He lets us see all the good things he has done for us. He helps us see our own brokenness. He gives us the light and direction we need to find our way down the path.

That light shone most clearly when Jesus came into the world. John writes this about Jesus' birth:

John 1:4-5

What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by.

The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.

Any inkling of light we have in this life is from God. Without God, we can't see a thing. We're stuck, groping around in the dark. But his very essence is brilliant and intended to light up the sky and show the way. Another Psalm put it this way:

Psalm 18:28

You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.

That image of a lightning bolt is so perfect. It's that point at which the light of heaven itself makes contact with earth. Are we in contact with God's brilliance? Are we allowing it into our lives to show us what we haven't seen about ourselves and about God?

The Psalm writer continues with one of his most vivid descriptions yet:

The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.

What this tells me is that **God is the only permanent solid.**

If you had to find something on earth that seemed the most enduring and immovable, it would be a mountain. Think of Mt. Everest. Over 29,000 feet tall, stretching into the edges of the atmosphere itself. If you weighed it, it would weigh over 100 billion tons. It's not going anywhere.

But in comparison to God, it's like a big pile of butter. God not only moves mountains, he melts them.

This shows me two things. Number one, I need to quit acting like I'm a mountain. Half the time, I operate as if I'm permanent. Again, the Psalms set us right:

Psalm 39:4-5

*"Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Each man's life is but a breath.*

I'm much more fragile and fleeting than I like to think, and I need to keep that in mind compared to God's permanence. But if mountains melt like wax before the Lord, that means the mountains in my life melt like wax. Whatever seems like the biggest hurdle in our life, God can melt it. Whatever hearts are hard as stone, God can melt them. Whatever seems too much to handle or overcome, God can overcome it. Whatever solid, secure thing I'm placing my trust in, God WILL melt it. He's more permanent than anything in this world. He existed before it began and he'll still be here long after it's gone.

God is permanently solid. He's also ingeniously creative. The Psalm writer says,

The heavens proclaim his righteousness,

God is ingeniously creative.

In another Psalm it says, "the heavens declare the glory of God." All of creation points to the creator.

You hear a lot in the news these days about the debate over intelligent design and whether or not it should be taught in public schools. But more and more scientists in the fields of biochemistry, physics, cosmology and astronomy are seeing evidence of somebody having a plan for the world.

An article in Discover magazine said this:

“The universe is unlikely. Very unlikely. Deeply, shockingly unlikely.”

What they mean by that is what scientists call the fine tuning of the universe. Everything about it is precisely geared to support life. Physicists have found that getting all the necessary ingredients right on accident would be incredibly difficult. It’s mind blowing.

Some Christians are afraid of science, thinking that something will prove there’s no God. But the more advanced science gets, the more evidence that shows up for just how big God is, how smart his mind must be and how spectacularly creative he is. Author Bill Craig writes, “The Christian can stand confidently within biblical truth, knowing it’s in line with mainstream astrophysics and cosmology.”

As for me, I’m with Winnie the Pooh when he said, “I am a bear of very little brain.” I don’t pretend to have a grasp on the details scholars are discovering. But when I read about the design and shape of the whole universe; when scientists say the ratio of carbon to oxygen inside stars is extremely important; when astronomers point out that if the moon wasn’t exactly the size it is in the orbit it has around the earth we couldn’t live here – even I can see that the heavens proclaim God’s righteousness. He is so far bigger and more involved in our world than we ever realized.

Professor Robin Collins put it well. “The deeper we dig, we see that God is more subtle and more ingenious and more creative than we ever thought possible. And I think that’s the way God created the universe for us – to be full of surprises.”

That’s why the Psalm writer concludes the section of the Psalm with these words:

and all the peoples see his glory.

There is so much around us that points to who God is when we stop to look for it. And we don’t just see God’s character – it says we see his glory. The Psalm writer wants us to know that **God is beautiful.**

Think about it – God isn’t just functional. He doesn’t just get the job done. He’s BEAUTIFUL! He has glory and splendor and majesty. Think of the most beautiful flower, the most beautiful person the most beautiful view you’ve ever seen. The most beautiful act of kindness you’ve ever seen. God is the source of all that. He himself is beautiful.

Psalm 27:4

One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek:

*that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.*

This is what we've been trying to get at this morning. We are wired to enjoy God for who he is – not just what he can do for us.

There is so much that is ugly and ruined in our hearts and in our world. Our souls long to connect with something better and higher.

As we do that, as we spend time contemplating God's glory and beauty, it begins to seep into us. When Moses spent time on the mountain with God, he walked away with God's glory radiating from his own face. He had to wear a veil over it for a time it was so bright. Paul says the same is true for us as well.

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Glory seen becomes glory reflected. God's beauty shines through us. As our universe is changed by once again placing God at the center, the rest of our lives can't help but be changed. We're transformed more into his likeness, says Paul. We become one more way for the rest of the world to begin to see God's glory for themselves.

I mentioned earlier the fine tuning of the universe. A scientist at Oxford named Roger Penrose has said that one of the parameters of the universe requires fine tuning to an accuracy of (and I quote) "one part in ten billion multiplied by itself one hundred and twenty three times." He said it would be impossible to even fully write that number down because it would take more zeroes than there are particles in the universe.

I don't even know what that means. But it feels the same way in trying to describe God. It's impossible to fully say how great he really is. There aren't enough words in the whole world.

Our God is a stunning God. Each time someone in Scripture catches a glimpse of his beauty and glory, they are literally knocked off their feet by the sight. Their legs give way and they fall on their faces.

I need more of that in my life – more of the sense of awe that he is in charge. More wonder that he is far beyond my grasp. More amazement at his creativity. More confidence in how rock solid he is. More comfort in his justice, and more joy in his glory.