

Waiting: The Lofty and the Lowly

Human Engine Waits

We are on the second sermon in the HEW series. I have chosen to preach through some of this album is because of Andy's theological depth. His lyrics make rich biblical and theological connections between the OT and NT, driving our attention to centrality of Jesus in the history of redemption. "Waiting" is no exception to this. Drawing upon the rich imagery of Isaiah and Revelation, Andy juxtaposes the high and the low, the lofty and the humble. This morning we are going to consider the question: **"How can a high God live with a lowly people?"** In order to answer this question, we will examine two of the key texts that inspired Andy's song—Isaiah and Revelation. Just how high is God? How low is man? And how can we reconcile the seemingly infinite distance between the two? God. Man. And how to Connect, Commune.

A High God

Isaiah's prophecy is to exiled Israel, displaced from their land, temple, and culture, living in the heart of enemy territory—Babylon. God had sent Israel into exile because of her rejection of YHWH and her acceptance—worship—of foreign gods. And in 587 BC the Babylonians looted and sacked the Jewish temple, a vivid image of Israel's spiritual state, plundered, broken down. The temple, the center of cultural, political, and religious life, now gone and Israel gone. When describing their multifarious sin, Isaiah calls Israel "children of transgression," juxtaposed to his description of God in 15: *"For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place...'"* This is the God who is high, high and lifted up, higher than any CEO. He lives in eternity; his house is forever. It makes the mansions of Westlake Hills look like shacks. His name is holy, a name that no human on the planet can claim, a name more fame-worthy than any Hollywood star or celebrity athlete. He lives in a high and holy, lofty place. Where is this place? What is Isaiah referring to? Let's take the language of "high and lifted up". This is existentially gripping language for Isaiah. It trips the memory of his call in Isaiah 6 to become a prophet, which began with a vision of God high and lifted up:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

This is a vision of the God who is high, exalted, lifted up, holy, holy, holy. The heavens are his throne and the earth is his ottoman. His glory unfolds like a royal robe, filling the earth. The whole earth is full of his glory. He is surrounded by a concert of Narnia-esque creatures who repeatedly sing the chorus of his glorious name—holy, holy, holy. The vision of God is so strong, Isaiah can barely stand it. He is in the presence of the eternal, uncreated King of all creation! You see, this phrase "high and lifted up," in 57 evokes images...of the cosmic, sovereign, holy, God of all creation. The God who is High. How high? Isaiah continues to roll out his vision of God in the final chapter, where he depicts God's dwelling place as a cosmic temple (66:1): *"Thus says the LORD: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?'"* Do you see how high God's dwelling place is? We are meant to see the height of God's glory extending well beyond any

man-made temple. Instead, the entire universe is a **temple of God's glory**. He dwells in a universal temple fit for a universal King. It is with this imagery in mind and mouth that Isaiah addresses the exiled Israelites, some of whom desire to return home, to their land, to their temple. But there is no temple. And so God poses this question: *"what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?"* Where will God dwell? How will Israel be reunited with him? God tells them that no new temple that can be built for him, that he is too grand for any costly temple they could ever build. His temple is removed from them, his presences is removed from them; he is high and lifted up. They are low and downcast. He is in eternity; they are in exile. So how can this lowly people reach their lofty God? How can we reach Him? Broken, sinful, infatuated with ourselves and our world? This is the enigma of Isaiah—how can a lowly rebellious people draw near to a God who is high and lifted up? This is our enigma. Back in Isaiah 57 we are told that this King of Glory dwells, not only in a high and lofty place, but also the lowly: *"I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit"* (57:15)." Who are these lowly people? Naturally, the Jews would want to know how to become lowly, so that they might live with the blessing of God's presence again. How then do we become lowly?

Lowly People

What does it mean to be a lowly person? Is God looking for grovelers? There are at least a couple of ways that we think of lowly—circumstances and character. There are **circumstances** that are difficult that can bring us to an emotional low. I think of Lolo Jones, the Olympic American hurdler who lost her lead just meters from the finish line as she struck the second to last hurdle. She ended up getting seventh when gold was in her grasp. After crossing the finishline she collapsed on the tracks in disbelief. After the race, she commented that four years earlier she sat in her house crying because she wasn't on the '04 Olympic track, but in an ironic twist she was crying again, except this time she was on the '08 track, without the gold she has trained so hard for. Lolo was brought low by her circumstances. Circumstances can be humbling, like losing a medal, promotion, a job, a gig. Your product or art doesn't sell. Your children don't behave like you've labored for them too. You feel like a failure as a parent, employee, friend, person. Circumstances humble us. This was certainly true of Israel? They had been stripped of their dignity, their culture, their land. But humbling circumstances don't *always* produce lowly, humble people. Consider Ara Abrahamain, the Swedish Olympic wrestler who stormed off the podium in the awards ceremony, tossing his unwanted bronze to the floor. Later, his medal was stripped. The third medal stripping in Olympic history. But unlike his predecessors, Ara refused to apologize. How do you respond to humbling circumstances? Like Ara or Lolo? Lowly circumstances don't necessarily produce lowly, humble people. So how do we cultivate humility? Because if we do, we get to live with God! Let's consider the second way a person can be lowly or humble--**character**. We might say a person has humble character when they don't think too highly of themselves, that, when given the opportunity to boast, they point away from themselves. I think of the two Americans who medaled in Track & Field. When one was asked how he did it, he replied: "This is what I came here to do; this is no surprise to me." The other American medalist standing next to him responded to the same question differently: "It's just a privilege to be here representing the U.S. I thank God. I am so happy." So we can be humble in character, in winning the gold, getting the promotion, getting a gig, selling

your product or art. In having well-behaved children who grow up to be productive members of society...*by not boasting in these accomplishments*. These are actually the kind of people we prefer to spend time with, aren't they? Do you enjoy being around that person who always has to one up you? The arrogant, me-monster (Brian Reagan) people? No. We'd rather be with people of humble, lowly character than with proud, arrogant people. We'd rather hang with Lolo than Ara. Why is that? Proud people make you feel small, they aren't concerned with anything other than themselves. You are a means to the end of their importance. They value you only to the extent that you can make them feel important. The proud are like a relational black hole; they suck everything out of you and give nothing back. Sometimes they can do this without uttering a word. The lowly/humble, on the other hand, rejoice in other's successes. So how do we get this humble character. If humbling circumstances aren't enough to produce humble, lowly character, then how do we get it? If we can answer this question, we'll be getting close to the bigger question of how can lowly people know a high and holy God. The corresponding adjective used to describe those that God dwells with is—**contrite**. This word refers, not to circumstances, or even to character, but to a state of the heart or of the spirit. Isaiah tells Israel that God will *dwell* with "him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit"; that he will revive the heart of the contrite. So this question of how lowly people can know a high God is related to the state of our hearts. What does it mean to have a contrite heart?

1. The contrite are **honest**. They don't pretend to be better than they are. They confess their brokenness, sin, and pride. They possess an honest evaluation of themselves.
2. The contrite also acknowledge their **need** for renewal, redemption, change. They know that they don't have what it takes to change their own hearts, to be truly humble.
3. The contrite are **repentant**; they grieve over belittling others, over making themselves great instead of marveling at his greatness.

These are the people that God lives with. Contrite hearts, honest about our sin, our need for redemption, and repentant over it? These are the people God lives with. As Andy sings, "You tend to gravitate to the lowly." And so how is it that we become honest, acknowledge our need, and repentant? How do we undergo this heart change?

Dwelling in the New Temple

It is with the humble of heart, the contrite in spirit, that God will dwell. How can a high and holy, eternal God come to live with us? After all, this is the God does not dwell in a temple made with human hands. So how is it that he will dwell with us? Remember, this is covenant-breaking, temple-missing, idol-worshipping Israel, "the children of sin." Yet God has found some hearts that are humble...how will he will dwell with them? Let's go back to Isa 57:14: "*And it shall be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way."* What is to be built up? This is not the typical word for build (*banah*). Instead, Isaiah uses a word that can be translated "to throw up" or "cast up" (*salal*), which is used in association with throwing up a siege ramp to assault a high wall (Job 19:12; cf. Ps 68.4; Jer 18:15). Throw up a ramp, clear all the obstacles, make a way for Israel! A way where? A way out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem, an exodus out of the exile! But this imagery is pointing, not merely to return to the old city to rebuild an old temple in which God cannot dwell. It is not a return from exile by superhighway to Jerusalem. Rather, it is a mountain road to Zion. [mountain temples] There is a ramp from the lowly people to the lofty God. Every moral stumbling block will be removed!

The image here is that a clear way is made for the high God to live with the lowly man. A way is made from the lofty to the lowly. How? Still broken, unholy yet contrite people. We are made new: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, *to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*" The lowly people of God can dwell with the God who is above *because he will make them new people.* He will revive their hearts—the implication being that their hearts were dead. The word is "to make alive, to restore to life from the dead." Humble, lowly Israel will ascend the holy mountain of God's presence because he has made them new, a people without sin. We are meant to see that the heavenly temple of God's presence is being extended to encompass the humble saints, as God makes them new. The people become his temple. And this newness is part of God's commitment to renew *all things*, to make for himself a re-newed temple in which he can dwell comprised of a new people and a new creation. Isaiah says: *"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind."¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness."* (65:17-18). This is how the high and holy God will dwell with his lowly people; he will make them new! They are new, they are whole, they are holy. A holy people and a holy God. John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, picks up on this prophecy and expands upon it in Revelation: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away..."² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. A new people, a new heavens, a new earth, a new temple for God to dwell in, and that temple is the New Jerusalem, a Bride, a city and a people. Notice the repetition of the word dwell, a word that could be translated "tabernacle" or "temple" among men. The high and Holy God dwelling with man. How? Because God made all things new, fit for his glory. This is the promise for all who hope in Jesus. Why Jesus? We see in Rev 21 that the Lamb is at the center of the city. The Lamb who was the final sacrifice for the final temple, who takes away all our sin and writes our name into the Book of Life. Because it is Jesus who dies and lives to make men new. How do lowly people connect with the high and holy God? God comes down in Jesus to make men new, so that men may go up the mountain road that leads to Zion, the city of God! A new city, a new creation, and new people, all promised with the return of the King, King Jesus. And so with Andy and all the saints we appropriately sing:*

*For you make all things new
And you restore the weary
So we place our hope in you
And we are waiting
Waiting for you...*

Waiting is not wheel-spinning; it is *hope* in what is true—all things new, with God, forever.

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