

# Measuring God

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'd like us first of all to turn now to Jeremiah chapter 31. Jeremiah chapter 31 and we'll read verses 35 to 37 which are on the screen before you but you can turn to it in your Bibles if you wish as well.

It's on page 798. Thus says the Lord, Who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is His name.

If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus says the Lord, If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.

The title of our sermon tonight is Measuring God. As many of you I'm sure will remember before I became a minister I was an engineer and one of the things I loved doing then and still love doing now is measuring things.

I love discovering how long things are, how heavy they are, how powerful they are, how old they are, how valuable they are. It's always fascinated me and it still does.

[ 1 : 3 9 ] Last month in Edinburgh we went to the Royal Highland show which is a wonderful show. It's not quite up there with the Carlisle show but it's pretty good.

One of the best things about the Royal Highland show is that it's got some very, very cool tractors. One of the tractors we saw was this one which is called the Case Quadtrak, probably the coolest vehicle on the planet I think.

Looking at something like that I'm just fascinated by all its measurements, how big it is, how heavy it is, how powerful it is. For those of you who are interested that tractor is 692 horsepower which is awesome I think.

Very cool. It's 28 tonnes and it's got a 12.9 litre engine. So all the kind of cars that we drive have got like pathetic 1.2 litre hybrid useless things.

That's got a 12.9 litre engine that's way bigger, way more powerful and I think it's amazing and I hope you do too. If not I can give you some counselling afterwards.

[ 2 : 5 5 ] The key point is that if you want to learn about something whether it's a tractor or whatever it may be you need to measure it. That's one of the best ways to learn about something and you take certain measurements.

That's very important particularly if it's something that you're going to be relying on. So if it's something that's going to take your weight, if it's something that's going to perform a structural role, measurement is very important.

Imagine somebody had designed a brand new type of plane and you were going to go on the very first flight and you were sitting next to the designer of the plane and just before you were taken off you said to him, how do you measure the correct length of wingspan for a plane?

If the designer replied and said, oh I just take a guess then that would not be good and you would feel very uncomfortable. And of course they never would just guess because measuring is very important.

We learn vast amounts by measuring things. So our question tonight is can you measure God?

[ 4 : 07 ] Is that even possible? Can we discover God's limits? Are there any tools that we can use to tell us how big God is or what his measurements are?

Can we identify the boundaries in which God exists? Can we quantify his power, his knowledge, his strength? Can we measure God?

Now that might seem like a silly question because at one level measuring God seems impossible, surely. God is infinite, how can we measure him?

But yet at the same time as we've been saying if you want to learn about that factor you need to measure it. If you want to learn about a piece of land you need to measure it. If you want to learn about anything you need to measure it.

So if you want to have knowledge of God surely we need to be able to measure him somehow. And we're left with this dilemma. Measuring God seems impossible because he's infinite.

[ 5 : 09 ] That by definition is immeasurable. But yet at the very same time measuring God seems to be essential because we need some kind of measure if we're going to know anything about him at all.

And because of that need to measure God, whether we realise it or not it's something that we often do. People very often measure God.

Or to put it another way, in order to understand God or to try and understand God we often place God within certain limits that we think we can understand.

So we have these sort of areas that we confine and fit God into in order to understand that and in order to understand him better.

That's something that's been true right through the history of humanity. Back in the Old Testament and in the days of Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other prophets that measuring of God was something that was very common and it was based on geographical territory.

[ 6 : 14 ] So the religious mindset in the ancient Near East was very much that the extent of God's power or presence was limited to a particular geographical location.

So if we were thinking of the equivalent today we would sort of say well God's power is in Carlisle but it's not in Stornoway.

It's confined to a geographical location. There's a very good example of that in 1 Kings chapter 20. In that chapter you'll read about a Syrian king called Ben Haddad who came to launch an offensive against Israel with a vast army.

So this huge army from Syria comes down to confront Israel and it looks like a completely one sided battle. Israel seems to have no chance but when they engaged in conflict Israel defeated them.

And of course that came as a huge shock to the Syrians and in the aftermath the king's advisors came to him and they said their gods are gods of the hills so they were stronger than we.

[ 7 : 26 ] But let us fight against them in the plain and surely we shall be stronger than they. And do this remove the kings that was other kings who were working with the Syrians each from his posts and put commanders in their place and muster an army like the army that you lost hush for hush and chariot for chariot then we'll fight against them in the plain and surely we shall be stronger than they.

And he listened to their voice and did so. You can read 1 Kings 20 when you get home to find out what happened next. But it's a very clear example of confining God to a particular territory.

As I said in the Old Testament that was geographical. The rest of history has seen that same pattern being used but we've moved from geographical territories to other kind of territories.

So some people will confine God to the territory of history so they say well God of course was relevant way back in the day back then. He's not so relevant now he's just confined to a kind of more primitive time when people needed some concept of the divine which they don't need now so God is kind of limited to the past.

In other ways God is limited to what we call a territory of morality. So our connection with God and our faith in God is simply about being a good person and our relationship with God is simply about just making our behaviour a wee bit better and making us better people.

[ 8 : 56 ] And so you have this idea of moral conduct and God is plunked into that territory and is limited by the boundaries which that is set.

Sometimes God is measured by the territory of our minds. So people will say well if there's anything about God that we can't understand then it can't be true.

And so God is kind of subjected to the limits of our rational understanding. And that's the mindset that has led people to reject doctrines like the Trinity and the incarnation to reject things like miracles because it's like well our minds can't get our heads around that so we just have to kind of disregard anything about God that goes beyond those limits and we just measure God as far as our minds can go and that's the limit.

And another way and perhaps maybe this is the most common way nowadays that God is measured or limited is where we kind of put God into just a sort of mystical spiritual category.

So people will say well yeah I do believe in God and I do believe there's something out there but it's kind of out there. It's not really anything to do with real life, not really anything to do with the physical world or my day to day conduct or existence, God is just this kind of mystical being that's just out there.

[ 10 : 19 ] And so in all of these ways whether people are realising it or not they're measuring God because they're saying he's only this big. So he's only as big as a historical period in the past or his authority only measures as far as doing good stuff or his nature only as far as our minds can go, his existence only measures as far as that sort of distant spiritual mystical realm.

It's got nothing to do with the physical here and now. People measure God and limit God in that way all the time and we can do the same.

We can confine God to different parts of our lives. We might confine God to a certain day in our lives. We might confine God just to certain parts of our behaviour or to certain people that we interact with and we keep a limit on how far God extends in our lives.

And of course all of that is wrong for the simple reason that when we confine God to a box we are putting ourselves above God.

We're saying this is how big God is. This is how far God's authority extends or this is where God is relevant and only there.

[ 11 : 50 ] And of course in all of that we are putting ourselves above God. And behind that lies the presupposition that whatever God is we need to be able to have a handle on it.

We need to make sure that we fully understand the extent of God's reality. And of course we must never forget that true knowledge of God will not fill your mind.

True knowledge of God will blow your mind. So we can't put God into these wee boxes but that still leaves us with the question can we measure God and if we can't then how are we going to learn about God?

And so we come to the Bible and we say well are there any tools found in the pages of scripture that we can use to measure God?

That's what happens when you want to measure something, if you want to measure how heavy something is you step on the scales. If you want to measure how tall something is you can use maybe a tape measure or if you can use a laser measure nowadays you can use your car if you want to measure how far it takes to get somewhere.

[ 13 : 13 ] If you want to measure something you need a tool. And so we can ask the Bible the question what tool can we use to measure God? Is there a tool that we can use to measure God?

And we'll probably think well of course there's not but the answer is yes there is. There is a tool in the Bible that we can use to measure God and it's a tool that we've seen in the passages that we've read tonight and which we've seen in Psalm 147 that we sang.

Do you know what the tool for measuring God is? It's the universe.

All of these passages refer to the universe and they're showing us that the universe is the tool that we can use to measure God.

Now there's a couple of important things to say before we go any further. First thing is to say that we're absolutely not saying that the universe is God.

[ 14 : 25 ] That's pantheism, that's a pagan, not a Christian doctrine and it's just another example of limiting God. We're not saying that the universe is God in the kind of sense of like mother and nature as a kind of divine being.

We're not saying that at all. Nor are we saying that the universe is as big as God gets. When we talk about using a tool we are talking in terms of an analogy not in terms of an equivalent.

We're not saying that the universe is God. We're not saying that the universe is as big as God. But we are saying, the Bible is saying, that the universe is a tool that we can use to get some kind of information in terms of measuring God.

And to do that I want us just to go back over the passages that we've read or sung together tonight. Because each of these passages is using the universe as a tool to measure an aspect of God's nature and character.

The first passage was our call to worship back in Isaiah chapter 55. For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways. My ways declare the Lord for us the heavens are higher than the earth.

[ 15 : 38 ] So are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Here we have the great contrast between earth and heaven. Now remember that when you see the word heaven in the Old Testament it refers, it can refer to three things.

It can refer to the sky. It can refer to the universe like space. And it can refer to the heavenly realm where God dwells.

So heavens can be where rain comes from. Heavens can be where the stars are. Heaven is where God dwells. And in many ways of course these three realms are also closely interconnected.

When living back in 700 BC you step outside your door, you look up and the sky, whether it's during the day or the stars, whether it's at night are just way, way up there.

And to the Hebrew mind that distance is utterly immense. And that vast height is the difference between the way we think and the way God thinks.

[ 16 : 46 ] The way he is inclined to go and the way we are inclined to go. Often we can think that God is just like us, only kind of like a wee bit better. He's a wee bit more knowledgeable or a wee bit more understanding.

He's just a bit higher like a kind of super person. But the truth that's been conveyed before us here is that God is way higher than us. And he operates at another level all together.

And that has very important practical application for us because it's reminding us that we should never, ever be concerned if there are some theological truths that we cannot completely grasp.

Often people will study the Bible and they'll find some aspect of the Bible that they can't fully understand. Some truth about God, about his nature or about the way he acts and we think we can't really get our heads round that.

Sometimes we think, oh, maybe it's not true, I can't get my head round it. It seems impossible to believe and it could worry us. But in truth, we should be far more worried if we had a God that we could fully get our heads round.

[ 17 : 57 ] Because a God that a human mind can fully explain is always going to be a man-made God. God's ways are far, far higher than ours.

The second verse I want to look at is in Psalm 147. We sang this together a moment ago. Verse 4 is where I want to focus. Verse 4 and 5, he determines the numbers of the stars.

He gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord and abundant in power. His understanding is beyond measure. Then we are being told and encouraged to think about the universe.

So imagine standing outside here in a dark winter night where it's still and the sky is clear and you look up and there's just a vast expanse of stars.

And in this Psalm, the comparison has been made between that image and a picture of how powerful God is and how great his understanding is. If you ask yourself how powerful is God, how great is his understanding, the Psalm is saying if you can count all the stars, then that will give you some idea.

[ 19 : 10 ] Now again, if you were way back in the Old Testament in 700 BC, that's an immeasurable quantity. But today we have the advantage of all the God-given progress that we've made through science and through astronomy.

And we actually have a clearer grasp of the number of stars. And that makes the analogy even more amazing. So I went to the most reliable source of information on the planet, Google, and I asked how many stars are there in the universe?

And here's the answer I got. There are about 10 billion galaxies in the observable universe. The number of stars in a galaxy varies.

But assuming an average of 100 billion stars per galaxy means that there are about one zero billion stars in the observable universe.

God has a name for them all. So if you want to measure God's power and understanding, you need a measuring tape that has the name of one billion trillion stars written on it.

[ 20 : 28 ] The third passage is Isaiah 40, which we read. I will just pick up the section here from verse 10 to verse 15. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him.

So you see the word might there in verse 10. This is talking about God's strength. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense. Before him, he will tend his flock like a shepherd who gathered the lamb in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and mapped off the heavens with a span and closed the dust of the earth in a measure and waved the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

Who has measured the spirit of the Lord or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, who taught him knowledge and showed him the way of understanding?

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are accounted as the dust on the scales. Behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.

[ 21 : 28 ] This is a fascinating passage, speaking about how strong God is and it gives us some vivid imagery to describe that. A lot of it's focused on your hand.

So you can just look at your hand as a comparison. First of all, we'll see that it talks in verse 12 about measuring the waters in the hollow of his hand.

So you look at your hand and think about when you scoop up water in your hand. Whenever you try to scoop up water, most of it dribbles through your fingers and makes a mess of your sleeve and you just end up with a pretty tiny pool in the palm of your hand.

So you can hold, I don't know what the measurement is, but just like a tablespoon of water in our hand. Now imagine that that pool in your hand was big enough to hold the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Southern Ocean, the Indian Ocean and all the seas and lakes of the world.

That's how big God's hand is. It then talks about a span. We use a span to measure something. I think do you use span to measure horses, I think? How high horses are?

[ 22 : 44 ] You could use a span to measure how high this lectern is or to measure the book. This Bible here is about one span.

My hand are quite big, my fingers are long, my span is on the larger than average size, probably. How big is God's span? What says here, God can measure the heavens.

In other words, he can measure the universe with a span. God's power is immense.

And you see this remarkable imagery. The nations of the world are like a drop in a bucket. The mountains are like dust just left over on a set of scales.

And in light of this, Isaiah 40 talks about how absolutely ridiculous it is to try to make an idol to represent God. You think of the God whose span covers the whole of the heavens and then you make this tiny little wooden statue and say, that represents God.

[ 23 : 46 ] Isaiah 40 is saying that's ludicrous. God is just so much bigger. You cannot compare God with any likeness.

And of course, that's why the second commandment prohibits any worship of God through images. And we're being reminded that God's strength is so immense that only the universe itself comes close to measuring it.

Do you not know, do you not hear, has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above this circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.

The entire universe is just like a curtain to God. The fourth passage speaks about God's presence and we're actually going to sing it at the end.

It's Psalm 139. It's a Psalm that I'm sure many of you will know quite well. And again, it speaks about the universe.

[ 24 : 54 ] Where shall I go from your spirit or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you're there. If I make my bed in shell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

The imagery here is remarkable. At one level, the Psalm speaks about space travel. It speaks about ascending into the heavens. Imagine you could just fly up, up, up and up and explore the sky and the heavens and the stars beyond.

It speaks about underground probing. When it says make my bed in shell, that's thinking in terms of the grave. So remember again, from an Old Testament mindset, the heavens is up, the grave is down.

So when it speaks about there going down, it's underground probing. And in verse nine, you have ocean exploration, traveling to the far off parts of the sea.

And even if you could reach the limits of all of these things, can you get beyond God's presence? And the answer is no.

[ 26 : 02 ] God's presence is inescapable. And the only thing that comes close to measuring that is the universe itself. Can a human get out of the universe? No.

Can we get beyond God's presence? No we can't. So we've seen imagery of God's power, His presence, His strength, His understanding.

Finally we come back to Jeremiah 31, where we're taught a little bit about a measurement of God's commitment. This passage is speaking about God's covenant relationship with His people.

And in particular, it's speaking about God's commitment to the new covenant, which is the ultimate fulfillment of all of God's promises. In the Old Testament, you have various strands of this covenant theme foreshadowing God's ultimate fulfillment of His promises through Jesus Christ in the new covenant.

And this is what this verse is pointing us, this chapter is pointing us towards. And here we have a description of God's commitment. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar.

[ 27 : 14 ] The Lord of hosts is His name. If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.

Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.

These verses are basically saying, if time stops and if the universe itself can be measured, then God's commitment is going to fail.

And of course, the whole point of that poetic language is to say that that is never going to happen. So the principle in all of these passages that we're looking at together is that if you want to measure God, the best tool available to humanity is the universe itself.

And that's helpful in a way because it gives us some kind of point of comparison. It gives us something that is tangible. And yet at the same time, even the universe itself for us is immeasurable.

[ 28 : 33 ] And that's really why the universe is such a good tool for measuring God. It's tangible, but it's immeasurable. It gives us a reference point for the immensity of God, but at the same time, the fullness and reality of that is too big for us to take in.

And of course, that's the whole reason why the universe is so big because the heavens declare the glory of God.

Sometimes when we see the vastness of the universe and the tinniness of earth, it can shake our faith and we think to ourselves, well, can God be real in all of that?

But of course, the truth is, of course, God is real in all of that. Because if God is God, if God is infinite, then he needs a massive universe to declare his glory.

It all makes perfect sense. But in all of that teaching being said before us, you might be thinking, well, Thomas, what has any of this got to do with me?

[ 29 : 50 ] And in a way, it does seem kind of big and beyond us. In many ways, measuring the vastness of God can hit us with a sense of total insignificance.

We're talking about measuring God against the universe. Even the universe itself isn't big enough to measure God. But now, if you measure yourself against the universe, it just seems so tiny.

And sometimes you see these kind of films or videos put together where it will show the earth or it will show part of the earth and then it will zoom out and you'll see the world and zoom out and see the solar system and zoom out and zoom out and zoom out.

Before you know it, the earth is just this tiny speck and you're just one sixth billionth of the people who live on that tiny speck. We seem so tiny.

We seem like we're just nothing. And the great tragedy of godless science, of science that has no kind of reference to God is that the more we discover the immensity of the universe, the more we are left feeling worthless and insignificant.

[ 31 : 14 ] And that, of course, is why many people today actually are trying to push back against the hard facts of science in order to try and feel special.

We can so often be left feeling hugely significant by comparison. If you feel like that, if you think that God is just so massive and you are so worthless and tiny, then there's something else in all of these passages that you need to see.

Because these passages that we've read have got more than one thing in common. At one level, they all have in common the fact that they use the universe as a tool to measure God, but they all do something else as well.

They all make a direct connection between the infinite magnitude of God and his astonishing care and love towards you.

Look at it again. Jeremiah 31, speaking about this fact that if time stands still, if the universe can be measured, then my commitment will end.

[ 32 : 47 ] And in the verse before that, it explains the reason for that. No longer shall each one teach his neighbour and say to his brother, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest to clear the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more.

But thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed sort of the moon, etc, etc, etc. It's all in the context of God's forgiveness of those who've mucked up in their lives.

Psalms 139 says, if I ascend to heaven, you're there, if I make my bed in the grave, you're there, if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, then there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

Psalms Isaiah 40, speaking about the immense strength of God, who's got the oceans in his hand and who can measure the universe with a span and for whom the nations of the world are like dust.

It says, behold, the Lord God comes with his might, his arm rules for him, behold, his reward is with him, his recompense before him, he will tend his flock like a shepherd.

[ 33 : 56 ] He will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

Psalms 147, the Lord builds up Jerusalem, he gathers the outcasts of Israel, he heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds, he determines the number of the stars and gives them all their name.



And then we come back to Isaiah 55, which we read at the very beginning. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he's near, let the wicked forsake his way in the unrighteous man his thoughts, let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon because my thoughts are not your thoughts.

Neither are your ways, my ways, declares the Lord. And the great truth being set before you and me in all of this is not simply the astonishing mind blowing immeasurability of God.

The truth being set before us is that the immeasurable strength of God means that he can hold you and never let you go.

[ 35 : 16 ] The limitless power and understanding of God means that he can bind up your wounds and heal you no matter how broken your life may be.

The inescapable presence of God means that he will never, ever leave you. He will always be with you.

The vastly superior thoughts and ways of God mean that he can forgive you and he can pour his compassion onto you.

And the eternal commitment of God means that you can know him forever.

You are his and he is yours. And all that immensity that can only be measured by the universe is being poured into looking after you.

[ 36 : 34 ] And that's what's being told to us in the second passage that we read in Colossians chapter 1. And it all centres around Jesus Christ.

I'm just going to read it slowly but when we read this, think about creation, think about the universe, think about how it all fits together. He, Jesus, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

For by him all things were created. So whole universe created by Jesus, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things and in him all things hold together. So the whole universe held together by Jesus Christ. He's the head of the body, the church, he's the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, in that in everything he might be preeminent.

But in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

[ 37 : 38 ] And so we have this amazing picture of the whole universe being held together by Jesus, the whole universe being made by Jesus, everything centred on him.

He's made peace by the blood of the cross and you who were once alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds. He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you, holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

That is telling us that in Jesus the immeasurable greatness of God's power, strength, understanding, presence and commitment is all being channeled towards God's great goal, which is to save you and to have you with him.

And it's all possible through the cross because Jesus Christ, the one through whom the whole universe was created, the one in whom all things hold together, he came to die for you so that that can happen.

So think back to that hand, that hand that can measure the universe, that hand that can hold all the oceans in just the palm, that hand in whom all the mountains of the earth are just like dust, that hand was nailed to the cross for you.

[ 39 : 13 ] And that's why measuring God is so important because the more you measure God, the more you will discover how loved you are.

And I really hope you can see that because the Christian Gospel presents you with a God whose love and commitment to you is so great, the only tool that comes even close to measuring it is the universe.

And the only way that we can respond to that is to bide out before him, to worship him, to trust him and to follow him.

Amen, let's pray. Dear God, our Father, we are just amazed at the immensity of your power, wisdom, strength, presence and commitment and we're even more amazed that you channel all of that towards people like us.

Thank you so much for all that you've done and we just rejoice before the mind-blowing wonder of who you are and of all that you've done.

[ 41 : 05 ] And so we bow before you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we thank you.