

THE GOD ANTHOLOGY: EXPLORING THE DEPTHS OF GOD

SERMON OUTLINES

These sermon outlines were created to be used in conjunction with a study based on Mark Batterson's sermon series "The God Anthology," which he preached at National Community Church, Washington, DC. This series of sermons is designed to bring people to a better understanding of the nature and character of God. The subject material—knowing God better—presents a challenge to the sincere believer as well as the seeker. The rewards for such a pursuit can be transforming.

The God Anthology provides six snapshots of God's character and how these glimpses trigger transforming moments in the lives of the writer and readers of the biblical accounts.

MESSAGE 1: MYSTERY

Biblical Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-10

¹ When I came to you, brothers, announcing the testimony of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. ² For I didn't think it was a good idea to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a powerful demonstration by the Spirit, ⁵ so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power.

⁶ However, we do speak a wisdom among the mature, but not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ On the contrary, we speak God's hidden wisdom in a mystery, a wisdom God predestined before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But as it is written:

*What eye did not see and ear did not hear,
and what never entered the human mind—
God prepared this for those who love Him.*

¹⁰ Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

MAIN IDEA:

Understanding God's mystery requires moving beyond our senses and reason to the realm of mystery and faith.

Introduce *The God Anthology* series by quoting A.W. Tozer's statement, "What comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you." How we think about God either enhances or diminishes our ability to relate to Him. If we create a God we can easily comprehend, what we have created is more of an idol than a greater spiritual understanding of God.

Explain that this series examines six portraits of God's character—mystery, holiness, incomparability, mercy, jealousy, and sovereignty. Guide everyone to envision their own "portrait" of God and think about what that portrait suggests most vividly to them about God.

To introduce today's topic, consider using what William Jennings Bryan once said about the watermelon: "I have observed the power of the watermelon seed. It has the power of drawing from the ground through itself 200,000 times its weight ... it takes this material and out of it colors an outside surface ... and forms inside of it a white rind and within that again a red heart, thickly inlaid with black seeds, each one of which, in turn, is capable of drawing through itself 200,000 times its weight. When you can explain to me the mystery of the watermelon, you can ask me to explain the mystery of God." If you're not risk-averse, you may try a demonstration with a real watermelon.

SUGGESTED TEACHING POINTS:

I. Comprehending God as "Mystery" takes us beyond our usual frameworks of understanding. (1 Corinthians 2:1-8)

A. Understanding God as Mystery requires unusual modes of language. Refer to Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, "The medium is the message." Technology alters how we perceive reality by altering our processes for learning. For centuries we read from side to side—left to right in western cultures, and right to left in eastern cultures. Now with computers we read from the top down. Technology-driven people tend to reduce reality to twitter-length messages. As a result we may be drawn to a "Twitter God" by reducing our understanding to bite-sized blurbs of 140 characters. In the process, we lose the sense of mystery—the unknowable, the spectacular, the mind-boggling—the richness of a sunset, a summer storm, or the unfathomable mystery of God.

B. Sometimes we go in the other direction, from Twittering God to making God into some kind of super-sized human. When we make God an extension of the human form, we create for ourselves an idol—only a projected imitation of ourselves.

C. Understanding God better starts with humility. Unpack the biblical text by describing Paul's approach of humility concerning his own eloquence and wisdom. Focus especially on verses 7-8 where he describes how the mystery of God has remained hidden but is destined for greater understanding through Jesus Christ.



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MESSAGE 2: HOLINESS

Biblical Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

¹ *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and His robe filled the temple.* ² *Seraphim were standing above Him; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.* ³ *And one called to another:*

*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts;
His glory fills the whole earth.*

⁴ *The foundations of the doorways shook at the sound of their voices, and the temple was filled with smoke.*

⁵ *Then I said:*

*Woe is me for I am ruined
because I am a man of unclean lips
and live among a people of unclean lips,
and because my eyes have seen the King,
the LORD of Hosts.*

⁶ *Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs.*

⁷ *He touched my mouth with it and said:*

*Now that this has touched your lips,
your wickedness is removed
and your sin is atoned for.*

⁸ *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying:*

*Who should I send?
Who will go for Us?*

I said:

Here I am. Send me.

MAIN IDEA:

The presence of God's holiness transforms the repentant heart into one of willing service.

Consider sharing times in which you have experienced moments of exhilarating grandeur such as driving in the mountains with clouds below or flying beside magnificent thunder clouds, viewing soaring arches of a cathedral or an inspiring sunset or rainbow. Describe the feelings inspired within you.

Explain ancient people's proclivity to have insights into the supernatural. The Celts, for example, believed that there were great moments or places where the natural and supernatural met. They referred to these places of natural and supernatural collision as "thin places"—rare, unique, and momentary encounters. Ask congregants if they have ever been in a "thin place." Places of divide between the dimensions of what we know and the dimensions of eternal reality. Isaiah had such a moment. It was transformative for him and can be for us as well.

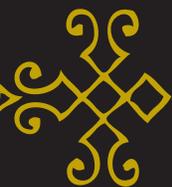
SUGGESTED TEACHING POINTS:

I. God is above all and is in control of all. (Isaiah 6:1-3)

A. Explore the process that babies use to develop their first mental images of their parents, starting with their mother. According to developmental psychologists, babies start developing internal pictures of external realities before two years of age. It is called *representational intelligence*. A baby studies the facial expressions of the nurturing mother or father and gradually comes to understand the external reality. In the same way, we envision God by studying His character. Like the baby, the lines may be blurred, but the reality is there.

B. Isaiah's vision came at a crucial moment. The king had died. It was a time of anxiety. What would be the course of the nation? Would events spin out of control? In the depths of thought and anxiety as he prays in the temple, Isaiah's mind is suddenly flooded with a vision that transformed his reality. It was a vision of God's holiness. Explore the outstanding features of this vision. God is high and exalted—towering above all. His robe fills the temple—God's presence pervades all of the space. God is visible, yet cannot be looked on. Seraphim cover face and feet in approaching God. As they fly, they call out to one another. The key to understanding Isaiah's picture of God is not that it portrays what God looks like, but rather where God is. God is on His throne.

C. In moments of anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion, we can know that God is always in charge. Neither the death of the king, nor the traumas of life, can ever alter God's reigning presence in our lives.



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MESSAGE 3: INCOMPARABILITY

Biblical Text: Ephesians 1:16-23

¹⁶ I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ I pray that the perception of your mind may be enlightened so you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the glorious riches of His inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power to us who believe, according to the working of His vast strength.

²⁰ He demonstrated this power in the Messiah by raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavens—
²¹ far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.
²² And He put everything under His feet and appointed Him as head over everything for the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way.

MAIN IDEA:

God's incomparable power is available to help the believer deal with any life challenge.

Introduce the sermon by explaining that the practice of using descriptive words for nicknames goes back a long time. In fact, the Bible is full of references to new names being applied to leading people—Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, Jacob became Israel. Jesus often applied nicknames to His followers. James and his brother John were called “The sons of thunder.” You can almost feel the impact of that. Simon became Peter, which meant “rock.” We associate word images to help describe certain characteristics. Associating the word incomparable with God helps us to understand another of God's characteristics. Paul refers to God's “incomparable great power.”

Remember A. W. Tozer's statement “What comes to mind when you think of God is the most important thing about you”? Ask: How do you envision God's incomparable power?

SUGGESTED TEACHING POINTS:

I. We are invited to know God better. (Ephesians 1:16-18)

- A. One might back away from coming to know God better because God is so powerful and we are so limited. Yet Paul's prayer invites and encourages believers through

the Spirit of wisdom and understanding to know God better. It is a spiritual journey. As you unpack Paul's prayer you might address these questions:

1. Would we like to know God better?
2. Would we like to see God better?
3. Would we like to have greater hope?
4. Would we like to share in God's richness?
5. Would we like to be enabled by God's power?

- B. Knowing God better is a worthwhile journey of faith. Paul's concern for his readers was that they come to know God better. He makes it a matter of continuous and fervent prayer—“I keep asking” (v. 17, NIV). Our growth as believers depends on our growth in exploring the nature of God. Over a lifetime we make only the smallest dent in understanding the fullness of God's character. The more we come to know God, the more we discover how little we know. Only the arrogant among us claim to know God to the fullest extent.

II. The most powerful things we know about do not compare with God's power. (Ephesians 1:19)

- A. On December 2, 1942, Enrico Fermi successfully unleashed the power of the atom. The incredible power of atomic fission was discovered. The smallest building block of nature, the atom, released so much energy that when the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima less than three years later, a whole city was devastated. Less than one third of an ounce of uranium destroyed 60,000 people and wiped out four square miles of city in seconds. The amount of energy contained in every particle of matter is almost inconceivable to us.

- B. Paul combines two Greek superlatives, *incomparable* and *great*, to describe God's power. God's power is not just *great*. God's power is not just *incomparable*. God's power is *incomparably great*! Even if we understood the power of the atom, we would still fall short of understanding the power of God.

- C. We often project onto God human characteristics. It is called *anthropomorphism*. We project a bigger form of ourselves onto God. It is like making God super-sized—a flight of fancy, like Superman, “able to jump tall buildings with a single bound.” God is more than that.



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MESSAGE 4: MERCY

Biblical Text: Micah 6:6-8; Hebrews 4:14-16; Romans 12:1-2

⁶ *What should I bring before the LORD
when I come to bow before God on high?
Should I come before Him with burnt offerings,
with year-old calves?*

⁷ *Would the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams
or with ten thousand streams of oil?
Should I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the child of my body for my own sin?*

⁸ *Mankind, He has told you what is good
and what it is the LORD requires of you:
to act justly,
to love faithfulness,
and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:6-8).*

¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed
through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to
the confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to
sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in
every way as we are yet without sin. ¹⁶ Therefore let us approach the
throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and
find grace to help us at the proper time (Hebrews 4:14-16).*

¹ *Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present
your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is
your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be
transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern
what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1-2).*

MAIN IDEA:

God's mercy provides a new pattern for living.

Relate a time when you experienced an act of mercy. Perhaps it was mercy shown by a parent to you as a child when you did something wrong. In South Africa, after Apartheid ended and the oppressed majority came to power, the new government instituted a policy of "Truth and Reconciliation." If a perpetrator of violence against oppressed citizens came forward and confessed the crime, pardon and reconciliation were available. If they didn't, however, they could be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. A policeman, who had shot and killed a child, publicly confessed his crime in the presence of the child's parents. Even with that horrible deed, there was forgiveness and reconciliation. We will explore God's great mercy toward us.

SUGGESTED TEACHING POINTS:

I. God is just and merciful. (Micah 6:6-8)

- A. God's justice demands that we be held accountable for our sins, but God's desire is to show mercy. Of course we want mercy—everyone does! Share a story that illustrates this point. Something like—when you were stopped for speeding and, while expecting the worst, you were greatly relieved when the officer issued only a warning.
- B. Discuss Micah's dilemma in approaching an exalted God. What offerings could he possibly bring to God who owned everything? Consider the problem we face at Christmas or some other occasion when we have to come up with a gift for someone who has everything.
- C. Micah reveals what God requires of us and, in so doing, reveals God's character. Three requirements are given: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. God is One who acts justly, who loves mercy, and who is willing for us to walk with Him. Emphasize the profound nature of a God who is willing for us to walk alongside Him. That says a lot about God!

II. God's grace allows us to approach God with confidence. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

- A. Describe an experience when you felt awkward or intimidated being in the presence of someone of authority or great respect—such as a student with a respected teacher, a citizen with a high government official, a low-ranking recruit with a military commander, a fan with an admired celebrity. Consider the sense of awe one would have approaching God's throne.
- B. Consider what we do when something breaks—perhaps an appliance, a computer, mobile phone, car, even our bodies when we have a health issue. We want to get it fixed. We look for someone who is able to fix it. For spiritual issues, we also need someone who is able to fix them. Hebrews suggests there is a High Priest who can do that, and that priest (Jesus) is not only capable but also empathetic with us, already knowing what we are going through.



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MESSAGE 5: JEALOUSY

Biblical Text: Ezekiel 8

¹ In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting in front of me, and there the hand of the Lord God came down on me. ² I looked, and there was a form that had the appearance of a man. From what seemed to be His waist down was fire, and from His waist up was something that looked bright, like the gleam of amber. ³ He stretched out what appeared to be a hand and took me by the hair of my head. Then the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and carried me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the inner gate that faces north, where the offensive statue that provokes jealousy was located. ⁴ I saw the glory of the God of Israel there, like the vision I had seen in the plain.

⁵ The LORD said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." I looked to the north, and there was this offensive statue north of the altar gate, at the entrance. ⁶ He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing here, more detestable things that the house of Israel is committing, so that I must depart from My sanctuary? You will see even more detestable things."

⁷ Then He brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked there was a hole in the wall. ⁸ He said to me, "Son of man, dig through the wall." So I dug through the wall, and there was a doorway. ⁹ He said to me, "Go in and see the terrible and detestable things they are committing here." ¹⁰ I went in and looked, and there engraved all around the wall was every form of detestable thing, crawling creatures and beasts, as well as all the idols of the house of Israel.

¹¹ Seventy elders from the house of Israel were standing before them, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had a firepan in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising up. ¹² Then He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his idol? For they are saying, 'The LORD does not see us. The LORD has abandoned the land.'" ¹³ Again He said to me, "You will see even more detestable things, which they are committing."

¹⁴ So He brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the LORD's house, and I saw women sitting there weeping for Tammuz. ¹⁵ And He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see even more detestable things than these."

¹⁶ So He brought me to the inner court of the LORD's house, and there were about 25 men at the entrance of the Lord's temple, between the portico and the altar, with their backs to the LORD's temple and their faces turned to the east. They were bowing to the

east in worship of the sun. ¹⁷ And He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? Is it not enough for the house of Judah to commit the detestable things they are practicing here, that they must also fill the land with violence and repeatedly provoke Me to anger, even putting the branch to their nose? ¹⁸ Therefore I will respond with wrath. I will not show pity or spare them. Though they cry out in My ears with a loud voice, I will not listen to them."

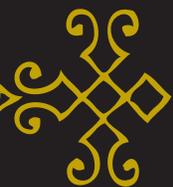
MAIN IDEA:

God's jealousy is provoked by anything that distracts our attention and affection away from Him.

Is it fair to ask how God can be jealous? Of what could He be jealous, since He has everything? We can make the distinction between being jealous of something and jealous for something. God is jealous for His people. It is like when parents are jealous for their children—to protect them and encourage them to do well—or a spouse who is jealous for his or her partner's commitment and love. Some scholars suggest that it is the idea of being zealous. Anything that displaces God becomes an idol. Idols are imitations made by us. We can easily substitute our creations for God.

SUGGESTED TEACHING POINTS:

- I. **God is jealous when we mistake the source of life and livelihood. (Ezekiel 8:1-6)**
 - A. Describe Ezekiel's vision. He is on a plain far away from Jerusalem. He sees a figure like a man—fiery waist down and glowing amber waist up, with a hand extended. That hand elevates Ezekiel between earth and heaven; he is yanked up by his hair into mid-air. In the vision, God transports him to Jerusalem to the temple. At the north gate he sees the idol that provokes God's jealousy.
 - B. Most scholars believe the idol may have been the Canaanite goddess of fertility. Perhaps the people looked to the idol as the source of their procreation of families and the fertility of their crops. Their livelihood was dependent on fertility. They were seeking to ensure their livelihoods from the idol instead of God.
 - C. Is there a connection with our day? Could this be our idol as well? Do we become self-sufficient? Are we so wrapped up in our own lives and pleasures that we feel little or no dependence on God for sustenance? Our food comes from a store. Fertility issues are assisted by medical research. Pleasure is sought from entertainment. Who needs God?



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MESSAGE 6: SOVEREIGNTY

Biblical Text: Matthew 10:29-31; Job 38:1-4,12,19; 39:1,9,26; 40:15,21

²⁹ Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's consent. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head have all been counted. ³¹ So don't be afraid therefore; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31).

¹ Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind. He said:

² Who is this who obscures My counsel with ignorant words?

³ Get ready to answer Me like a man; when I question you, you will inform Me.

⁴ Where were you when I established the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, ...

¹² Have you ever in your life commanded the morning or assigned the dawn its place, ...

¹⁹ Where is the road to the home of light?

Do you know where darkness lives? (Job 38: 1-4,12,19)

¹ Do you know when mountain goats give birth? Have you watched the deer in labor? ...

⁹ Would the wild ox be willing to serve you? Would it spend the night by your feeding trough? ...

²⁶ Does the hawk take flight by your understanding and spread its wings to the south? (Job 39:1,9,26).

¹⁵ Look at Behemoth, which I made along with you. He eats grass like an ox. ...

²¹ He lies under the lotus plants, hiding in the protection of marshy reeds (Job 40:15,21).

MAIN IDEA:

Nothing is too great or too small to escape God's notice or care.

Our concept of sovereignty can be colored by politics. We live in a democracy where citizens determine who will lead or represent us. No leader has absolute power over us. In other times, people yielded to absolute rulers—kings, caesars, sheiks, khans. The Mongols once exercised rule over the largest land mass of all time—ruled by Genghis and descendants like Kublai Khan. A large statue of Genghis Khan presides over the capitol building of Mongolia and gives name to the national airport there. Often ruthless, such despotic rulers had unquestioned authority, even though they could at times be benevolent. *Sovereignty* is used to describe God's authority

and rule over all. He is considered all-knowing (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), and all-present (omnipresent). If God knows everything, has power to do anything He chooses, and is present at all times, why do we sometimes suffer or feel alienated or abandoned by God?

SUGGESTED TEACHING POINTS:

I. God's sovereignty extends from the greatest to the smallest. (Matthew 10:29)

A. Jesus' approach to teaching drew from ordinary, everyday life in order to encapsulate profound truth. Could lowly sparrows become vehicles for teaching deep truths about God? Sometimes our greatest insights come unexpectedly, from the simplest experiences of daily life. It is the reason always to live in the present moment with full awareness of the things around us—a flower petal, a butterfly, a child, a spider's delicate web. They can each teach us.

B. Sparrows were sold on the market for next to nothing. Though almost worthless to us, God notices each one. Not one sparrow falls to the ground without His notice. Jesus suggests that a God who notices even the smallest of things certainly must notice us. Nothing is too big for God. Nothing is too small for God.

II. If God cares so much, why do bad things happen? (Matthew 10:30-31)

A. This is a question that naturally follows a discussion of God's sovereignty. Jesus tells His hearers not to be afraid. Note that He did not suggest that God kept the sparrow from falling. Why doesn't a sovereign God keep a child from drowning, stop a tragic accident, cure cancer, end starvation, disease, or war? No life is spared varying degrees of sorrow and hardship.

B. Ultimately we have no answer. We know that bad things happen to good people. At best, we can only gain a better perspective. It is like looking at a painting in an art gallery. Sometimes, if you stand too close, all you see are brush strokes. By stepping back, you can see the grand design. Or, like zooming your camera too much, all you get are the blurry pixels. Like Isaiah, we know that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). But whatever happens, God notices and cares.

