

# God is...Independent

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church  
Sunday, December 10, 2023

## ❖ Introduction

- Just last month, my family and I got the chance to visit Taiwan, where my parents are from. One of the things we did early into the trip was to visit my ninety-nine-year-old grandmother, who's still living in the same home that my mother grew up in way back when.
- One of the things that caught my attention when I was there was this large, wooden, altar in the front of the living room, just next to the TV.
- Now, the living room itself isn't all that big. So the altar really just stands out when you're there. There's an image at the altar of an important figure in Buddhism, Guanshiyin Pusa. My grandmother is a Buddhist.
- But there's also a picture of my grandfather just to the left of the altar, high up on the wall.
- My grandfather passed away a long time, while I was still a kid.
- My mother remembers that, growing up, on certain days of the year, her family would place different meats and drinks and fruit outside the house as an offering to the Chang family ancestral spirits. They would burn incense and pray to them for health and wealth.
- Now it might sound strange to the average American ear, but ancestor worship is pretty commonplace in a country like Taiwan. It's not uncommon for there to be home altars set up, just like the one in my grandma's place.
- So what's ancestor worship? It's this idea that after loved ones die and go on into the afterlife, there's a continued relationship that they have with family members who are still alive.<sup>1</sup>
- On one hand, these deceased ancestors have this sort of dependence on their living relatives to care for them and to sustain them as they experience the world of the afterlife. And that's done through food offerings or other items.

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<sup>1</sup> Jason F. Way, "Taiwanese Ancestor Worship: Honoring Family Legacy," DiscoveringTW, last modified September 2023, <https://discoveringtw.com/taiwanese-ancestor-worship-honoring-family-legacy/>.

- On the other hand, if you treat these ancestors well, pray to them, honor them, present the right offerings, then your life will in turn be blessed.
- Listen to one way this practice is described: “The offerings are believed to nourish the spirits of the ancestors and ensure their continued well-being and protection of the family. Additionally, it’s customary to burn incense and joss paper [which is basically paper money that’s burned as an offering], which are believed to provide comfort to the spirits and help them on their journey in the afterlife.”<sup>2-3</sup>
- And listen to this other description: “The key point of ancestor worship is that living descendants provide those who’ve passed away with the means for a happy existence in the afterlife. Ancestors are both loved and feared; if neglected by their sons or grandsons...they may deliberately harm their descendants.”<sup>4</sup>
- I want you to hear this sort of give and take that some people in this world have in their supposed relationships with their deceased ancestors.
- If I just perform this ritual right, if I just show enough honor and respect, if I just give the right kinds of offerings, then the spirits of my ancestors will not only get the help and nourishment *they* need in the afterlife, but they’ll help me get the life that I think *I* need as well.
- And the question is: is this what the God of Christianity is like?
- I mean, when you think about the Old Testament, and all the different types of sacrifices and offerings that were prescribed for the people of Israel to carry out, is our God really any different from these ancestral spirits?
- This morning, we’re continuing on in a series focusing on different attributes of God. We’ve looked at the ways that God is good, that he’s patient, that he’s unchanging, and, last week, that he’s eternal.
- And all these different characteristics of God paint a fuller picture of what the God we worship is like. And how to relate to him based on what he’s like.
- Today, what I want to focus on is this idea that God is independent. That he’s radically different from the kind of ancestral spirits who supposedly *need* their living descendants to help them thrive and to be “happy” in the afterlife.
- No, God doesn’t *need* us. He doesn’t. And I know that can make God sound pretty cold and distant.

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<sup>2</sup> Way, “Taiwanese Ancestor Worship.”

<sup>3</sup> “Joss Paper,” Wikipedia, last modified November 22, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joss\\_paper](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joss_paper).

<sup>4</sup> “Taiwan’s Culture and Festivals,” Life of Taiwan, accessed December 7, 2023, <https://lifeoftaiwan.com/about-taiwan/culture-festivals/>.

- Like he's so far out there that he doesn't *need* our prayers, that he doesn't *need* our worship, that he doesn't *need* us to get up early and gather like this on Sunday mornings.
- And that can be discouraging to think about.
- But what I want to show you this morning is that this is actually a *good* thing.
- That we serve a God who isn't dependent on us humans to make him feel good about himself. We're not just here to boost God's self-esteem!
- So here's where we're going this morning. What I first want to do is to define and spell out what it means for God to be independent.
- Then I want to demonstrate God's independence from the Bible, particularly through the story of Moses rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.
- And then I'll end with some implications of what God's independence means for us. And what I want you to walk away with is a clear answer to this question, however way the Spirit speaks to your heart: how is knowing that God is independent actually *good* for us?

### ❖ **Defining God's Independence**

- So first, what does it mean for God to be independent? Theologians use a fancy term, called "aseity," to describe God's independence. It comes from a Latin phrase, *a se*, which means "from or by himself."<sup>5</sup>
- One theologian defines God's aseity this way: "...that he is sufficient to himself, independent of anything outside himself."
- He goes on to explain that this "guards God's freedom to enter the creation without compromising himself, to enter relationships with the world and with people."<sup>6</sup>
- In Acts chapter 17, when the apostle Paul gave a speech to the men at Athens, he specifically points out that the "God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he *needed* anything..." (17:24-25, ESV; emphasis mine).
- I like how theologian, Wayne Grudem, points out that "[p]eople have sometimes thought that God created human beings because he was lonely and needed fellowship with other persons. If this were true, it would mean that God is not completely independent of creation. It would mean that God *needed* to create persons in order to be completely

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<sup>5</sup> John Frame, "The Eternality and Aseity of God," The Gospel Coalition, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/eternality-aseity-god/>.

<sup>6</sup> Frame, "The Eternality and Aseity of God."

happy or completely fulfilled in his personal existence.”<sup>7</sup>

- Then he points out that the three persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – have always enjoyed the utmost level of communion and fellowship among themselves, even before the creation of the universe.<sup>8</sup>
- In John 17:24, Jesus talks about a glory that his Father gave to him because the Father “loved [him] before the foundation of the world” (ESV).<sup>9</sup>
- Grudem goes on to say this: “The fact that God is three persons yet one God means that there was no loneliness or lack of personal fellowship on God’s part before creation.”<sup>10</sup>
- And so, on one hand, God has no *need* of being in a relationship with us humans. There’s nothing he *depends* on us for.
- But on the other hand, this doctrine of God’s independence also teaches us that, in his sovereign will, though he has no need of us, he freely *chooses* to establish a relationship with us and to enfold us into his plans and purposes for this world.
- Again, Grudem helps us understand a truth that makes this doctrine of God’s independence actually a *good* thing for us.
- And it’s that, yes, God doesn’t need us. *But*, “*we and the rest of creation can glorify God and bring him joy... that we are in fact very meaningful because God has created us and has determined that we would be meaningful to him.*”<sup>11</sup>
- *And*, “he chooses to delight in us and to allow us to bring joy to his heart.”<sup>12</sup>
- So where do we see this in the Bible?

### ❖ Demonstrating God’s Independence

- Turn with me to the book of Exodus, chapter 3. Many of you know the story leading up to this chapter. But at one point in Jewish history, the people of Israel were held in bondage in the land of Egypt. This was because one of Abraham’s great-grandsons, Joseph, in a series of events, had come to great power in Egypt.
- And in the middle of a famine, he invited his brothers and his father, Jacob, to settle in the land of Egypt. After many years, the people of Israel grew to be so big in number that

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<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>10</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>11</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 192.

<sup>12</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

they intimidated the king of Egypt.

- The Bible says in Exodus 1 that “the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service...” (1:12b-14a, ESV).
- And so we read in Exodus 2:23-25: “During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (ESV).
- What was that covenant? Lots of people. Lots of land. Back in Genesis 15, God shows Abram the stars in heaven and tells him, “So shall your offspring be” (15:5, ESV).
- God later promises Abram, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gergashites and the Jebusites” (15:18-21, ESV). You get the point.
- And so we get to the beginning of chapter 3, where we find an obscure shepherd, named Moses, tending to his flock out in the middle of nowhere. This isn’t just any random shepherd in the middle of nowhere, though.
- Just the chapter before, we find out that this man was a Jew, who found himself out in the distant land of Midian, far away from his people back in Egypt because he had murdered someone. And he was trying to get away from being killed by Pharaoh himself.
- So look down at verse 1 of chapter 3 with me: “Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb [also known as Mount Sinai], the mountain of God” (Ex. 3:1, ESV).<sup>13</sup>
- So Moses is just minding his own business when out of nowhere, he spots a bush over to the side that’s caught on fire. Except the bush wasn’t being burned up.
- And from this burning bush, Scripture tells us that an “angel of the LORD” begins to speak to him. Look down at verse 4.
- “When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground’” (Ex. 3:4-5, ESV).

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 109.

- Now people have different opinions about who this “angel of the LORD” exactly is. But there’s one view I read in a commentary that makes the most sense to me. And that’s that this angel is actually just God himself.<sup>14</sup>
- The rest of this passage details the conversation directly between Moses and God. Look at verse 6, for example: “And he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at *God*” (ESV, emphasis mine).
- So Moses was talking with God. And at the same time, he was afraid to look directly at God himself.
- In verse 7, look down there with me, God goes on to tell Moses that he’s “seen the affliction of [his] people...in Egypt and [has] heard their cry because of their taskmasters” (Ex. 3:7, ESV).
- He says, “I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:7-8, ESV).
- But the catch is this. Look down at verse 10. God says to Moses: “Come, I will send *you* to Pharaoh that *you* may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt” (ESV, emphasis mine).
- Now Moses’ response is telling and this is where I want to make my point. Look down at verse 11. “But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’” (ESV).
- What stands out here is the way Moses seems to be missing the point of this entire encounter. This was not about him! Moses, after killing a man in Egypt, was now an obscure shepherd in the middle of nowhere.
- He’s a forgotten part of the past. And certainly had no dreams to rescue his own people out of Egyptian slavery. He was content living in obscurity. Tending to his flock. Leading a quiet life.
- But out of nowhere, through a burning bush, God steps into Moses’ life with a plan to send this obscure, forgotten murderer-now-turned-shepherd back to Egypt to get his people out of slavery.
- What I’m trying to show you is that God, though completely independent of humanity—no, he didn’t have to do *anything* when the people of Israel were crying out to him for help—*chose* to enter into the plight of his people.

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 112-113.

- God *chose* to appear to Moses, initiating a relationship with him and calling him on a mission. He didn't need to, but God *chose* to make Moses a meaningful part of the bigger story that he was writing.
- Moses asks God what to tell the Israelites if they ask the name of the God who sent him.
- Look down at verse 14: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"
- One commentator suggests that here, we see God clearly pointing out his own independence from everything else that he's created in this world. He's always been who he is in both his "character" and in his "nature."
- He's able to be and to do whatever he wants to simply because God *is* who he is and God *is* who he wants to be.<sup>15</sup>
- Look down at verse 15. "God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel: "The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you." This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations'" (Ex. 3:15, ESV).
- So the name God gives to Moses to tell the people of Israel is, in the English translation, "LORD," but you'll notice all the letters are capitalized. If you're reading from the ESV, if you look down at the footnote, you'll see that when Lord is all capitalized, it actually refers to the specific name for God, "Yahweh."
- This is the name, one commentator explains, that the Israelites back in Egypt would recognize as "the true God of old, the God their own ancestors worshiped."<sup>16</sup> Which, then, would provide Moses with the credibility he needed to lead God's people out of Egypt.
- Ok, so I was trying to explain God's independence to one of my sons in the car on the way back from Japanese school yesterday.
- And it was kind of hard. I mean, if you tell someone that basically, God's independence means that God doesn't need you, that doesn't really feel good.
- But imagine one day I was taking my boys out for a bike ride. And we just happen to notice that one of the boys' bikes has a flat tire. And we need to pump some air in it.

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<sup>15</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 191.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 122.

- Now, I don't need my boys to help me with that. I could get that tire pumped on my own. In fact, I could do it faster and more efficiently if I did it on my own.
- But, if you're a parent, you'll know how this feels, kids like to help out. And there's something different and special about just going ahead and letting a kid take hold of that big pump and push and push and push what little air they can get into that tire.
- Even if the pressure gauge doesn't go very far. It's the act of being invited into something like that that makes a kid feel special and a meaningful part of that activity.
- Isn't this just like how we are with God? God doesn't *need* us. That's true. But just like Moses, God can *choose* to include us into what he's doing in this world and to draw us into the story he's writing in a way that brings him joy.
- So we've talked about what God's independence is. And I've shown you through Moses' story how God's independence is seen in Scripture.
- Now I want to move on to drawing some implications from the fact that God is independent. How is knowing that God is independent actually *good* for us?

#### ❖ **Drawing Implications of God's Independence**

- First, God's independence should *deepen* our dependence on him.
  - You know it's possible to take this doctrine of God's independence and come to entirely wrong conclusions.
  - One conclusion could be that since God is so independent of us, even if he exists, there's really no point to try to relate to him.
  - Yeah, God's out there, he probably exists. But outside of creating the world and setting it into motion, there's really nothing he has to do with my life and there's probably nothing I do that really matters to him.
  - And this might be how some of you here today feel about God. That he might be out there. Yes. But he's so different from you or so far from what you experience day-to-day. In fact, you're pretty happy just living life independently from God.
  - But you know, living independently from God is the complete opposite of how we were created by him to live!
  - The Bible says that even though God doesn't "live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything...[he] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:24-26, ESV).
  - Why?



- “...*that they should seek God*, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27, ESV; emphasis mine).
- We humans are created by God to be completely *dependent* on him. That’s what makes us so different from him, since his existence and well-being doesn’t depend on us.
- But the human heart will literally be *miserable* until it learns to be dependent on God.
- That’s why St. Augustine wrote, “You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>17</sup>
- Pastor Jason once taught that “the essence of sin” is “declaring your independence from God.”<sup>18</sup>
- And so for those of you who haven’t crossed the line of faith yet, I hope you see how you trying to living independently from God is really going against how you were created to be.
- We were created to find our deepest levels of joy and satisfaction and hope and peace in *God*.
- Jesus came to shatter our independence so that we would finally put our dependence on *him*. And he can do it in different ways to get us there. He can. Just ask any Christian you know.
- Christ died on the cross to bear our sins that are so deeply rooted in our desires to be independent from God.
- To do things our own way. To live life the way *we* want.
- But Christ died so that, like an orphan, we would have the chance to be adopted into the family of God, and learn to be a child of God, completely *dependent* on our heavenly Father.
- Jesus isn’t dead. He came back to life on the third day and is alive and wants to be in a relationship with you.
- For those of you are still far from God, maybe your next step is to just be convinced that living independently from God really won’t satisfy. It’s not worth it.

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<sup>17</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, “Our Heart is Restless Until It Rests In You – Augustine,” Crossroads Initiative, published July 1, 2021, <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/ourheartisrestlessuntilitrestsinyou/>.

<sup>18</sup> Jason Tarn, “The Incommunicable Attributes of God: Independence,” sermon manuscript (Houston Chinese Church, August 4, 2013), 7.

- Because you'll end up trying to be satisfied in all the wrong things. Things can't take the place that God was meant to be for you.
  - So let me encourage you to pray, right now, right where you're sitting, you can just talk to God and ask him to know what it means to depend on him and to find your deepest comfort, joy, and satisfaction in him.
  - If that's what you really want, let me also encourage you to have a conversation about this with a Christian friend of yours sometime later today or during the week.
  - So God's independence should *deepen* our dependence on him.
- But, lastly, God's independence should also deepen our experience of prayer.
- Have you ever noticed how long God took to answer the Israelite's prayers back in Exodus 2? The Bible tells us that "the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out [to God] for help" (Ex. 2:23, ESV).
  - God "hear[s] their groaning" and gets to work (Ex. 2:24, ESV). That work involves showing up to Moses in a burning bush. It eventually involves Moses and his brother, Aaron, asking Pharaoh to let God's people go, only to have Pharaoh come down even harder on the Israelites and make them make bricks without providing them straw.
  - So some Jews accuse Moses and Aaron saying, "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Ex. 5:21, ESV).
  - Then in chapter 5, verse 22 we read, "Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, 'O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all'" (ESV).
  - We are free to question the wisdom of God. But we must, at the same time, understand that he is utterly independent of us. And so, he moves at his own pace.
  - Here, Moses is questioning the fact that God seemed to be moving at a *snail's* pace.
  - But he had just started the journey to free Israel from the grip of Pharaoh. And he wasn't aware of all that the Lord was about to do (like send out frogs and gnats and flies all over Egypt, or kill off all the firstborn in Egypt).
  - There was still so much more to the story that needed to play out before getting to "the good part" (basically, freeing the people of Israel from Egypt).

- No, Moses didn't understand why God was taking so long. The prayers of the people of God were still as of yet unanswered. In fact, things worsened!
- But proof that God was sovereign over this entire situation is found in Exodus 12:40-41. I want you to turn there with me.
- "The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, *on that very day*, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt" (ESV, emphasis mine).
- God had a specific day he knew he would free his people. Moses, in chapter 5, was just not aware of this and with the rest of God's people, longed for a release right away.
- God heard his people's cries for help and rescue. And yet, he authored a story that would ultimately test his people's collective patience and lead them to expose their lack of trust, faith, and dependence on him.
- Isn't this just how prayer works? We pray, we cry out, we long for a breakthrough, for our prayers to be answered by a God who we know can do anything and, therefore, *could* potentially answer us right away.
- *Why would he wait?*
- Because God is independent. And he's independent in the way he chooses to write the stories of our lives. And so, like it or not, he gets to call the shots on when and how he intervenes in response to our prayer requests. But that's not a bad thing.
- Think about it. What kind of parent would give into every one of her kids' requests? "Mom, I want chocolate for breakfast today." "Dad, can I ride my bike without a helmet?" "Do I have to put this seatbelt on?"
- It'd be crazy for us to think that a parent would give into every single one of his or her child's wishes and demands. But this can help us understand just a bit more about why it's actually a good thing for God to be independent from us and not answer every single one of our prayers exactly the way we'd like them to be answered.
- God is infinitely wiser than us. And he knows the future and what the best way for things to work out is for us.
- And so the question is...will we trust him if he leaves certain prayers of ours unanswered or partially answered or answered in a way we didn't expect?
- This doesn't diminish our need to pray. Rather, it teaches us to pray with deeper dependence and trust.

- Paul Miller writes in his book, *A Praying Life*, that “[p]eople often talk about prayer as if it is disconnected from what God is doing in their lives. But we are actors in his drama, listening for our lines, quieting our hearts so we can hear the voice of the Playwright. You can’t have a good story without tension and conflict, without things going wrong. Unanswered prayers create some of the tensions in the story God is weaving in our lives. When we realize this, we want to know what God is doing.”<sup>19</sup>
- So is there something that you’ve been praying for that seems to be taking a long time for God to answer? Maybe you’ve prayed about something once or twice or over a few days, but nothing really seemed to come of it.
- God isn’t far off and trying to be cold and cruel. No, he’s good and loving and he wants to be near us. He doesn’t *need* us to pray to him, but he *wants* us to pray to him because he wants us to grow our dependence on him.
- So keep on praying and waiting on him. Bring the things that weigh on your heart to him.
- And then, as you wait, trust God to answer in the way he thinks best in the timing he thinks best. Because *he’s* busy writing the story. Just like he was with the Israelites.
- And he knows where all the pieces are supposed to go. He knows how all the twists and turns of the storyline of our lives are supposed to work out. How the different tensions and conflicts we face are supposed to resolve.
- So yes, God doesn’t need us. But he’s freely decided that we would be meaningful to him and that we would be a part of the story that he’s writing in this world.
- So let these truths draw us into deeper dependence on him and to pray with greater patience as we watch the story that he’s writing play out in our lives.

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<sup>19</sup> Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2017), 10.