

YOUR GOD IS STILL TOO SMALL

Chapter 1

The Universe and a Call To Worship

*If you think God is who you think he is,
then your God is too small*

Our minds are funny things. Neuroscience teaches us that in our lives, we form thought patterns in our brains, and we tend to interpret new things in line with those thought patterns. We can think of it like a bowl holding one scoop of ice cream. If one were to pour hot water over the ice cream, then it would form little channels or rivulets down the dome form of the ice cream. Think of those as the thought patterns and ways of thinking in our minds. When we then get new ideas or information, it is like pouring additional water on the top of the scoop. That water is naturally going to flow into the channels already formed. Our brains work the same way. We tend to put everything into the perspective and ways of thinking that exist in our minds. It makes sense that our tendency in our day-by-day walk in life is to view the world from our existence.

In 1976, I lived on 16th street in Lubbock, Texas. On May 29 of that year, Saul Steinberg did a cartoon cover for the New Yorker magazine entitled “View of the World from 9th Avenue.” As a high school boy living in Lubbock, if I had done a takeoff from Steinberg’s cartoon, I could have called it “View of the World from 16th Street.” It might have looked like the drawing on the following page. The biggest part of the world would have been my street and Texas Tech University. Certainly, my school would have been in the drawing, as would the houses of my friends. Church was a big part of my life, and it certainly would have made the drawing. If I had thought about it, I would have added Houston, Washington D.C. and New York City. The Atlantic Ocean would have been somewhere, and I was mildly aware enough to throw in England, Europe, and Africa. Much like a child’s drawing, the importance of each would likely be reflected by the size I made them in the drawing. Hence, Texas Tech would have been two to three times the size of Africa. The Tech football stadium would likely have been featured as big as England and continental Europe combined.

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Now, if you had asked me about my level of consciousness and awareness, then I would likely have told you that I knew plenty about the world and was quite aware of things. Yet the truth is, my worldview was extremely limited.



Moving from Lubbock changed me, and it would have changed my picture and perspective. Even still, my view would have been somewhat limited, though I would not have thought so. My map would have been fuller and different, but the map would be limited nonetheless.

As I mentioned before, church would have been featured in my map. I was living in Lubbock when I came into a direct relationship with God. It was in Lubbock that I learned and placed my faith in him as a Savior and Redeemer. I am certain I would have told you that my faith and knowledge needed to grow, but I am just as certain that I felt reasonably sure that I had a good grasp on who God was. God fit into my map and worldview quite easily. He was my Heavenly Father and best

friend. I fit God into my neural pathways, and into the ways I thought. God made sense to me. I could understand and fathom God, even though I had an intellectual awareness that God was “more” than I knew, it was “more within reason!” Almost like a rounding error.

As I got older and moved around, several things happened in my view of God. In one sense, my view of God expanded along with my “neighborhood,” even as he still fit into my picture and my neural pathways. But over time, my early views of God seemed in some ways childish. My world expanded so much that there was a struggle for the God of my young neural network to keep up with my personal growth. If my understanding of God did not grow with my neural network, then he was in danger of becoming a childhood God in my mind. It was as if the world got larger and God had to grow to keep up! This is a warning I have given my children as they go off to college. College is a time when your world of thought and understanding expands in many ways, with brand new independence and focused learning. I have warned my children that if they fail to stay plugged in, not only in a vibrant worship experience, but also in a vibrant fellowship and personal devotional life with God, their own neural network will grow, but the channels that are associated with God and spiritual things will remain those of childhood, making God seem childish and not something real to the “mature.” That would not be an accurate view of God; it would be a simple manifestation of neuroscience!

One of the college experiences that added to my personal growth and spiritual growth was attending a concert by Keith Green. Keith was a Christian singer-songwriter who died in an airplane crash just a few months after I saw him in concert. In the concert, he told us of sleeping one night, and having a vivid dream of King David singing Psalm 8. Keith awoke in the middle of the dream, and quietly crept to his piano and played the melody quickly into a cassette recorder so he would not forget it. He then played the song for us. The Psalm was an incredible expression of David’s contemplations of God in ways that were a part of his neural network and experiences. It moved David to praise, and brought that same praise to Keith Green and to many of us in the audience.

When I read Psalm 8, I like to think of David reflecting on his time spent in the Judean hills minding his father's flock. On a clear night 3,000 years ago, with no real light pollution, I am sure you could see so many stars that the night seemed bright. David would not have had even a rudimentary understanding of astronomy, and I am sure his mind wondered what those stars were. Were they pinholes through which the lights of heaven shined through? Were they part of a dome or inverted bowl that framed the sky, rotating through the night? Regardless of what they were, they were certainly grand and magnificent. David likely spent more nights than he could number staring into the stars and thinking about them.

Their unknown nature no doubt added to their mystique and to David's wonderment. David knew that the same God responsible for the heavens was responsible for him. This was the God who had Samuel anoint David, and who had tremendous plans for the young shepherd boy.

Psalm 8

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens,
and what passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

I wonder whether David ever tried counting the stars (We are not positive that David wrote the Psalm or whether it was just dedicated to him. The Hebrew title is not clear. Accordingly, we will speak of "the Psalmist" as the author. That title fits David or any other who might have been inspired to write the Psalm.). Estimates vary, but generally at any point of time in the night sky, as long as there is not significant light pollution, one can see about two thousand stars.

On a night of stargazing, counting those stars, one can readily understand the awe and wonder of the Psalmist, "YHWH, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." YHWH are English letters that correspond to the Hebrew letters that make up the "name" God gave to Moses as his own name (The story is recounted

in Exodus 3). The name of God was a special name to Jews since they knew this name from a special revelation by God. The Psalmist, however, makes the bold statement that God's "name" was majestic not simply in Israel, but "in all the earth." Beyond the letters of YHWH, the "name" of YHWH stood for his reputation, for his historical actions, and for his character. Something about gazing into the stars, affirmed for the Psalmist that God's character and reputation was majestic and great all over the land (earth). We can follow the Psalmist's train of thought as he added, "You have set your glory above the heavens." While the Psalmist did not understand the nature of what he could see in the night sky, he knew that it was beneath God, and that God was something greater. The heavens were simply works of God's fingers. The moon and stars were there because God wanted them there.

It is no wonder that the Psalmist then considers man. He must have realized how small he was compared to the heavens. After placing the moon and stars in place, and after displaying the heavens, what is a human being to God? Why would God care or pay attention to a man or a child? Yet God did, and God *does*. God *is* mindful of man. God *does* care for the individual. While God's glory is above the heavens, God has crowned humanity with a measure of glory and honor as well. He made man unique and special. He gave man a dominion over animals, birds, fish, and more. Man determines much of the course of the planet by the grace and enabling of God.

In this way, the Psalmist comes full circle. The Lord's name is majestic and a cause for praise and wonder because of the heavens, but even more astonishing and causing praise is the thought that the same God of heaven cares for each individual person. That the God of heaven interacts with man brings out the final resounding praise in the Psalm: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" God's care for man, even more so than God's handiwork in the heavens, declares God's glory in the earth.

Those were the Psalmist's reflections three thousand years ago. His reflections fit in well with my ideas about God in those college years. I too had gazed into the heavens at night. Now, I had a good bit more knowledge about the heavens from a scientific perspective. I knew that most of the bodies were suns like ours, just too far away to seem big. I also knew that those suns were there even in the daytime, but were not visible through the light pollution permeating our atmosphere from our own sun's rays. But even with my greater scientific knowledge, God fit into the picture well. Looking back at my mock Lubbock drawing from just a few years earlier, you will notice I had not even put in the stars. That was not a big part of my thought system!

Now fast forward to today. Get on the Internet and do some basic research on the universe. We now know more about the heavens than in David's day – much more. The stars he saw were a minute fraction of what was and is there. At any time on a clear night, the estimated number of stars visible to the human eye range from 2,000 to 3,000. We know from science, however, that the real number of stars in the heavens is on the order of 100 sextillion. That is 10^{23} or:

100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.

Perhaps even more bizarre, is the recognized possible error in that calculation. It might be as many as 90 sextillion less (10^{22} or one less zero if written out longhand) or even 900 sextillion more! (That would be one "septillion" or 10^{24} . It would mean adding one more zero to the number written out above.)

David spoke of the moon and the stars in their appointed places. We now know that from a scientific perspective, the stars and moon are where they are because of gravity, electromagnetism, and other forces. The universe is not a bowl placed over earth at night, it is a massive expanse of unknown size. The sun is our nearest star and while it looks small up in the sky compared to earth, its actual size is a million times larger than earth. It only looks small because it is 93 million miles away! Our sun's system ("solar system") is part of a collection of solar systems called the Milky Way galaxy. Our Milky Way galaxy would take 100,000 years to cross, if one were travelling at the speed of light! Beyond our galaxy are billions and billions more galaxies. No one knows the full size of the universe, but the observable universe is estimated to be 93 billion light years in diameter. That means travelling at the speed of light, it would take 93 billion years to cross the universe. Lest we think the speed of light is slow, we should remember it is 186,000 miles per *second*!

Where does this leave us in contemplation of God and Psalm 8? Has our knowledge of God grown greater as we have grown in our knowledge of the heavens? If not, then it should! Let us reconsider Psalm 8 in light of modern science. We can still embrace the opening praise, Oh YHWH, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." Whether looking into space from the northern hemisphere or the southern hemisphere, whether looking at incredible pictures of nebulae from the depths of space, whether contemplating the vast number of stars which are numbered so high, we have trouble counting the digits. We can certainly understand that God's renown as Creator reaches all over the earth.

The earth beneath those heavens declares the glory of God! As Paul wrote in Romans 1:20,

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

This Romans passage also teaches us that we can learn of God by observing nature. So, what can we learn of God from the universe? Many things! First the heavens reflect the orderliness and faithfulness of God. As his creation, the heavens show precision and predictability. In other words, the heavens are reliable in what they do and how they do it. Scientists are able to calculate orbits with precision. They can send rockets that will place a man on the moon. They can speak of the future eclipses with full accuracy. Each aspect of the universe holds not only an accurate future but also a consistent past. Whether one ascribes to a view that the heavens were created and spoken already formed into existence, or whether one believes that God created the heavens with a big bang allowing them to form by his predetermined laws of physics, the result is the same. We have heavenly bodies that reflect a logical and consistent history. The

A Word About Science and Faith

We must never confuse the things revealed by science with the theology revealed by God. Science teaches us “how” while theology teaches us “why.” We can think of it like a coffee pot. If we were to ask about the hot coffee in the pot, one answer could legitimately be “the pot of hot coffee is there because water dripped through coffee beans trapped in a filter.” Another equally legitimate answer could be “the pot of coffee is there because my wife Becky likes hot coffee in the morning.” One of the answers discusses *how* it became a pot of coffee. The other answer discusses *why*. So it is with theology and science. Science tells us *how* things are, while theology gives us the explanation of *why* things are. Historically, people have been prone to assign events to God when they did not understand the scientific reason for the event. For example, the reason the Sun got dark was because God turned it out! God became responsible for the gaps in human knowledge. Assigning unknown science to God is a theological mistake. God created the world to function, not as a puppet where he pulls strings, but as an entity following the rules he put in place. We can see why God uses nature and the world around us, and we can assign reason to his usage, but we should never let God be the scientific answer for murky, unknown things. That makes God too small! Then when science gives answers, the “too small God” disappears from the scene!

laws of physics are consistent and reliable.

The creation also evidences an otherworldly beauty. Anyone who has gazed at the pictures of nebulae deep in space has likely also thought of how tremendous it would be to observe something so beautiful firsthand. God has placed things of amazing beauty into the heavens, just as he has placed amazing beauty on earth. God's creation reflects his beauty, something that causes everyone to pause and admire it for what it is.

In addition to the faithfulness and consistency of God displayed in his creation, and in addition to creation's reflection of God's beauty, there is a presence of chance in the placement and existence of matter. While we will probe this more in a later lesson, we stop here to note that there is an element of "free will" or independence exhibited in the heavens.

A final note about the way that the heavens teach us of God comes from the fine-tuning of the laws of physics. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) is frequently quoted for his saying,

The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.¹

The universe is built around laws of physics that make it possible for the existence of man. The smallest tweak of most any law would make man's existence impossible. Theoretical physicist and Royal Society Fellow Sir John Polkinghorne likens the laws of physics to a "universe machine" where the knobs get set before the universe comes into existence. Those knobs are set with great precision for the existence of man. Change the rate of gravity even slightly and life is impossible. Change the "strong force" that holds protons and neutrons together and life is impossible. Tweak the "weak force" that changes one particle into another and life is impossible. Change electromagnetism's rate even slightly and matter does not hold together in such a way where there are humans. Polkinghorne comments that some people give the "incredibly lazy" answer to this magnificent fact by simply saying, "It just is." That is not acceptable.²

We have in the creation around us, a consistency of mathematical precision. This reflection of God shows that the entire universe bears the design stamp of suitability for humanity to exist on the planet earth. This ties back into Psalm 8 where the Psalmist's heavenly wonderment gave way to the wonder over God's involvement in the existence of mankind. In the midst of this incredible universe, the Psalmist asked, "what is man that you are mindful of him?"

The Psalmist saw that God was not only mindful of man, but had also assigned man a measure of glory to rule over creation. Man is not an afterthought; he is the purpose. Man is given a role and God has involved himself with humanity, so man's role can be a joint effort with the Creator.

I like the way the night sky forced the Psalmist to view the world. It moves me to blow open the doors that restrained God in my mind. God is not what fits easily into my neural pathways. He is infinitely more than I will ever understand. I now perceive with humor, the bold request Moses made of God on Mount Sinai:

Please show me your glory (Ex. 33:18).

God's response makes so much more sense as we consider his greatness in light of the universe:

You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live (Ex. 33:20).

Of course this is true. How can man see God in his heavenly glory? It is impossible. For God to show himself to humanity required a miracle, something beyond the laws of physics. To use Paul's language,

Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Phil. 2:5-7).

Paul writes that to do this, Christ had to "make himself nothing." Paul uses the Greek word *kunoo* (κενω). It means "to make empty" or "to make void or of no effect." The God who could never be seen or understood by a human, who made a septillion stars and can fathom the movement of every atom in a universe 93 billion light years across, emptied himself to become a human. Then once in human form, this same one humbled himself to humanity, even dying a sinner's death, to redeem those God loved. This is beyond our brain cells, and it should drive us to our knees in worship, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

CONCLUSION

We all tend to see things nearby as important and tend not to look far beyond. Often, our perspective of God tends to follow the same thought pattern. We think of God as near us, concerned with us, thinking about the little things in our life. To an extent, that is a good and proper thing. That perspective, however, sets in danger a limiting image of God. We can easily start thinking of God only in those

terms. Then when we then begin to see how massive the world really is, and how massive the universe really is, we begin to wonder how “God” as we think of him, can really be the God of so much! That would need to be a *massive* God, far beyond our comprehension! Furthermore, even if we could wrap our brains around such a God, we naturally begin to wonder how he could care about each of us, small individuals on this dirt clod called “earth” spinning around a solitary sun buried in the Milky Way galaxy amidst over 170 billion other galaxies. Yet he does. He cares immensely. He cares with a passion and devotion that is as hard to understand as his character and power. It just will never fit into our neural pathways! Any time we tie God to our neural pathways, regardless of how expansive our views are, we should know for a fact, *our God is Still Too Small!*

¹ Vallentin, Antonina, *Einstein: A Biography* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1954), p. 24

² Polkinghorne, John, *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity* (Crossroad 2005), at 35ff.