



“I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God” (Isaiah 45:5).

---

---

# God Is...

## Introduction: If You Could Ask God One Question...

If you could ask God one question, what would it be? Maybe you would ask a big question: What is God’s purpose for you? Or, what’s going to happen to you after you die? Or perhaps, why does God let people suffer?

On the other hand, you might ask a question that seems minor but still perplexes you: Where did your puppy go after it ran away when you were 10? What would your life be like if you had married a lost sweetheart? Why did God make the sky blue?

But perhaps you might want to ask God about himself: Who are you? Or, *what* are you? Or, what do you want? God’s answer to such basic questions would actually go a long way toward answering other questions. Who and what God is, what God wants – these are aspects of God’s nature. And the nature of God underlies everything else – why the universe is the way it is, who we are as humans, why our lives are the way they are, and what we should be doing with our time. Has anyone ever lived who didn’t puzzle – at least a little – over such profound questions?

We humans can begin to grasp the answers. We can begin to understand the nature of God. Believe it or not, we can even come to share in that divine nature. How? Through God’s will and revelation of himself.

That is the subject of this booklet – what we can know about God, at least a little bit. Thinkers throughout history have viewed God in different ways. But

God *reveals* himself to us – through his creation, through his Word, and through his Son, Jesus Christ. God shows us who and what he is, what he does, and even a lot about why he does what he does. He also tells us how we should relate to him now – and how we will relate to him ultimately.

Philosophers discuss the nature of God, but this booklet is not based on philosophy. It is based on the Bible, which God uses to reveal himself to us. We accept the Scriptures as an authoritative source of information about who and what God is. This booklet is written for people who want to know what the Bible says about God. Those who want a more philosophical approach, or those who are more skeptical of biblical authority, will need to turn elsewhere, although they may find this booklet of interest, as well.

The book of Isaiah tells us that God reveals himself to people who are humble and repentant, to those who respect God’s Word (Isaiah 66:2). Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). God wants to make his home with us. When God does, our questions will begin to be more fully answered.

## **Chapter One: In Search of the Eternal**

**H**umans have always wrestled with questions like “How did we get here?” and “What should we be doing?” and “Where are we going?” Their pursuit of answers inevitably led them back to fundamental issues such as whether God exists and what God is like. They framed in different ways the ideas they came up with.

### **Twisted paths back to Eden**

Throughout history, people built their religious concepts on their desires to understand human origins and the purpose of life. In their own ways, they wanted to make contact with and relate to the Source of human life – and, presumably, the Authority over human destiny. Unfortunately, the human inability to understand spiritual reality perfectly gave rise to disagreement and more questions:

*Pantheists* saw God as being all that is, including all the forces and laws behind the universe.<sup>1</sup> They depersonalized God and interpreted both good and evil as divine.

*Polytheists* believed in many gods. Each of these gods could help or hurt, but none held absolute power. Polytheism was the basis of many Middle Eastern and Greco-Roman forms of worship, and of the spirit and ancestor worship found in many tribal cultures.

Monotheists embraced a personal deity as the source, sustainer and goal of everything.<sup>2</sup> Three of the world's most influential religions are monotheistic – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three claim their descent from Abraham.

### **Does God exist?**

Historically, every culture has had a sense that God exists. Atheism does not provide satisfactory answers to humanity's questions about who we are and why we exist. Atheism cannot explain purpose, or distinguish between good and evil. Atheism has no authority, no proof of its philosophical assumptions.

We see nature all around us, and science equips us to investigate the natural world. But science cannot explore the supernatural world. We cannot search for God with microscopes or deep space probes. If we are to know God, God must reveal himself to us. We want to know what the Creator is like, what his purpose is, and what must happen for us to come into harmony with him. So how does God reveal himself to us?

## **Chapter Two: How God Reveals Himself**

**I**magine, for a moment, that you are God. You created all things – including human beings. You made humans in your own image (Genesis 1:26-27) and you want them to relate to you in a special way.

---

<sup>1</sup> ("**Pantheism** (Greek *pan*, 'all,' and *theos*, 'God') A term coined by John Toland (1670-1722), literally meaning 'everything God.' The view is that God is all and all is God. It differs from 'panentheism,' which views God as *in all*" (*Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 1996, p. 199).

<sup>2</sup> "**Theism** (From Greek *theos*, 'God') Belief in a god. Also belief in one God (monotheism) in contrast to belief in many gods (polytheism)" (*Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 279).

Wouldn't you tell those humans about yourself? Wouldn't you tell them what you expect of them? Wouldn't you tell them how to come into the relationship you want to share with them?

People who believe that God is unknowable assume that God, for some reason, hides himself from his creation. But God does reveal himself, through his creation, in history, in the pages of the Bible, and through his Son, Jesus Christ. Let's look at what God shows us about himself through his acts of self-revelation.

### **Creation reveals God**

Many people have looked at the grand cosmos and concluded from it that God exists, that God holds all power and that God works in order and harmony. Romans 1:20 tells us, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

Looking at God's fabulous heavens made King David marvel that God even notices humans, who seem so insignificant next to God: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:3-4).

The patriarch Job questioned God. In reply, God described many of his marvels - and thus revealed his limitless authority and wisdom. Job was humbled by the exchange. You can read God's "speech" in chapters 38-41 of the book of Job.

Job realized: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.... Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:2-3, 5).

### **God's purpose for humanity**

What did God intend when he made all things and gave us life? Paul explained to the Athenians: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:26-28).

Or, simply, as John wrote, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

## **History reveals God**

Skeptics ask, "If God is real, why doesn't he show himself to the world?" This question assumes that God hasn't already shown himself to humanity.

However, the Bible record reveals no basis for this assumption. For, in fact, from the time of the first family on, God has often placed himself in direct communication with human beings. But they, for the most part, have wanted nothing to do with God!

The story of Adam and Eve describes humanity's typical reaction. God had created these people and spoke directly to them. But they disobeyed him, and then hid themselves from him. "The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they *hid* from the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8).

The book of Isaiah puts it this way: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). Disobedience separates us from God, makes us afraid of God, makes us want distance between us and God. The Bible is full of examples of how God reached out to sinning humans – but they rejected him.

Noah, "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), warned his world about God's coming judgment. But they didn't listen – and they perished in the Flood. God destroyed sinful Sodom and Gomorrah in a fiery display (Genesis 19:28). But this supernatural rebuke did not convince anyone to change their ways.

Most of the Old Testament traces how God worked with the nation of Israel. But Israel often did not want to hear God. "Do not have God speak to us," they said (Exodus 20:19). God also intervened in the affairs of great powers such as Egypt, Nineveh, Babylon and Persia. But the effects were short-lived.

Many of God's servants met awful deaths at the hands of those to whom they brought God's message. People rejected the messengers of God because

they did not like the message. They did not like what God was saying through his servants, because they did not like God.

Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." Jesus Christ came into the world to preach the gospel of salvation and the kingdom of God. The result? "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (John 1:10). They killed him.

Jesus, as God in the flesh, was expressing God's loving concern for his people when he cried: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, *but you were not willing*" (Matthew 23:37).

## **The Bible record**

God has revealed himself in many different ways, but most people have not wanted to see even the little part that they did. The Bible reveals God in these ways:

- *The Bible contains statements God makes about who and what he is.*

In Exodus 3:14, God revealed his name to Moses: "I am who I am." God's name reveals that God is self-existent, self-perpetuating life. The other names of God, found throughout the Bible, offer additional insight into who and what God is.

"I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.... There is no god apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me" (Isaiah 45:5, 21). In Isaiah 55:8, God tells us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." God exists and acts on a higher plane than we humans do. We cannot understand all that he is, or all that he does.

Jesus Christ described himself as the "I am" who lived before Abraham (verse 58). He was God in the flesh. He called himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12), "the gate" to eternal life (John 10:9), "the good shepherd" (verse 11), and as "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

- *The Bible records statements God makes about what he does:*

What a person does reveals much about what he or she is. In the same way, biblical statements about God's acts reveal him more fully to us.

"I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself," God says in Isaiah 44:24. God made all that is. And God rules what he made.

God also declares what he will do in the future: "I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

God loves the world, and sent his Son for the salvation of the world. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Through Jesus, God is bringing children into his family. "He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (Revelation 21:7). Of our future, Jesus says: "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12).

- *The Bible records the words of humans who describe what God is:*

God has always interacted with people he chose to carry out his will. Many of those inspired servants left us, in the Bible, details about what God is like. "The Lord our God, the Lord is one," said Moses (Deuteronomy 6:4). God is one. The Bible proclaims monotheism, that there is only one God. (This concept will be taken up in more detail in chapter 3.)

Among the psalmist's many statements about God is this one: "For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God?" (Psalm 18:31). God alone deserves worship, and he strengthens those who worship him. The Psalms are full of insight about who and what God is.

Among the most comforting of Bible verses is 1 John 4:16, "God is love." A vital insight into God's love and his will for humanity is found in 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to

repentance." What is God's greatest desire for us, his creation, his children? That we be saved. And God's word does not return to him empty - it will accomplish what he sends it to do (Isaiah 55:11). Knowing that God intends to save us, and that he is perfectly able to do so, should give us great hope.

- *The Bible records the words of humans who describe what God has done and is doing:*

God, as a loving Creator, formed humans in his own image and gave them dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26).

Here's how God felt when he saw the earth corrupted by the evil that humans had chosen to do: "The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (Genesis 6:6). God responded to the wickedness of the world by sending the Flood to start civilization over through Noah and his family (Genesis 7:23).

Centuries after the Flood, God called the patriarch Abraham and established with him a covenant through which "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3) - a reference to Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham.

When he formed the nation of Israel, God supernaturally brought them through the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army: "The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:1).

The Israelites broke their agreement with God and gave themselves over to violence and injustice. Thus God allowed the nation to be attacked by foreign powers and, eventually, to be carried out of the Promised Land into slavery (Ezekiel 22:23-31; 36:15-21). Yet the merciful God promised to send into the world a Redeemer who would establish an everlasting covenant of righteousness with all those, Israelite or otherwise, who would turn to him in faith and repent of their sins (Isaiah 59:20-21).

In due time God sent into the world his Son, Jesus Christ. He proclaimed, "My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). God assured, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

Today, God empowers his church to preach the gospel of the kingdom “in the whole world as a testimony to all nations” (Matthew 24:14). On the Day of Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God sent the Holy Spirit to unite the church as Christ’s Body and to empower the preaching of the gospel, the good news of what God is doing (Acts 2:1-4).

The Bible is a book about God and humanity’s relationship to him. Its rich message invites us to a lifetime of study to learn more about God, including what he is, what he has done, what he does, and what he plans to do. But we know only in part. We are unable to know *all* there is of God, but we are able to understand what he has revealed to us. The Bible shows us that God is:

- self-existing
- not restricted by time
- unbounded by place
- unlimited in power
- unlimited in knowledge
- transcendent (having his existence beyond the physical universe)
- immanent (involved with the universe).

### **But exactly what Is God?**

Suppose you are in a class in which a professor is trying to give the class a better understanding of God. She asks the students to close their eyes, relax and imagine God in their minds. “Think about what he must look like, what his throne would be like, how he would sound and what would be going on around him.”

The students sit in their chairs, eyes shut, for a long time, each dreaming up a picture of God. “How are you doing?” the professor says. “Can you see God? Each of you by now must have some image. But do you know what?” – and then the professor shocks the class by exclaiming, “That’s *not* God!”

“No!” the professor declares to the suddenly attentive class. “That’s not God! You cannot contain God in your mind! No human can have a full grasp of God, because God is God, and human beings are only physical, finite creatures! No image, no picture can do him justice.”

Why is it hard to describe who and what God is? Because, as physical beings, our knowledge comes to us by way of our five senses - and human languages are designed in accordance with this knowledge. Our words, our grammar, our way of thinking, are all based on the physical world.

But God is supernatural, eternal. He is infinite. He is invisible. Of course, we can still speak meaningfully about God, even though we are limited by our physical senses, but our words can never convey all that God is. We are limited in our languages.

### **Spiritual realities, human language**

God shows us facets of himself throughout creation. He has intervened many times in history. The Bible tells us much about him. He even manifested himself in various ways to various people in the Bible. Still, since God is spirit, his fullness cannot be seen or heard or touched or smelled. The Bible gives us truths about God by using words that physical beings in their physical realm can grasp. But those words are not capable of completely defining God.

The Bible describes God as a rock and a fortress (Psalm 18:2), as a stronghold and a shield (Psalm 144:2) and as a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). We realize that God is not any of these physical things in a literal sense. But these metaphors, based on what we as humans can observe and understand, reveal important truths about God. The Bible even attributes human form to God, revealing aspects of his character and his relationship with humans.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible also describes how God wants us to relate to him, often using familial language. Jesus taught us to pray to “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). God will comfort his people as a mother comforts her child (Isaiah 66:13). In Revelation 21:7, God promises, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

---

<sup>3</sup> “**Anthropomorphism** (From Greek anthropos, ‘human,’ morphē, ‘form’) the attribution of a human quality to God, such as ‘eyes,’ ‘hands,’ or ‘arms’” (*Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 13).

Biblical passages describe God with: a body (Phil. 3:21), a head and hair (Rev. 1:14), a face (Gen. 32:30; Ex. 33:23; Rev. 1:16), eyes and ears (Deut. 11:12; Ps. 34:15; Rev. 1:14), a nose and nostrils (Gen. 8:21; Ex. 15:8), a mouth (Matt. 4:4; Rev. 1:16), lips (Job 11:5), a voice (Ps. 68:33; Rev. 1:15), a tongue and breath (Isa. 30:27-28), arms, hands and fingers (Ps. 44:2-3; 89:13; Heb. 1:3; 2 Chron. 18:18; Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10; Ps. 8:3; Rev. 1:16), shoulders (Isa. 9:6), a chest (Rev. 1:13), a back (Ex. 33:23), a waist (Ezek. 1:27) and feet (Ps. 18:9; Rev. 1:15).

Yes, God calls Christians to a family relationship – to be his children. The Bible paints the picture in words humans can get their minds around. But the picture, to use a term from the world of art, is impressionistic. It does not give us a total and absolute grasp of the ultimate, glorious, spiritual reality. The joy and glory of our ultimate relationship with God as his children is far greater than our finite words can express.

“To all who received [Jesus Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13).

In the resurrection, when the fullness of salvation and the kingdom of God have come, we will be able to know God fully at last. As Paul wrote: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

**“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”**

God’s self-revelation, as we have seen, encompasses creation, history and the Bible. But God also revealed himself by becoming a human. He became like us and walked and served and taught among us. God’s greatest act of self-revelation was in Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh,” John 1:14 tell us, and this divine Word we know as Jesus Christ. The Son of God set aside the prerogatives of divinity and came to earth as a man – fully human, who died for our sins, was resurrected from the dead, and started his church.

Christ’s coming disturbed the people of his day. Why? Because their picture of God wasn’t big enough, as we shall see in the next two chapters. Yet Jesus told his disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In short, God had revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

### **Chapter Three: “The Lord Our God, the Lord is One”!**

Judaism. Christianity. Islam. These three great faiths all look to Abraham as their father. Abraham differed from others of his day in one vital respect: He worshiped only one God – the true God. Monotheism, the belief that only one God exists, marks the starting point of true religion.

## **Abraham worshiped the one true God**

Abraham was not born in a monotheistic society. Centuries later, God reminded ancient Israel: “Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants” (Joshua 24:2-3).

Before God called him, Abraham lived in Ur, though his relatives may have lived in Haran. The people of both places worshiped many gods. Ur, for instance, was the site of a great ziggurat or temple tower dedicated to the Sumerian moon-god, Nanna. Other temples at Ur honored An, Enlil, Enki and Nin-gal. God called Abraham out of this polytheistic setting: “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation” (Genesis 12:1-2).

Abraham obeyed God and moved (verse 4). In a sense, God’s relationship with Israel began when he revealed himself to Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham. God renewed that agreement with Abraham’s son Isaac and, later, with Isaac’s son Jacob. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worshiped the one true God. This set them apart even from their close relatives. Laban, a grandson of Abraham’s brother Nahor, embraced numerous household gods or idols (Genesis 31:30-35).

## **God rescues Israel from Egyptian idolatry**

Decades later, Jacob (whose name God changed to Israel) and his children settled in Egypt. The children of Israel remained in Egypt for nearly three centuries. The Egyptians also worshiped many gods.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* points out: “The first observation of a person coming to the study of Egyptian religion is the large number of deities, many of them in animal form, or human form with animal heads.... It is possible to list at least thirty-nine gods and goddesses” (vol. 4, page 101).

The children of Israel grew in number in Egypt but became enslaved by their Egyptian hosts. God revealed himself as the one true God through a series of miracles that led to Israel’s liberation from Egypt. God then made a covenant

between himself and the nation of Israel. God's revelation of himself to humanity, as these events clearly show, has always centered on monotheism.

He revealed himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The name God called himself, "I am" (Exodus 3:14), implies that other gods do not exist in the same way God does. God is. They are not!

Because Pharaoh refused to release Israel, God humbled Egypt with 10 miraculous plagues. Many of these plagues directly showed the impotence of Egypt's gods. For example, one of the Egyptian gods had a head in the shape of a frog. God's plague of frogs upon Egypt ridiculed the worship of that god.

Even after witnessing the devastating effects the 10 plagues had on his nation, Pharaoh still tried to prevent the Israelites from leaving. God finally swept the Egyptians "into the sea" (Exodus 14:27). This action demonstrated the impotence of Egypt's sea god. The children of Israel sang triumphantly (Exodus 15:1-21), exalting the omnipotent God of Israel.

### **The true God found - and lost**

God led the Israelites out of Egypt and to the foot of Mt. Sinai, where they ratified a covenant. God stressed in the first of his Ten Commandments that he alone was to be worshiped: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The Second Commandment forbade the making or worshiping of idols (verses 4-5).

Time and again, Moses pleaded with the Israelites not to worship idols (Deuteronomy 4:23-26; 7:5; 12:2-3; 29:14-18). He knew Israel would be tempted to follow the Canaanite gods when they arrived in the Promised Land.

A saying known as the *Shema'* (after the Hebrew word for "hear," which begins the saying) captured Israel's duty to God. The *Shema'* starts: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Of course, Israel again and again lapsed into worshiping the Canaanite gods, among them El (a standard term for deity that is also applied to the true God), Baal, Dagon and Ashtoreth (also known as Astarte or Ishtar).

Baal worship particularly troubled the Israelites. As they colonized the land of Canaan, they became dependent on crop production. Baal, the storm god, was worshiped in fertility rites. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states, "The fertility cult, by virtue of its focus on the fertility of land and beasts, must always have had an attraction in a society such as ancient Israel where economy was based primarily on agriculture" (vol. 4, page 101).

God's prophets warned the Israelites to turn from their waywardness. Elijah asked the people: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). God answered Elijah's prayer to prove that he alone was God. The people acknowledged: "The Lord - he is God! The Lord - he is God!" (verse 39).

God revealed himself not merely as the greatest of all gods, but as the only true God: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 45:5). And: "Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior" (Isaiah 43:10-11).

### **Judaism - strictly monotheistic**

The Jewish religion of Jesus' day was not merely henotheistic (holding that God is the greatest of many gods) nor monolatrous (permitting the worship of God alone but acknowledging that other gods might exist). It was strictly monotheistic, meaning there is only one God.

According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, on no other point were the Jews more united than on the confession "God is one" (vol. 3, page 98). Reciting the *Shema'* remains an integral part of Jewish worship today. Rabbi Akiba, who was killed in Palestine during the second century A.D., is said to have been brought to his execution at the time of the reading of the *Shema'* and to have repeated Deuteronomy 6:4 throughout his tortures, breathing his last on the word *one*.

### **What Jesus said about monotheism**

When a scribe asked Jesus which command was greatest, Jesus replied by quoting the *Shema'*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29-30). With this the scribe agreed

wholeheartedly: “Well said, teacher.... You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him” (verse 32).

In the next chapter, we shall look at how Jesus’ coming gave the New Testament church a deeper and broadened concept of God. (Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and to be one with the Father.)

Jesus reaffirmed monotheism. As the writers of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* point out: “Early Christian monotheism is confirmed rather than shattered by the Christology of the [New Testament].... According to the Gospels Jesus himself sharpens the monotheistic confession” (vol. 3, page 102).

Mark 10:17-18 records one of Jesus’ clearest affirmations of monotheism. When a man addressed him as “Good Teacher,” Jesus answered: “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God” (New King James Version).

### **What the early church preached**

Jesus commissioned his church to preach the gospel and to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). This soon involved preaching to gentiles who were still immersed in polytheism.

When Paul and Barnabas preached and performed miracles at Lystra, the reaction of the people betrayed just how steeped they were in polytheism: “When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker” (Acts 14:11-12). Hermes and Zeus were two gods in the Greek pantheon. Both the Greek and Roman pantheons were well known in the New Testament world, and the worship of the Greek and Roman gods was widespread.

Paul and Barnabas responded vigorously with the message of monotheism: “We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them” (verse 15). Even then, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them.

In Athens, Paul found many altars set up to honor different gods – even one with the inscription: “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23). He used that altar as a starting point from which to explain monotheism to the Athenians.

At Ephesus, brisk sales of idols accompanied the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis. After Paul preached about the one true God, the idol trade slackened. The silversmith Demetrius was adversely affected economically. He told his fellow artisans, "Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people.... He says that man-made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26). Here is another case of one of God's servants preaching that gods made by hand are not gods at all. Just as the Old Testament does, the New Testament proclaims but one true God. The other gods aren't.

## **No other God**

To the Christians at Corinth, Paul stated explicitly, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Corinthians 8:4).

Monotheism underpins both the Old and New Testaments. God called Abraham, the father of the faithful, out from a polytheistic society. God revealed himself to Moses and Israel, and founded the old covenant on the worship of himself alone. God sent prophets to reiterate the message of monotheism. Finally, Jesus Christ himself reaffirmed monotheism. The New Testament church that Jesus founded continually battled against worship that fell short of true monotheism.

The church, from the days of the New Testament forward, has consistently preached that which God long ago had revealed: "The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

## **Chapter Four: God Revealed in Jesus Christ**

**T**he Bible teaches that God is one. There are not two Gods, or three, or a thousand. Christianity is a monotheistic religion. That is why the coming of Jesus Christ aroused such strong controversy in the communities of his day.

**"A stumbling block to Jews..."**

God revealed himself to humanity through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus called God his Father (Matthew 10:32-33; Luke 23:34; John 10:15) and said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). He boldly claimed, "I

and the Father are one" (John 10:30). After Jesus' resurrection, Thomas addressed him as "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Jesus Christ was God.

Judaism could not accept this. "The Lord our God, the Lord is one," said the *Shema*' (Deuteronomy 6:4), which had long undergirded the Jewish faith. Yet here was a man with profound scriptural insight and miracle-working power who claimed to be the unique Son of God. Some Jewish leaders acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher come from God (John 3:2). But God's Son? How could God be one, and yet Jesus Christ also be God?

"For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him," says John 5:18. "Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father."

The Jews eventually condemned Christ to death because they thought he had, by his claims, blasphemed: "The high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.' The high priest tore his clothes. 'Why do we need any more witnesses?' he asked. 'You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?' They all condemned him as worthy of death" (Mark 14:61-64).

### **"...foolishness to Gentiles"**

On the other hand, the gentiles could not accept Jesus for who he said he was, either. The Greek philosophers thought that nothing could cross the gap from what was eternal and unchanging to what was temporal and material.

So the Greeks scoffed at John's statement: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14).

For the unbelievers, this unbelievable story didn't end there. Not only did God become a human being and die, but he was raised from the dead and returned to his former glory (John 17:5). Paul wrote to the Ephesians that God had raised Christ "from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 1:20).

Elsewhere, Paul addressed the consternation with which both the Jews and Greeks greeted the astounding story of Jesus Christ: "Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:21-23).

Not everyone could understand and rejoice at the wonderful news of the gospel. Paul went on: "But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (verses 24-25). And in Romans 1:16 Paul exclaimed, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

### **"I Am the Gate"**

During his life on earth, Jesus, God in the flesh, smashed a lot of long-held and cherished – but false – beliefs about what God is, how God lives and what God wants. He illuminated truths at which the Old Testament had only hinted. And he pronounced that no one could be saved except through him. Jesus stated: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" (John 10:9).

"I am the way and the truth and the life," Jesus announced. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). And: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:5-6).

### **Jesus is God**

Jesus did not do away with the monotheistic command in Deuteronomy 6:4. Rather, Jesus *expanded* beyond what anyone had imagined what it means for God to be one. Jesus revealed that, while God is one and only one, the eternal Word existed with God and was God (John 1:1-2).

When the Word came in the flesh, though he was fully divine, he voluntarily set aside the prerogatives of divinity. Jesus, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but

made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8).

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He held all the power and authority of God, but he voluntarily, for our sakes, subjected himself to the limitations of human existence. And during this period of incarnation, he, the Son, remained one with his Father in heaven.

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,” said Jesus (John 14:9). “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me,” he said (John 5:30). And, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (John 8:28).

Just before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples: “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (John 16:28). Jesus came to earth to die for our sins. He came to found his church. He came to start the preaching of the gospel in all the world. Jesus also came to reveal God to humanity. In particular, he opened human understanding to the Father-Son relationship that exists within the Godhead.

The Gospel of John, for example, largely devotes itself to recording Jesus’ work of revealing God the Father to humanity. Jesus’ Passover discourse (John 13-17) is of special interest in this regard. What a startling truth about the nature of God! Even more startling is Jesus’ further revelation about how God intends for humans to relate to him.

### **Humans can share in the divine nature!**

Jesus told his apostles: “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21). God wants to unite humans to him in a profound relationship of love – the love the Father and Son share. God is revealed – is manifested – to those in whom that love works.

Jesus went on to explain: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me” (verses 23-24).

God *lives* in those who come to him through faith in Jesus Christ, committing themselves to live in allegiance to him. Peter preached: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The Holy Spirit also is God, as we shall see in the next chapter. The Holy Spirit lives in the believers.

Paul knew that God lived in him: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but *Christ lives in me*. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Because Christ lives in us and the Holy Spirit lives in us, *God* lives in us. But there is only one God.

God revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ. “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). What can this revelation mean to us? By partaking of Christ, through faith in him, we can be partakers of God’s own divine nature! Peter summed it up by saying that God’s “divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

### **Christ – the perfect revelation of God**

In short, how did Jesus Christ reveal God?

- Jesus revealed God’s *character* in all he did and taught.
- Jesus died and was raised from death so that humans may be saved and reconciled to God, and that they may receive eternal life. Romans 5:10-11 tells us: “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”
- Jesus revealed God’s plan to form a new spiritual community – the church – transcending racial and national barriers (Ephesians 2:14-22).

- Jesus revealed God as the Father of all who are reborn in Christ.
- Jesus revealed the glorious destiny God has promised to his people. The indwelling presence of the Spirit of God gives us a foretaste of that future glory here and now. The Spirit is “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:14).
- Jesus also witnessed to the existence of the Father and the Son as one God. Our understanding of God’s unity must allow for Father and Son, for more than one Person within the Godhead.

New Testament writers frequently applied the Old Testament names for God to Christ. By doing so, they showed not only what Christ is like, but what God is like, for Jesus is the revelation of the Father, and he and the Father are one. We learn about God as we study what Jesus Christ is like.

## **Chapter Five: One in Three and Three in One**

**A**s we have seen, the Bible never compromises the fact that God is one. Yet, Jesus’ incarnation and work presented a greater depth of understanding of the way in which God is one. The New Testament testifies that Jesus Christ is God and that the Father is God. There is more than one Person in the one God.

The New Testament, as we shall see, also presents the Holy Spirit as divine and eternal. Whenever we say that the Holy Spirit does something, we mean that God does it. The Holy Spirit is God. That means the Bible reveals one God who exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that Christians are to be baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

Throughout the centuries, many ideas have been developed that might seem, at first glance, to make these biblical facts easier to understand. But we must be careful not to accept any idea that contradicts what the Bible says. Some ideas might make things seem simple, in the sense of making God easier to comprehend and easier to picture in our minds. But we should all agree that what is important is whether an idea is consistent with the Bible, not whether it is simple or easy.

The Bible tells us there is one and only one God, and then presents us with more than one Person called God. The Father is called God, the Son is called God, and the Holy Spirit is called God. All three are eternal, and all three do things that only God can do. So there is one God, and three in the One.

“One in three” – or “three in one” – is a concept that, at first glance, appears illogical. But neither is it logical for us to think that God could not possibly be more than what we would expect if we simply sat down, with no revelation, to figure it out for ourselves.

God reveals many things about himself, and we believe them, even though we cannot explain them all. For example, we cannot completely explain how God can be without beginning. This concept is beyond our ability to understand. We cannot explain what eternal existence is like, yet we know it is true that God is without beginning. Likewise, the Bible reveals that God is one and only one, yet is also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe it even though it is not simple or easy to explain. We believe it because the Bible reveals it.

### **The Holy Spirit is God**

Acts 5:3-4 calls the Holy Spirit God: “Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.’”

When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, Peter says he was lying to none other than God. He was not trying to deceive an impersonal force or an intermediate agency – he was trying to deceive God himself.

The New Testament ascribes to the Holy Spirit attributes that belong only to God. For instance, the Holy Spirit is omniscient, or unlimited in knowledge. “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.... No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

The Holy Spirit is omnipresent, or unlimited in place. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19). The Holy Spirit

is present in believers everywhere, not limited to any one place. (See also Psalm 139:7-8.)

The Holy Spirit regenerates Christians, giving them new life. “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:5-6).

The Holy Spirit speaks and foretells the future. “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Timothy 4:1).

The Holy Spirit is equated with the Father and the Son in the baptismal ceremony. Christian converts are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). There is one name, but three are included in the One.

The Spirit creates out of nothing (Psalm 104:30). Only God can create like that. Hebrews 9:14 says the Holy Spirit is eternal. Only God is eternal. Jesus told the apostles: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:16-17).

Jesus specifically identified the Counselor as the Holy Spirit: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (verse 26). The Counselor convicts the world of sin, an accomplishment that can rightly be ascribed only to God. He guides into all truth, something only God is capable of doing. As Paul affirmed, “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Corinthians 2:13).

### **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: one God**

When we understand that God is one, and that the Holy Spirit is God, just as the Father is God and the Son is God, we have no problem understanding a passage like Acts 13:2: “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” Here Luke presents the Holy Spirit as speaking. The Holy Spirit is God at work in the church, speaking and calling people to do God’s will.

The biblical revelation of the nature of God is beautiful. When the Holy Spirit speaks, or sends, or inspires, or leads, or sanctifies, or empowers, or gives gifts, it is *God* speaking, sending, inspiring, leading, sanctifying, empowering or giving gifts. But since God is one, and not three separate beings, the Holy Spirit is not a separate God.

God has one will, the will of the Father, which is also the will of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is not a matter of two or three separate God Beings deciding to be in perfect agreement with each other. This would contradict scriptures such as Isaiah 44:6-8. It is a matter of one God, one will. The Son is the very expression of the will of the Father. Similarly, the Holy Spirit constitutes the will of the Father at work in the world.

Paul says that “the Lord is the Spirit,” and he speaks of “the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). He says “the Spirit gives life” (verse 6), which is something only God can do. We know the Father, only because the Spirit enables us to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus dwells in us and the Father dwells in us, but that is only because the Spirit dwells in us (John 14:16-17, 23; Romans 8:9-11). Since God is one, if the Spirit is in us, then the Father and the Son are in us. The three can be distinguished, but not separated.

Paul equates the Spirit, the Lord, and God in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. He says it is “the same God who inspires” in verse 6, and he says “these are the work of one and the same Spirit,” and goes on to declare that the Spirit does all this as the Spirit wills (verse 11). How can the Spirit will? The Spirit wills because the Spirit is a person, and the Spirit is God, and God is one, and the will of the Father is the will of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

To worship God is to worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the one and only one God. That does not mean we are to single out the Holy Spirit and worship the Holy Spirit as though the Holy Spirit is a separate Being. We do not direct our worship to the Holy Spirit specifically, but to God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is God in us (the Holy Spirit) who causes us to worship God. The Comforter (like the Son) will not speak on his own (John 16:13), but what the Father gives him he will speak. He does not direct us to himself, but to the Father through the Son. Likewise, we don’t normally pray specifically to the Spirit – it is the Spirit in us who helps us in our prayers, and intercedes for us (Romans 8:26).

Unless God himself is in us, we would not be turned toward God at all. Unless God himself is in us, we would not know God, and we would not know his Son. That is why all the credit for our salvation goes to God and not to us. The fruit we bear is the fruit of the Spirit – that is, God’s fruit, not ours. But God gives us the privilege, if we will accept it, of participating with him in his work.

The Father is the Creator and Source of all things. The Son is the Redeemer and Savior, and the one by whom God created all things. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter and Advocate. The Holy Spirit is God in us, the one who leads us to the Father through the Son. Through the Son, we are cleansed and saved so that we can have fellowship with him and the Father. The Spirit stirs our hearts and minds and inclines us toward belief in Jesus Christ, who is the way and the gate. The Spirit gives us gifts, the gifts of God, including faith, hope and love.

All this is the work of the one God, who reveals himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is not a different God from the God of the Old Testament, but in the New Testament something more is revealed about him: He sent his Son as a human being to die for our sins and to be raised to glory, and he sent us his Spirit – the Comforter – to dwell in us, to lead us into all truth, to give us gifts, and to conform us to the image of Christ.

When we pray, reaching God is the goal of the prayer, yet it is also God who leads us toward that goal, and it is also God who is the Way along which we are led toward the goal. In other words, it is to God (the Father) we pray; it is God in us (the Holy Spirit) motivating us to pray; and God is also the Way (the Son) along which we are being led toward that goal.

The Father initiates the plan of salvation. The Son embodies and executes the atoning, redemptive plan for the salvation of humanity. The Holy Spirit applies the benefits, or gifts, of redemption to empower the actual salvation of the faithful believers. All this is the work of the one God, the God of the Bible.

Paul ended 2 Corinthians with the blessing: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). In this verse, Paul highlights the love of God, which is shown to us through the grace he gives us in Jesus Christ and the unified fellowship with himself and one another he gives us through the Holy Spirit.

## How many “Persons” is God?

Many people have only a hazy idea of what the Bible teaches about the oneness of God. Most do not really think about it. Some imagine three separate Beings. Some picture one Being with three heads. Others think of one Being who changes from Father to Son to Holy Spirit whenever he wills. It is easy to make such mistakes.

Many people use the word Trinity as a definition of the biblical teaching about God. However, if asked, most would not be able to explain what the Bible actually teaches about how God is one. In other words, what many people envision when they speak of the Trinity is not really biblical. Some of the confusion lies in the use of the word Persons.

The word Persons, which is normally included in English-language definitions of the Trinity, causes people to think of three Beings. “One God who is three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” is a common way the Trinity is explained. But the ordinary meaning of the word *Person* is misleading when it is applied to God. It gives the impression that God has limits, and that his threeness lies in his being three separate individuals – which is not the case.

The English word person is derived from the Latin word *persona*. The word *persona* was used by theologians to describe the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Latin language, but it did not convey the same meaning as the English word person conveys today. It was a word originally used for a role that an actor portrayed in a play. It was also the word for “mask,” because actors wore different masks for each character they portrayed. But even this concept, though it does not allow the error of three Beings, is still weak and misleading when referring to God. It is misleading because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not mere roles being played by God, and because an actor can play only one role at a time, quite unlike God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all the time.

Even though a Latin theologian may have understood what he meant when he used a word like *persona*, the average person would not. Likewise, the English word person is easily misunderstood by the average individual when referring to God, unless it is accompanied by an explanation that “Persons” in the Godhead should not be thought of in the same way as “persons” like any of us humans.

When most English-speaking people think of one God who is three Persons, they cannot help but think in some way of three separate divine Beings. In other words, the terms persons and beings are usually thought of, in English, as meaning the same thing. But that is not how God is revealed in the Bible. There is only one God, not three. The Bible reveals that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the way the one true God of the Bible is, the way God exists always.

### **One God: three Hypostases**

When we express the biblical truth that God is one and at the same time three, it is helpful to use words that do not imply three Gods. God's oneness cannot be compromised. The problem is, all words that refer to created things tend to mislead by their very context in ordinary language. Most words, including the word Persons, tend to confuse God's nature with the created order. On the other hand, all our words are in one way or another refer to the created order. So it is important to know what we mean, and what we do not mean, when we use any word in reference to God.

A helpful word, and one that was used by Greek-speaking Christians in expressing the oneness and threeness of God, is found in Hebrews 1:3. This passage is helpful in several ways. It states: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

From the description of the Son as "the radiance of God's glory," we learn a number of things. The Son is not a separate Being. The Son is not less divine than the Father. The Son is eternal, just as the Father is. In other words, the Son is to the Father as radiance or brightness is to glory. One cannot simply have radiance without the source of radiance, or a source of radiance without the radiance itself. Yet we distinguish between God's glory and the radiance of that glory. They are distinct, without being separate.

Likewise, there is much to learn from the words "the exact representation of his being." The Son is the full and complete expression of the Father. What God is in his being, the Son also is.

Now, let's look at the Greek word translated "being" in this passage. Other versions translate it "person." The word from which "being" and "person" in this passage are translated is *hypostasis*. It comes from Greek words meaning "standing under." It refers to that which "stands under," or that which makes

something what it is. *Hypostasis* could be defined like this: “That without which something cannot be.” It could be called “the ground of being.”

## **God is personal**

*Hypostasis* (in plural form, *hypostases*) is a good word to use of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is a biblical term, and it does not so easily confuse God’s nature with the created order. Of course, the word Person is also a good word to use if one understands that Person must not be confused with the way humans are persons.

One reason the word Person is helpful, if it is understood correctly, is that God interacts with us in a personal way. It is wrong to say that God is impersonal. We do not worship a rock or plant, or an impersonal “power that is behind the universe.” Rather, we worship a “living Person.” God is personal, but he is not a person in the way humans are persons. “I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you” (Hosea 11:9). God is Creator; he is not just another part of his creation. Humans have a beginning, grow up, have a body, are separate from one another, grow old, increase or decrease in size, strength, etc., and die. God has none of those characteristics, but is nonetheless personal in his relationship to humans.

God is infinitely more than any human word can convey, yet he is personal and loves us dearly. God has revealed much about himself, but he has not revealed everything about himself – some things human beings are simply incapable of knowing. As finite beings, we cannot totally grasp the infinite. We can know God as he reveals himself to us, but we cannot know him exhaustively, because we are finite, and he is infinite. What God has revealed to us about himself is real. It is true. It is relevant. It is intimate. It is marvelous, and it is thorough. But we must never think we know everything about God. God has revealed all we need to know, and what he has revealed is indeed wonderful!

God calls on us to continue to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Jesus proclaimed, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). The more we know God, the more we realize how small we are and how great he is

## Chapter Six: Humanity's Relationship with God

In an earlier chapter, we tried to frame a question that would capture what it is that humans want to know about God. What one question would we want to ask God, if we had the chance? To our fumbling question "Who are you?", the awesome God who made and rules the cosmos replies, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). God declares himself to us in creation (Psalm 19:1). He has interacted with the human family ever since he made us. Sometimes he speaks through thunder, quaking or fire, and sometimes he speaks in a gentle whisper (Exodus 20:18; 1 Kings 19:11-12). He even laughs (Psalm 2:4).

In the biblical record, God reveals information about himself and inspired reports of how people responded to him. God also reveals himself through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. But we want to know *more* than who God is, don't we? We want to know why he made us. We want to know his will for us. We want to know what he has in store for us. We want to know not just *about* him – we want to know *him*.

What is our relationship with God now? What should it be? And what will our relationship be in the future? God made us in his image (Genesis 1:26-27). The Bible reveals a far more profound future than we can now imagine.

### Where we find ourselves now

Hebrews 2:6-11 tells us that we are made "a little lower than the angels." Yet God has crowned us with "glory and honor" and put everything under our dominion. His future intent for humanity is to leave "nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him."

God has prepared an infinitely glorious and joyous future for us. But something stands in the way. We find ourselves in a state of sin, separated from God by our transgressions (Isaiah 59:1-2). Sin has created a barrier between us and God – one we cannot cross by ourselves.

But the breach has been healed. Jesus tasted death for us (Hebrews 2:9). He paid the death penalty that our sins have brought on us so that he might bring "many sons to glory" (verse 10).

Revelation 21:7 says that God desires to unite us with him in a family relationship. Because of God's love for us and what he has done for us, and what he is doing for us now as the Author of our salvation, Jesus is "not ashamed to call [us] brothers" (Hebrews 2:10-11).

### **So what should we be doing now?**

Acts 2:38 instructs us to repent of our sins and to be baptized – to figuratively bury the old self. God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who believe that Jesus Christ is their Savior, Lord and King (Galatians 3:2-5).

When we repent – turning to God from the selfish, worldly, sinful ways we followed in the past – we enter, in faith, into a new relationship with him. We are reborn (John 3:3), given a new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, regenerated by the Spirit through God's grace and mercy and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

What happens then? We "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) for the remainder of our lives, destined to take part in the first resurrection, after which we will "be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

### **Awesome inheritance**

God "has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5).

In the resurrection, we will be given immortality (1 Corinthians 15:54) and a "spiritual body" (verse 44). "As we have borne the likeness of the earthly man [Adam]," says verse 49, "so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven [Jesus]." As "children of the resurrection," we will no longer be subject to death (Luke 20:36).

Could anything be more wonderful than what the Bible says about God and our future relationship with him, a relationship that can begin right now? We will "be like him [Jesus], for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Revelation 21:3 says that, in the time of the new heaven and new earth, "the dwelling of God

is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

We will be one with God in holiness, love, perfection, righteousness and spirit. As his immortal children, we will be the family of God in its fullest sense, sharing complete fellowship with him in perfect and everlasting joy. What a marvelous and inspiring message of hope and eternal salvation God has for all those who are prepared to believe!

## Appendix One: What is “the Image of God”?

Genesis 1:26 quotes God as saying, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” Verse 27 tells us God followed through on his intent: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Genesis 5:1 adds, “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.”

How, then, are we to understand what God means when he tells us we are made in his image and likeness? God’s creation of humans in his image and likeness, recorded in Genesis 1:26-27, may be linked with the dominion God gave humans over the earth. In a sense, we act for God on earth when we exercise responsible lordship over the creation. “The context suggests that humanity is the image of God in the dominion it exercises over the rest of creation,” notes *Harper’s Bible Commentary* on Genesis 1:3-31 (Harper & Row, 1988, page 87).

The book *ABC’s of the Bible* adds: “Before undertaking his supreme creation, God announced his intention to make man in his image and likeness. The Hebrew word for ‘image’ usually refers to a statue (often used in the Old Testament for pagan idols), while a different word for ‘likeness’ suggests a physical resemblance. Later generations interpreted the terms more generally, however. They thought of themselves as resembling God not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense by possessing ...intelligence, and the capacity to make moral distinctions” (Reader’s Digest Association, 1991, page 16).

Insight into the image of God can also be gained from a consideration of the distinction between the material body and the immaterial spirit within humanity’s own constitution. *The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* states: “Recent

discussions have focused on the unity and integrity of man. Thus it is man as a physical-spiritual unity who is in the image of God as Spirit. This explains why the same words can be used both of God and man. God sees and hears as men do, but men do so in a way appropriate to their constitution as physical-spiritual creatures (with ears and mouth) and God in a way appropriate to his nature as spiritual and uncreated" (article "Image of God," Baker Book House, 1988, page 1018).

The image to which humans ultimately must conform is that of Jesus Christ. Romans 8:29 tells us God desires that we "be conformed to the likeness of his Son" - Jesus Christ. *ABC's of the Bible* states, "The New Testament added to the notion that man was created in the image of God by proposing that Jesus was the sole embodiment of divine perfection" (page 16).

We are unique among earth's creatures in that God endowed us with rationality, free choice and moral responsibility. By creating us in his own image, God has given us the incomparable capacity to have a personal relationship with him.

## **Appendix Two: One and Three**

**T**he first Christian missionaries preached the gospel in a pagan, polytheistic world. They preached that there was only one God, and they also preached Jesus Christ as God. It was not long before people wondered how these ideas could both be true.

The gentiles needed to know how the Christians could claim to be against polytheism if they saw nothing wrong in worshiping the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Christians responded by expounding scriptural concepts that centered on God's unity. The development of these concepts led to the church synods, or councils, that formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. Even then, controversy raged for decades. Two major heresies loomed in the struggle for understanding God's nature. These heresies resulted from sincere but misguided efforts to simplify the scriptural presentation of the three-in-oneness of the Godhead.

1) Modalism. Some believed in the unity of God - that God is one - but explained that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were merely three "modes of revelation," masks, so to speak, under which the one God had revealed himself

to humans at different times. Sometimes God presented himself as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit. Modalism denied the biblical teaching that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist simultaneously. The modalist view was rejected because it meant that Jesus would have had to pray to himself, and the Father would have died on the cross.

2) Arianism. This teaching also defended the unity, or oneness, of God, but it asserted that only the Father is God. Arians believed that Jesus Christ was created and therefore belongs to the created order, as the first and highest creation of God. Arius (ca. A.D. 250-336) and his followers saw the Holy Spirit as the first of the Son's creations.

Athanasius (ca. A.D. 296-373) opposed Arius, holding to the unity of God but seeing three co-essential hypostases in God. Athanasius said the Son is of the same substance or *essence* as the Father (thus he is "co-essential") and that the Son is eternally generated of the Father. Thus the Son "eternally proceeds" from the Father. He is the Son from eternity. He is also the Son by virtue of his incarnation on earth. God is one being, but three hypostases – one being, but three Persons.

The Roman emperor Constantine supported, at first, the Athanasian view, which was accepted at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325). Constantine soon reversed himself, however, and persecution against supporters of the Nicene decision ensued. It was not until the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) that the church leaders finally adopted what is now known as the Nicene Creed, which described God as one divine being existing in three, co-essential hypostases, or persons.

In the sixth century, the Western church (Roman Catholic) came to believe that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, while the Eastern church (Eastern Orthodox) retained the Nicene view that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. It was unfortunate that this disagreement alienated Christians from one another.

All Christians realize that any humanly worded formula cannot really describe God with complete accuracy. Thus the Trinity has been described as a mystery. It is often accepted on faith, with the admission that it cannot be perfectly understood. The Bible gives us these facts: There is one God, and the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms these biblical facts without contradicting the Bible.

It goes without saying that a finite, flesh-and-blood human being cannot possibly fathom the fullness of the transcendent God. Even the fullness of God's love, which we humbly acknowledge, is beyond our limited grasp. The apostle Paul describes it as a love "that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19). We shall never come to a complete knowledge of God, but God has given us the intellectual tools to know at least that he is the Creator, the Author of all things, the Giver of life, and a being whose nature is far greater than human beings can possibly imagine or explain.

But more than just knowing about God, God also wants us to know him in a personal way. He has not only revealed facts about himself as the Creator, but he has also revealed his love for us. In the next chapter, we will learn about the relationship that God has with human beings.

### **Appendix Three: The Name of God – YHWH**

**W**hen God called to Moses out of the burning bush, telling him to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, Moses asked: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13).

God answered Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (verse 14). The Hebrew word for "I AM" is *ehyeh*, which comes from the verb "to be." It can also be translated as "I SHALL BE."

God further told Moses: "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers...has sent me to you'" (verse 15). Although the Hebrew word for "Lord" is *adon*, the word translated "Lord" in verse 15 is different. It is spelled with the four Hebrew consonants YHWH - "the tetragrammaton" (Greek for "four letters"). The word is related to *ehyeh* and also comes from the verb "to be." Both words have the sense of "being actively present."

Although most scholars pronounce the tetragrammaton as Yahweh, the correct pronunciation is not known for certain. The Hebrews avoided saying the tetragrammaton because they believed that doing so would take God's name in vain. When reading a passage of the Hebrew Bible that contained it, they referred to God by another one of his names - *adonai* or "Lord."

The oldest known manuscript fragments of the Septuagint leave the tetragrammaton untranslated. However, later manuscripts, probably reflecting Christian editing, render the tetragrammaton as *kurios*, Greek for “Lord.” Later, English versions rendered the personal name YHWH as the impersonal “the Lord.” They used all capital letters for “Lord” to indicate they were translating YHWH, rather than *adon* or *adonai*. The text of the Hebrew Bible originally had only consonants. When vowels were added in the 10th century A.D., the vowels of *adonai* were also used for the tetragrammaton, reminding the readers to pronounce the word as *adonai*.

In the 16th century, Latin translators combined the vowel points of *adonai* with the consonants of the tetragrammaton to produce the artificial form *Iehoua*. In 1530, Tyndale rendered the tetragrammaton as *Iehouah* in his translation of Exodus 6:3. Subsequently, the I became J, and the u became v, and *Jehovah* became the standard spelling. The King James Version uses this spelling (see, for example, Psalm 83:18), but the KJV usually translates YHWH as “the Lord” and *adonai* as “the Lord.”

Copyright © 1993, 2000 Grace Communion International