Hold Fast: The Forgotten Truths We Must Always Remember
God Alone is Great!
Selected Scriptures
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Well this morning, I want us to continue with the summer series that we have begun together as of last Sunday. We want to look at a new theme, a theme that remarkably has been forgotten in the church.

The year was 1715. It was the year that King Louis XIV died. He had reigned over France for 72 years, longer than any other European monarch had. And he was a magnificent monarch. It was Louis XIV who made the famous and audacious claim, "I am the state." He had a magnificent palace. His court, the Palace of Versailles, was the most magnificent in all of Europe. He even referred to himself as Louis the Great. His funeral therefore was designed by him to be spectacular. His body was placed in a golden coffin. It was laid in state in Notre Dame Cathedral. He had demanded that all of the rest of the candles in the great cathedral be snuffed out, and that there be a lone, solitary candle placed on the top of his coffin to signify his greatness.

Thousands attended the service there at the great cathedral, and they sat there in stunned and hushed silence as their monarch of 72 years had died. Louis had asked Massillon, the court preacher, to deliver the funeral sermon. And that day as Massillon entered the pulpit, he first paused, and very slowly, very deliberately, reached down, and he snuffed out that lone, solitary candle. He walked into the pulpit, and the first words that he said, twice in French, were these: "Only God is great. Only God is great."

That truth is foundational to the Christian faith. It is foundational to the Scripture. God's people have understood it in profound and rich ways in the past, but sadly, it has been lost in our day, just as it was lost in his. Last week we began a summer series entitled Hold Fast: The Forgotten Truths We Must Always Remember. As I mentioned, I borrowed that title "Hold Fast" from William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament. In five passages in the New Testament, he translates with the words "hold fast." Eventually, sailors adapted and adopted Tyndale's words "hold fast" to refer to holding on the ship's ropes, especially to the lifelines

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when the ship was being driven by the wind and waves and there was a risk of their being swept overboard. In the same way, there are lifelines in the Christian faith: truths that today's church has forgotten, but to which we must always hold fast.

Last week we looked at the truth that *The Bible Is Enough.* Today, I want to urge us all to hold fast to the forgotten truth that *God Alone Is Great.* Tragically, today's church has lost its sense of God's greatness. Not by replacing the true God with other gods, but by replacing a biblical view of God with flawed and false views of God. It's like the Psalmist said in Psalm 50, verse 21, in the words of God Himself speaking to us, "You thought that I was just like you." There is a wonderful description of our times. "You thought I was just like you."

Luther encountered this same problem. In one of his letters to Erasmus, the great scholar of that period, a defender of the Roman Catholic faith, Luther wrote to him and said, "Your thoughts of God are too human." If that was true in Erasmus' day, and it certainly was, then how much more true is it of our day? Your thoughts of God are just too human.

I think we can all be influenced by this, and in fact, I think this sort of human thinking of God pervades the mindset of the contemporary church. Let me give you some common misconceptions of God, misconceptions that are common in society at large, and equally common in the church.

First of all, there is "the disengaged inventor." There are those who see God as one who created everything, but He's just too distracted with really important things. And so, He pays very little attention to us.

A second misconception—and unfortunately you hear it even from the lips of those who claim to be fearers of God "the man upstairs." This portrays God as simply the greater, more powerful man who lives upstairs by virtue of His superiority. It conjures up the image of the one who was the bigger and more powerful man who lived upstairs in the estate home while we, the servants, live downstairs.

A third flawed view of God that's very common is "the hard schoolmaster." God is simply an unfeeling, heartless schoolmaster who demands that we learn our lessons with absolutely no concern for us as people.

Another misconception is the perception of God as "the overeager policeman." Always

watching for us when we cross the line so that He can just let us have it.

There's "the clueless dad" conception of God. He loves us unconditionally, and unwisely, He trusts us. And so, we are bright enough to sneak around, to pull the wool over His eyes, and to get away with whatever we want.

There's "the indulgent grandfather." He knows about our sin, but He overlooks it. And He spoils us with whatever we want, because He loves us so much.

There's "the frustrated benefactor." He means well. He wants to do good to people, but our wills are more powerful than His. And so, His well-meaning and well-intentioned plans for us are often frustrated. He just can't accomplish what He wants to accomplish.

Number eight, and this is, I think, one of the most common views of the church today. It's of God as "the good-natured buddy." The one who just sort of hangs around and supports us in whatever we want. He builds His life around ours. And therefore, all of the sermons you hear in most churches are about people. Never about God. Always about us and our problems and our relationships and our sex lives, or whatever the theme of the month might be at the local megachurch. A.W. Pink writes this:

> The god of this century. [And he was speaking, obviously, of the last century.] The god of this century no more resembles the Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The god who is talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday school class, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible conferences, is a figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their carnal minds. In reality, they are but atheists, for there is no other possible alternative between an absolutely supreme God and no god at all. A god whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, poses no title to deity. And far from being a fit object of worship, merits nothing but our contempt."

The church, as A.W. Pink wrote, has lost its sense of God's greatness. It no longer has a high view of God. It no longer has a sense of the majesty of God. Another way to say it is that the

church is no longer captivated by the transcendence of God.

When we say, God is transcendent, we mean that He is exalted above and beyond us, that He is magnificent, extraordinary, unparalleled, unrivaled, unequaled, unsurpassed, incomparable, unique, superior, supreme, foremost, above all, second to none. Is that how you really think of God?

You know, we find comfort in the fact that God is imminent. That's the opposite of transcendent. In other words, that God is accessible to us, that He's our Father, that He's our *Abba*. But we must at the same time never lose sight of the fact, as the church has, that He is exalted far above us, that God is separate from and superior to everything in the universe. God Alone Is Great. His person, His nature, His deeds, are all unrivaled, unparalleled, incomparable.

Listen to Jeremiah 10:6 and 7. Jeremiah writes,

> There is none like You, O [Yahweh] …; You are great, and great is Your name in might. Who would not fear you, O king of the nations? Indeed, it is Your due!

David, in his prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:11 through 13, says this:

> Yours, O [Yahweh] …, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O [God] … and You exalt Yourself as head over all. Both riches and honor *come* from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name.

Now let's be honest with ourselves. When you hear me say that God is great, it just doesn't have the impact that it ought to have. It doesn't in my own heart. Why? Well, in part, I think it's because of how our language has been so misused and over dramatized. I mean, after all, every text message calls for multiple exclamation points. And how can we begin to comprehend that God is great when advertisers tell us that Frosted Flakes are great. The only way that we can overcome our flawed conceptions of God and our pedestrian understanding of what is great is to let the Bible explain to us what it means when it says that God is great.

Nowhere in Scripture is the greatness of our God more powerfully and beautifully explained than

it is where I want you to turn this morning: Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40. I want us to look at verses that begin in verse 12 of Isaiah 40 and run down to verse 26. I know you're shocked that we're going to cover so many verses, but we're going to do it. Isaiah 40:12 - 26, makes one central point, and it is this: that Yahweh alone, the God of the Bible, the God who has revealed Himself to us on the pages of Scripture and then in and through His Son, that He alone is great, and is therefore worthy of your trust.

But that invites the question, "what is great?" How do you define, how do you measure greatness? Well, here Isaiah explains to us what it means that God is great. Isaiah makes four declarations about our God that outline for us His greatness. First of all, he tells us that *Yahweh Alone Is Creator*, verses 12 - 14.

Notice verse 12. "He," this God who's described in the first 11 verses of this chapter as Yahweh. You see the word LORD in all caps, that's the One who simply is. He says, "I AM." We say, "He is." That's Yahweh. "[This God] has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, ... has marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales." Isaiah's point is that Yahweh alone created everything. He poetically describes all of the earth. Notice, "the waters" (verse 12), "the dust of the earth," "the mountains," "the hills." In other words, all of this planet. And then he captures the totality of the rest of the universe in that expression "the heavens." Plural. He means all of space, everything that exists beyond this planet.

And notice how far God surpasses His creation. God is so majestic, He is so grand, that He can measure all of the oceans of this earth in the palm of His hand. God is so great that He can mark off the universe with the span of His hand. Now obviously, these are anthropomorphisms; that is, they are ways to help us understand God. God is a spirit, doesn't have a body. These are expressions to help us understand just how immense, how magnificent God is.

Isaiah describes God as taking a span. A span was a unit of measurement from the tip of your thumb to the tip of your little finger when your hand was spread. That's a span, roughly six inches on a human hand. But here, Isaiah describes God as taking His hand and measuring the universe.

Notice as well—don't miss the fact that all of the units of measure in this verse are instruments that we use to measure small things: the palm of your hand, the width of your hand, balances, scales. Isaiah intended to contrast the greatness of God compared to the relative smallness of His

creation, both the earth and the universe. God doesn't need great things to measure the planet. He doesn't need great things to measure the universe. He just uses His hand.

And by the way, Isaiah says, God didn't need anyone's help or advice or counsel, either to create the universe or to run it.

> Verse 13, "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him?" [Who helped God? Who gave Him advice in creation?] Verse 14, "With whom did He consult, and who *gave* Him understanding?" [God didn't need consultants. He didn't need a committee.] "And *who* taught Him ... the path of justice?" [That is, the path of what is right.] "And taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding?"

In both of these verses Isaiah intends to point out the unrivaled, unparalleled, underived, unlearned, wisdom of God. He just knows. And He is perfectly wise. He never makes a mistake. He never drops the ball. He never needs somebody else to help. He just knows. Yahweh alone is the all-wise Creator, and that helps us see that He is great.

Secondly, Isaiah tells us that "Yahweh alone is incomparable." Yahweh alone is incomparable. We could say immense. I think that's the idea here in verses 15 - 17. Yahweh alone is incomparable. Now notice that Isaiah transitions from the cosmos, from the planet and the universe, to the inhabitants of earth and to human history. And notice he begins with two powerful word pictures to show us just how inconsequential human beings are when they are compared to the grandeur, to the greatness, to the majesty of God.

Verse 15, "Behold, the nations." [That describes man in his collective, united strength.] "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;" [By the way, make sure you understand. God is not here talking about the value of people to Himself. God considered human beings valuable enough that He sacrificed His Own Son to redeem us. So, He's not talking about the value of people. He's talking about their greatness compared to His greatness. And He says,] "Behold, the nations." [That is, mankind in his collective, united grandeur compared with the Creator is like an inconsequential drop of water that falls from a full bucket as it's being pulled from the well. It doesn't matter one bit. It's not even worth notice. Compare the grandeur and the glory and the greatness of every human being on the planet to God, and it's like that solitary drop of water that falls from a full bucket. It's completely inconsequential.]

The second word picture he uses is, "the nations" … "are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales." In other words, humanity, organized, united, perhaps here against God, has no more weight than dust on the scales which doesn't cause it to tip one bit. They weigh nothing. They're nothing compared to the greatness of God.

In fact, verse 15 goes on to say, "Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust." [To God, the massive coast-lands, the islands of the sea, are as easy to weigh as that fine dust that doesn't cause the scales to tip. No effort, whatsoever. Now what Isaiah does next is surprising.

Notice verse 16. He says, "Even Lebanon [the country of Lebanon] is not enough to burn, nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering." [He here moves from man's futile attempts to organize politically against their Creator, to man's futile attempts to adequately worship their Creator in their own strength. What Isaiah says is there is no religious act that we can perform that is adequate for the worship of the God who exists. If we could somehow make the entire country of Lebanon our altar, and if we could burn all of its famous cedars, and on the altar of the country of Lebanon we could offer all of its animals—it wouldn't be enough.]

Alec Motyer, who writes a commentary on Isaiah, says this:

> Nothing we can do puts God in our debt or at our disposal. This is the death knell to all do-it-yourself systems of salvation. Over every human effort to move God, to meet His demands, satisfy His requirements, maneuver Him to our advantage, and climb into His favor, Isaiah simply writes "not enough."

Not enough. Oswalt, another commentator, says, "There is no way that we can provide the kind of worship God truly deserves. If He is to be appeased for the sins of the earth, He Himself will have to provide the means." Which is exactly what Isaiah 53 will explain. You can't offer Him a country as an altar and all of its animals as a sacrifice, and it be adequate to account for our sin and for the greatness of God.

Verse 17, "All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless." This is similar to verse 15, but notice the difference. Here he says "all the nations." If all the nations on this globe, if all seven billion people who occupy this world were to come together and to unite in their opposition to God, Isaiah says, "before Him," or in front of Him, their collective force would be nothing, zilch, nada. It's like it wouldn't even exist. In fact, notice he says it would be "less than nothing." Less than nothing to God. If every

person on this planet (whoever has existed, ever will exist), if every angel He created, united together as one massive army against the God of heaven, they would be nothing. They would be less than nothing. They would be meaningless to God. You see, God is not simply greater than us. He's not simply a greater version of us. He is on an altogether different plain.

The third declaration Isaiah makes about God to highlight His greatness is that *Yahweh Alone Is God*. We see this in verse 18 - 20. You see, apart from Yahweh, the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture, there is the universal, total absence in the universe of anything or anyone else that can properly be called God.

Verse 18, "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?" [If you don't worship the true God who's revealed Himself in Scripture, then you will create a god. That's all that's left. All that's left is a god of human invention inspired by demons.]

Verse 19, "*As for* the idol, a craftsman casts it, A goldsmith plates it with gold, and a silversmith fashions chains of silver." [Here this idol is ornate.] "And he who is too impoverished for *such* an offering selects a tree that does not rot." [So, you look for something that endures to make your false god with.] "[And] He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman [and he wants] To prepare an idol that will not totter."

You want to make it secure, stable. I mean after all, how ridiculous is it to have a god who keeps falling over? But that's the point. You see, every time Isaiah deals with idolatry, his language is filled irony and a sober sarcasm. He makes the point again and again that all false gods are human inventions that are so weak they have to be made by humans. And they have to be secured by humans, or they'll keep falling over. How different from the greatness of God. He alone is God.

Isaiah's fourth and final declaration about God is in verses 21 to 26. And it is that *Yahweh Alone Is Sovereign*.

Notice verse 21, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not be declared to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" [Isaiah here asks rhetorical questions that call for an affirmative answer. This is the equivalent of Romans 1. He says, of course you know, of course it has been declared to you in God's Word, and if you miss the message, you are culpable. Everyone has understood from the very foundations of the earth (in other words, from the beginning of human history) that there is one Creator, God, and that He

is Sovereign. Isaiah says the Sovereign Creator, first of all, rules over earth's people.]

Verse 22, "It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in." [Here is an Old Testament illusion to the round shape of the earth. But the point here is not the shape of the earth. The point is that God sits enthroned above the earth as the ruler over all of its peoples. In the ancient world—and by the way, this is still true even today where there are monarchs. In the ancient world, the king always sat on an elevated throne, so that he looked down upon all who approached him. It made him appear elevated and great, and it made them appear small. That's the picture behind this verse. Yahweh's throne is so exalted, it is so elevated, that from His throne the people of earth, even those with their massive egos, appear as small as insects. He's so majestic, so exalted.]

And notice, this exalted Monarch, verse 22, "stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in." [It's like God created the heavens out of gossamer. They're nothing to him. Or as Oswalt says, "The mighty heavens are to the true God as cobwebs are to steel. God will one day rip away that canopy and reveal Himself in His glory."]

But Yahweh not only rules the people of earth, He also rules earth's leaders.

Verses 23 to 25, "He *it is* who reduces rulers to nothing, who makes the judges of the earth meaningless." [The rulers and the leaders of earth, how do they conceive of themselves? They're always proud people who think of themselves as important, as somebodies. But in comparison to God, Isaiah says they are nothings and nobodies. He decides who rules, where they will rule, when they will rule, for how long they will rule.]

[And from His throne, verse 24, here's how it appears. Even King Louis XIV, who reigned for 72 years, here's how it looks to God.] "Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have they been sown, scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, But He merely (blowing sound) blows on them [like the hot, dry, summer wind on a wildflower], "and they wither, And the storm' [probably an illusion to the chaos of human history] "the storm carries them away like stubble." [This is the message of God through Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar. He raises up whom He will. He puts down whom He will and when He will. God is Sovereign over all of human history.]

Verse 25, "'To whom then will you liken Me that I [should] be *his* equal?' says the Holy One." [No earthy ruler, even the greatest earthly ruler who's ever lived, compares to God in the

smallest, most minute way, especially in their moral characters. Notice, He refers to Himself in a way that no earthly ruler can: I am] "the Holy One."

Verse 26 says that His rule extends as well to the entire universe. Just as is true today, in the ancient world there were many who believed that the stars rule and direct our lives. And Isaiah says instead that it is Yahweh who created rules and preserves the stars.

Verse 26, "Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these *stars*, [and] the One who leads forth their host by number [He guides and directs their courses.], [and] He calls them all by name." [That is a remarkable verse. Even in Isaiah's day it was remarkable. At that point Isaiah was probably able to see about 5,000 stars, about what you can see outside of the city lights with the naked eye. But today astronomers tell us that just our Milky Way Galaxy alone has 400 billion stars. And they tell us they estimate that there are 125 billion other galaxies in the universe. Now, I'm way out of my pay grade here, but if I understand it correctly, that means that the total number of stars estimated by astronomers today is about ten billion trillions.

God directs them all individually, Isaiah says, and like His pets] "He calls them all by name;" "Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing." God's power preserves every star. It survives as long as He is determined, and it dies only when He decides. Yahweh is Sovereign. There's not a single, stray molecule, and there's not a single, stray star in the universe.]

Now maybe as you sit here this morning, you're tempted to say, "Tom, listen, all of this theology about the person of God is fine, but I came here with problems. I have struggles with my health, with my family, with my work. I have other issues in my life. Why not preach about something practical?" Listen, you don't get it. Nothing could be more important for you to hear than this. What your soul needs more than anything else is a glimpse of the greatness of God. As Augustine said,

> "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You." Nothing could be more practical than an understanding of the greatness of God.

In fact, here in this context, Isaiah uses God's greatness to help us in two very practical ways. Let me just mention them briefly. First of all, here in this chapter Isaiah uses God's greatness as a comfort and help in the midst of trouble. He's just told the people of God that they would be

exiled to Babylon, that they would endure incredible difficulty and trouble. How can they be secured in that? How can they survive that?

> Notice verse 27. "Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel." [This is what the people in the middle of the exile would say. Isaiah was predicting it.] "'My way is hidden from [Yahweh] ...'" [He doesn't see. He doesn't know what I'm going through.] "'And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God?'"
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> Isaiah says, listen, didn't you get it? Don't … you … know? "Have you not heard that God is eternal?" [Yahweh] … [is the] Creator of the ends of the earth, [and He "doesn't"] "… become weary…." [He doesn't lack strength, and He doesn't fatigue.] His understanding is [unsearchable]." [He's the one who] "gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power." [Even the most hearty and "vigorous" of human strength grow[s] weary and tired [and] stumble, [but] those who wait for the LORD, [those who discount their own abilities, who trust in God, who wait for God to act, they will, literally, exchange their "strength."
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> They get God's strength. They will—instead of being pushed down and crushed by the trials and difficulties of life, those who get it, those who see the greatness of God] will mount up with wings like eagles. [They will soar, their souls will soar even in the midst of the trouble. And they will have the strength they need.] They will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.

Listen, I don't know what trouble you may find yourself in today. But let me tell you, the cure for that trouble is not to get out from under that trouble. It's to get a fresh glimpse of the greatness of God.

There's a second use that Isaiah makes of God's greatness here. It's as a reminder that God is willing and able to redeem those who repent and believe in Him. This is the first 11 verses of this chapter. I wish I had time to show it to you. Let me just point out a couple things.

Verse 2, He says, tell My people … "comfort My people." [Tell her (notice the middle of verse 2)] "That her iniquity has been removed." [Literally, her that iniquity has been pardoned, that it's been paid off in full. This is spiritual salvation. This is forgiveness. How? Verses 3 through 5. Because God, in all His glory, is going to come to earth.]

John the Baptist quoted this passage about the coming of Jesus the Messiah to bring salvation. Jesus, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And John called people using this very text to repent and to believe in Jesus, to be reconciled to God. Do you see what Isaiah does here? He says listen, God Himself wants you to know that He can and He will keep His promises, His promise of comfort in trouble.

Do you really believe that the God who doesn't forget the name of a single star, who doesn't allow one thing to happen to those billions and trillions of stars, do you really think that somehow God is going to mess up when it comes to your life? Do you think that God can't manage your life? Do you really think you don't have the right to trust Him, that He's not worthy of that? And God wants you to know as well, that He redeems from sin those who repent and believe in His Son. And all of that is founded, according to Isaiah here, on an understanding of the greatness of God. Hold fast to the truth that God Alone Is Great. It's the bedrock for everything.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, as we come to You today, we come seeking, first and foremost, Your forgiveness for thinking that You were just like us, for our flawed views of You in Your greatness and in Your goodness. O God, by Your Spirit and Word illumine our hearts and minds to understand, to grasp something more of your greatness. And seeing who You are, may You satisfy our souls. Father, for those who find themselves in the midst of difficulty and trouble, may Your greatness be their confidence.

And Father, for all of us, may Your greatness remind us that You will redeem in and through Your Son, that You are both willing and able, that Your ways are not our ways, and Your thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and out of Your greatness and out of Your wisdom comes the eternal plan of salvation.

We bless You and thank You.

Lord, forgive us for our sins against You as we come to take of the Lord's Table. We confess them freely, and we ask for Your cleansing. In Jesus' name, Amen.