

TALKING TO ABOUT GOD TEENS

IN A CULTURE OF CONFUSION



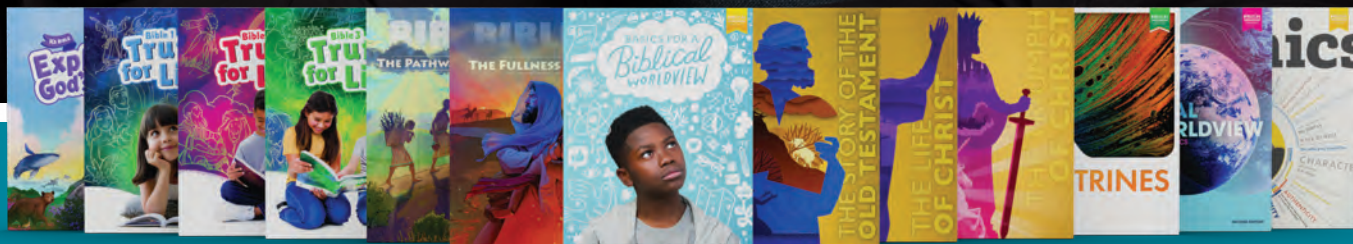


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HOW DO I TALK TO MY TEEN ABOUT GOD?

The most sobering passage of Scripture for parents is Proverbs 22:6. The first half of the verse tells us what our job is: “Train up a child in the way he should go.” The second half of the verse, however, is troubling: “and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Although many commentators have tried to relieve us parents of the weight of this verse, deep down we know that we hold an important responsibility for how our children turn out. Deuteronomy 6:7–9 reinforces our obligation, telling us to teach our children about the Lord diligently—when they’re sitting in our house, when we are walking with them, when they lie down to sleep at night, and when we wake them up in the morning. Our duty to teach our children to know our God rests squarely on our shoulders.

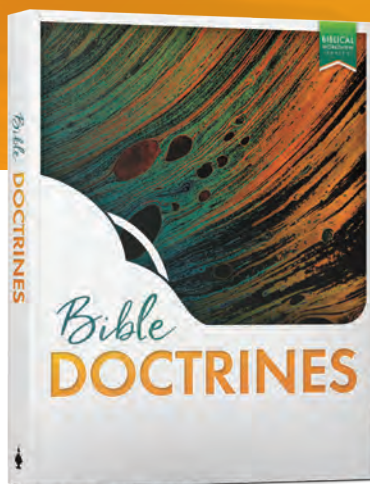
Consequently, many of us do the best we can with the time and the knowledge base we have—and pray it’s enough. But when teaching our children about God, we sometimes don’t know where to begin. Sometimes we don’t have the right terms to explain Him well. Sometimes we lack the categories to

help our children grasp all the idiosyncrasies of our God. And sometimes we lack clear illustrations that our children can relate to.

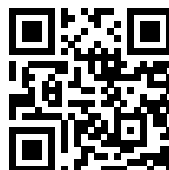
The following pages are chapters I wrote in a Bible textbook called *Bible Doctrines*, published by BJU Press. These chapters contain rich biblical doctrine conveyed in simple language that teens can understand. This content will equip you to begin conversations with your teen about God.

After reading this booklet, you will be able to identify a logical sequence of concepts in explaining God. You will be able to explain biblical terminology, apply those terms to biblical categories, and formulate explanations of God in simple language. If nothing else, this resource can be a first step in strengthening your biblical influence on the next generation.

Dr. Renton Rathbun
SPEAKER, BJU PRESS
HOMEFRONT



A strong biblical foundation helps us to stand firm in our faith—giving us confidence in what we believe and why.



Bible Doctrines from BJU Press explores all the major doctrinal categories and encourages students to learn how to formulate doctrinal positions according to biblical teaching and apply those positions to their lives. To purchase this book or video course, please visit bjupresshomeschool.com/bible



CHAPTER

7

*Is God one
or three?*

THE TRIUNITY OF GOD

Scripture Memory

Eph. 4:4–6

Key Scriptures

Exod. 3:1–16

Exod. 20:1–6

Exod. 32:1–10

Deut. 6:4–9

Luke 3:21–22

2 Cor. 1:2–3

Heb. 1:1–4

1 John 4:13

7.1 THE ONENESS OF GOD

Theological books from almost every perspective say that we can know God. But can we? Let's get this straight: we're supposed to know someone we've never seen and never heard. We haven't even met anyone who saw or heard Him! Is that about right? So what do people mean when they say we can know God?

We might feel this frustration because we're thinking of this all wrong. Because we can't see or hear God, perhaps we're trying to know Him the same way we would try to know a dead person. If you write a research paper on Abraham Lincoln, for example, you might face this same frustration. Abraham Lincoln is dead. You have to research many different sources trying to learn who he was and what he did. This kind of work doesn't really help you *know* Lincoln; it only helps you *know about* him. The only way you could really know Abraham Lincoln would be if he came back from the dead and hung out with you for a few years. Maybe that sounds crazy, but if we think of knowing God the same way we think of knowing dead people, we'll be frustrated.

It's possible to know God not just because He gave us Scripture, but also because He is alive and active in communicating with us. In other words, God is not silent and helpless like a dead man. God the Holy Spirit teaches us through Scripture what God is like (John 16:13). God the Son reveals to us what the Father is like (John 1:18; 14:7, 9; Heb. 1:3). And God the Father loves His people, showing Himself to us in His Word (John 3:16; 1 John 3:1; James 1:18). God is actively working among us so that we might know Him.

So, yes, we can know God. It's not just that we can know facts about Him—we can know Him personally because He actively shows us who He is. Of course, we can't know everything about Him, nor can we even know Him the way He knows Himself. But the knowledge He gives us through His creation and His Word is the perfect interpretation of Himself to us (Rom. 1:19–20; John 17:3).

Although absolutely true, God's revelation includes some things that are difficult for us to understand. Some of His revelation we cannot understand at all. Yet these difficult parts of theology should not lead us to doubt but to glorify God even more. No matter how much we are able to know about God, we will never know everything. Thus, lying under all our understanding of God is mystery—the mark of an infinite, all-powerful God. We must fight, therefore, the two main temptations that attempt to eliminate the mystery of God.

THE SUPERMAN TEMPTATION

In April of 1938, the first Superman comic book was released. The comic portrayed an indestructible, incredibly strong, humanlike alien possessing incredible superpowers.

The year 1938, however, wasn't the first time a culture portrayed someone with superpowers. Centuries before Christ's incarnation, the Greeks imagined gods who were much like men but with powers such as superhuman strength and the ability to control the weather and breathe underwater. Even before that, ancient people developed gods with grotesque features, such as the body of a man and the head of an animal, or vice versa. In the end, all these gods were just primitive previews of Superman—creatures like us, only with superpowers. They were not the Almighty God.

So how do you understand the true God? Does He think like us? Does He need anything? Is He a person?

We commit idolatry whenever we try to change God into something He's not and then worship this god of our own making. Throughout history, people have committed idolatry by portraying God as having creaturely features just as we have. In so doing, people remove the mystery of God. Yet at the same time, they cease to worship the one true God (Rom. 1:22-23). They end up worshiping Superman.

Even today, many Christians are tempted to think of God not as Scripture describes Him but as they want Him to be—more like themselves. The Superman temptation, then, comes when we attempt to remove God's mystery by making God a mere creature like us, just with super powers. We need to remove this temptation from our thinking when we encounter the absolute God of Scripture (Isa. 40:18).

THE STAR WARS TEMPTATION

One of the most recognized movies ever made is *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, released in 1977. Within a year, the film grossed \$530 million. The movie is famous for portraying an impersonal force in the universe that can be accessed by either good or evil people. This impersonal force seems to have an all-powerful status, so that it indirectly rules over the universe through the people that access it.

The concept of "the force," however, did not originate in twentieth-century Hollywood. The idea of an impersonal force indirectly ruling the universe dates back to early Greek philosophy. Even many people today view God as something like the force. They might claim that He has an aspect of a personality like we do, but when you probe more deeply, you discover that they see God as simply a massive, powerful force.

Why would people be tempted to view God as an impersonal force? The *Star Wars* temptation, like the Superman temptation, removes the



mystery of God. Although a force is strange and relatively undefined, we can still wrap our heads around the idea. We can talk about a force mathematically ($F = ma$). We can see its effects in physics. We can imagine it as a source of power philosophically. But in thinking about God this way, we can never quite connect personality to force. Therefore, force becomes power, absent of personhood. The *Star Wars* temptation, then, is another attempt to remove the mystery of the one true God by denying His personal nature.

Can you
wrap your mind
around God?
Or does He
blow your
mind?

THE JOY OF MYSTERY

In 1801, scientists discovered that a light particle (photon) can appear to be in two places at once. Prior to this time, such a phenomenon was thought physically impossible. Scientists decided, therefore, that a photon is a particle that can act as a wave for a fraction of a moment before acting as a particle again (this is called wave-particle duality). To this day, few can agree which sounds more implausible: that a photon particle can be in more than one place at a time or that it inexplicably varies between its nature as a particle and its nature as a wave.

How did physicists react to this strange activity in the universe? Not only did they accept this mystery, but they celebrated it. Renowned physicist Richard Feynman puts it this way: “I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it’s much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong.”¹ Wave-particle duality did not cause scientists to doubt science or find the universe meaningless. They did not walk away from science, posting on their social-media feed, “I am no longer a scientist!” They were inspired, motivated to know more, and excited to recognize their own limits of knowledge.

The apostle Paul had a similar reaction as he explored the depth of God’s revelation. As Paul considered the works and attributes of God, he was confronted with the limits of his own mind and the overwhelming complexity of the mind of God. This realization of God’s mystery didn’t cause Paul to doubt God. Instead, he burst into praise and wonder, delighting in God’s mystery: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Rom. 11:33). As we examine the complexities of God revealed in Scripture, let us embrace and celebrate the mystery of God.

In this unit, over and over again we will be brought to the limits of our thinking. Our investigation will lead us down paths that stop our feet right at the edge of mental cliffs. When we discover the vast mystery of God in His Word, we must remember the words of one reformer: “Where the Lord closes His holy mouth, let us also stop our minds from going on further.”² The mystery of God is not a problem that needs to be solved. Rather, it’s the very edge of our thinking. It’s from this edge that we’re able to rejoice in the mystifying view of God’s greatness.

How many gods are there?

THE ONE AND ONLY GOD

Most people have heard of the Ten Commandments. Even if they can’t list the commandments, most know that they’re God’s expectations of humanity. What many don’t know is the historical context. What was going on in the world when God gave Moses those two stone tablets?



In the ancient world, polytheism* was everywhere. Most cultures believed not only in false gods but in the existence of many gods at once. This belief might seem strange to us, but Scripture reveals an entire world of powerful authorities and rulers of darkness and wickedness we cannot see (Eph. 6:12). It's not unusual either for these rulers to be worshiped by people or for these rulers to interact with their worshipers.

polytheism: the belief in more than one god

God made all of us worshipers, for worship is in our very nature. Sin does not remove our nature of worshiping. It instead redirects our nature toward anything or anyone except the one true God. It's been this way ever since Adam sinned against God in the Garden of Eden. It's no wonder then that when God gave the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, He said, "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2-3).

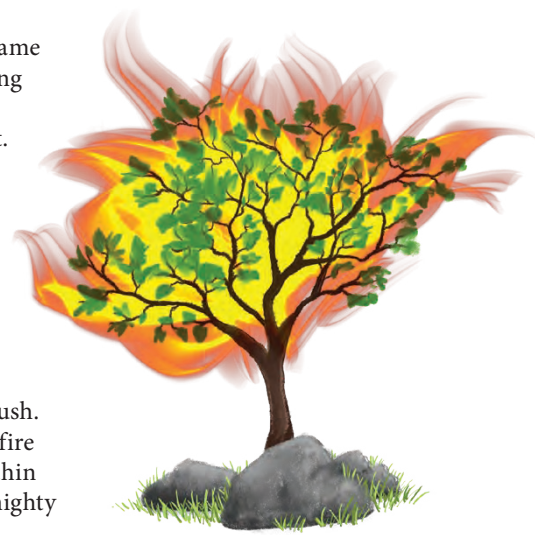
The wording here is important: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." In the original language, the phrase "before me" literally means "to my face." It is a personal affront to God to imagine any other thing or being as God. It's not that there really are other personal gods to choose from and God wants you to pick Him. Rather, it's that there's only one who is God—all other gods are counterfeits. God never had a beginning (John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20); He was not made. He needs nothing, but we desperately need Him. He is the only one who has the authority to command our worship—and He's worthy of it.

authentication: demonstration that something is genuine or the original

God identifies His name as Yahweh (LORD) and authenticates* this name with His work of saving His people from the slavery of Egypt. This saving activity was a significant moment for Israel. Through a burning bush, God commanded Moses to be an instrument of God's work against Egypt.

In biblical times, a parent would give his child a special name in hopes that he would live up to it. If, for example, a child's name was Daniel (meaning "God is my judge"), his parents likely expected him to have a sensitive conscience, eager to obey the Lord. This explains why Moses, as he stood before the burning bush, asked God for His name. The answer returned, "I AM" (a form of Yahweh). Thus God authenticated Himself as the same one whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob served (Exod. 3:13-15).

God identified Himself not only by name but also by the fire in the bush. The fire did not consume the bush, nor did it use the bush for fuel. The fire instead burned from its own power. At the same time, the fire dwelt within the bush—with its branches and leaves. The one and only God, the Almighty who dwells with His creation, does not rely on the bush or need it.





DOCTRINAL DILEMMA

IS IT OK FOR GOD TO BE JEALOUS?

Read Exodus 34:14 and James 3:14–16. Can jealousy ever be a good thing? If so, how would you distinguish appropriate jealousy from inappropriate jealousy, or envy? Can you give examples of both appropriate and inappropriate jealousy? How does God demonstrate jealousy?

The self-existing one is not a mere Superman, who is just like us but with special powers. He is rather the exclusive source and limitless God of power who dwells in the midst of His creation.

It is because God is the only true God that His next commandment is so crucial: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4). God is so protective of His

uniqueness as the one true God that He is not satisfied when we merely recognize no other gods besides Him. We are also commanded not to make images of Yahweh (or of an imagined god), and we are certainly not to worship those images (Exod. 20:5). This protection against both false gods and false worship is God’s jealousy.

The Israelites broke this commandment as they were waiting for Moses to return from the mountain with the stone tablets. They demanded that Aaron, their leader in Moses’ absence, make an image for worship. After fashioning a calf from gold, Aaron built an altar before the calf and declared, “To morrow is a feast to the LORD. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings” (Exod. 32:5–6).



Aaron mistakenly believed Israel could worship Yahweh (the LORD) through the golden calf. This image was Aaron’s attempt to represent God as something Israel could see and relate to. In reality, however, both the fashioning of the calf and the worship that resulted were simply idolatry. God is one, and thus He must be worshiped as the one and only God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). God will not accept any worship—even of Himself—that is not worthy of the Almighty God.

“To make an image of God is to take one’s thoughts of him from a human source, rather than from God himself; and this is precisely what is wrong with image-making.”

J. I. PACKER³

THE PERSONAL ONE

Before Moses’ death, he had one last chance to instruct the people of Israel on how to live. In his last speech, Moses instructed the people not only to love God themselves but also to teach the next generation to love God. To introduce this message, Moses called on the people to listen—really listen! Moses began, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD” (Deut. 6:4). The call to listen (“Hear”) was a signal that something vital was coming. Moses would proceed to explain important facts about who God is and how His people should live in response.

Deuteronomy 6:4 relates three crucial truths about God. First, the passage names God as Yahweh (LORD), or the self-existent one (Exod. 3:13–15). This name reveals that the one true God is personal; the one described by the general word *God* (or *Elohim**) has a personal name, Yahweh. He is not a force or power but a personal God who possesses all power.

Elohim: The general term for God used in the Old Testament; the term is plural, suggesting that the one God is a plurality of persons.

Second, as we mentioned above, the name Yahweh proclaims God as absolutely independent. Nobody is like Him because He needs nothing to sustain Himself. Therefore, He is the one and only God, the only one worthy of the name Yahweh.

Third, although He needs nothing, He is *our* God. We belong entirely to God, and yet, we can also say that He is ours. Even though a father has authority (and, in a sense, ownership) over his child, that child can still look back at his father and say, “That’s my dad!” This is the kind of God who is ours. He makes Himself known to us, provides for us, and actively loves us. Not only is He a personal God, but He has also gotten personal with us!

The very next verse tells us to love God “with all [our] heart, and . . . soul, and . . . might” (Deut. 6:5). We are to love our personal, unique, one-and-only God in a personal way—not with words only (Isa. 29:13). We can’t direct our love toward a force or an impersonal idea. Rather, actual love demands a personal object. We are to love God with our whole selves (“heart”): through both our “soul[s],” which we cannot see, and our bodies (“might”), which we can see.

Such personal love goes far beyond merely knowing about God. If we think it’s enough to simply know that there’s only one God, don’t forget that “the devils also believe, and tremble” (James 2:19). As our one-and-only Yahweh, God is to be loved, for He loves His people (Deut. 23:5; 1 John 4:10). This affection is the most personal relationship two persons can have. Therefore, we are to love only our God and have no barriers between us—no other gods, no images. As a husband loves his wife, God desires direct fellowship with His people.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

God did not have a beginning; He uniquely is. He is the Creator, not the creation. Nothing made sustains Him because He sustains all things. Throughout history, people have worshiped created things, but there’s only one worthy to be called God.

As the only true God, He alone is worthy of worship. We should not invent any god before His face because He takes it personally. We are to worship only Him and not make or worship anything that represents Him or an imagined god.

When Scripture speaks of God as one, it is not referring to the Father alone. Rather, Scripture refers to even the triune* God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as one. God in His oneness is personal. He has a personal name, Yahweh. He is personally ours. He loves us personally, and we are to respond by loving Him in the most intimate way we were made to love—with all our “heart, . . . soul, . . . mind, and . . . strength” (Mark 12:30).

triune: typically an adjective describing God as three persons who are the one God

THINKING IT THROUGH 7.1

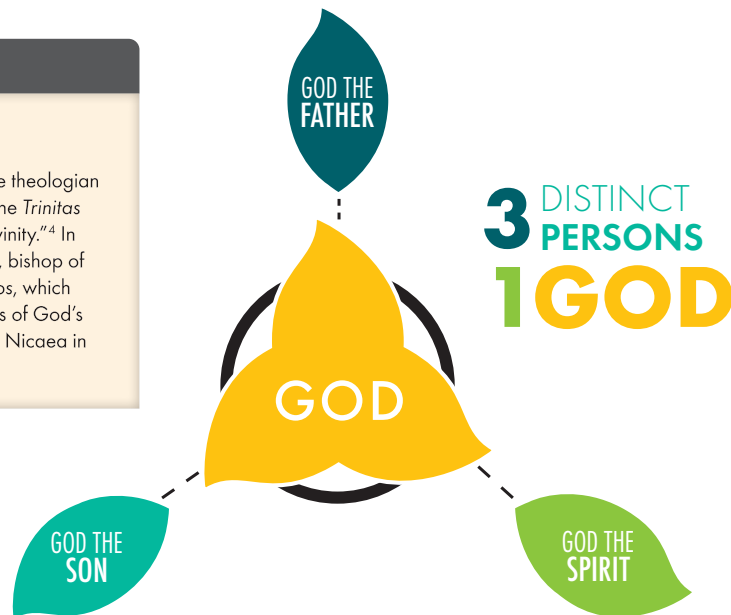
1. What is the difference between the *Star Wars* temptation and the Superman temptation?
2. What does the first commandment tell us about God’s oneness?
3. Which Bible passages tell us that there’s only one God? How would you use these passages to explain God’s oneness to a friend or family member?
4. What is significant about the fact that God has a name and calls Himself our God?
5. Explain how God is personal in His oneness.



HISTORY

THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM TRINITY

The term *Trinity* was first used in Latin by the theologian Tertullian (c. AD 155–240). He wrote about the *Trinitas Unius Divinitatis*, or the “Trinity of the One Divinity.”⁴ In the last half of the second century, Theophilus, bishop of Antioch in Syria, spoke of it in Greek as *triados*, which literally means “the three of God.”⁵ The details of God’s triunity were further clarified at the councils at Nicaea in AD 325 and Constantinople in AD 381.



7.2 THE THREENESS OF GOD

concordance: an alphabetical list of words in the Bible, usually tied to a particular Bible translation, listing some of or all the places in Scripture where those words occur

If you look in your Bible’s concordance* for the word *Trinity*, you might be disappointed. No verse in Scripture contains this word. You might be tempted to think that this is a mistake in the concordance or even a weakness in the Bible itself, but it’s not. After the Canon was completed, Christians in the early church developed the word *Trinity* to sum up all that Scripture says about God.

The prefix *Tri-* in *Trinity* means “three” and refers to the three persons whom Scripture calls God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But how did Christians come to believe that each of these persons is God? How did Christians come to believe that each of these persons is not a separate god? Are the three persons really just different “hats” the one God puts on at different times?

Scripture describes the three persons of the Trinity as distinct and fully God but never calls Them distinct gods. This might sound mind-boggling to you, and perhaps that’s why God revealed this truth about Himself so gradually. The Old Testament gives us some clues about the threeness of God. By the time we get to the New Testament, however, we see much more clearly that God is three persons. What’s so hard to grasp is that these three persons are still one single being who is God.

Despite how challenging it is to understand the Trinity, Scripture demands that we believe in a triune God. But what teachings of Scripture lead us to this conclusion? Theologian Geerhardus Vos explained that proving the Trinity from Scripture demands the following be shown:

- a) That there is one God.
- b) That there are nevertheless three distinct persons named, respectively, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, called God and considered as God.
- c) That there is, therefore, unity in trinity and trinity in unity.⁶

In Section 7.1, we addressed Vos’s first point, or the biblical teaching that there is only one God. In this section, we will address Vos’s second and third points. For now, however, we’ll simply define the **Trinity** as the three distinct persons of the one true God.

To better understand the Trinity, we'll begin by considering God's way of revealing this mystery throughout Scripture. Then we will clarify the biblical teaching about the Trinity and correct common errors and misconceptions. Finally, we'll tackle the hardest part of this section: What do we mean when we say God's oneness and God's threeness have equal priority?

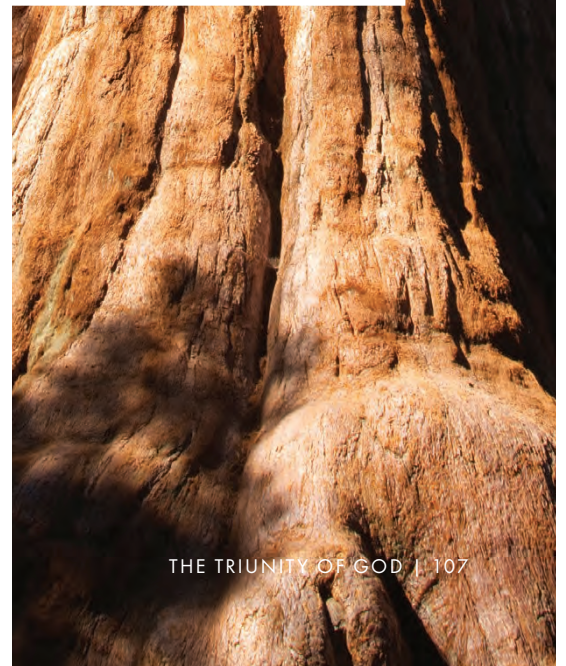
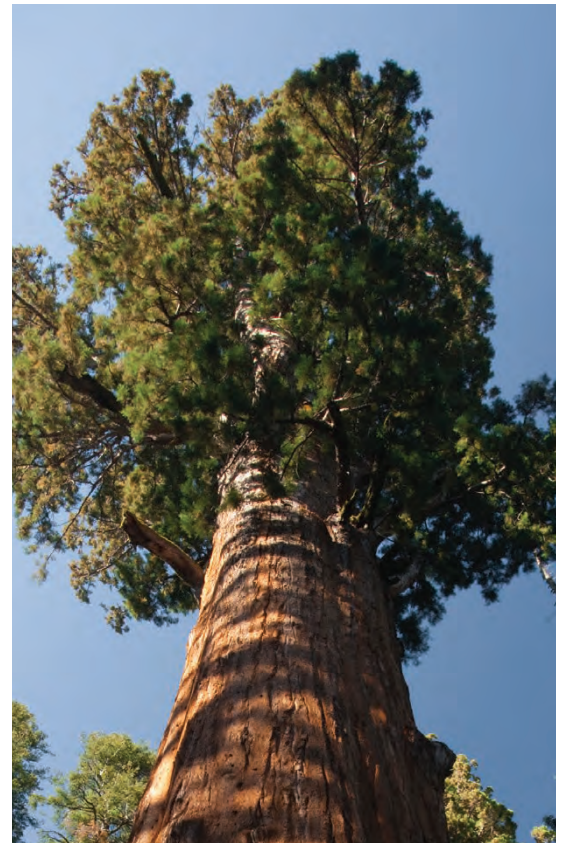
THE OLD TESTAMENT SEEDS OF THE TRINITY

The tallest tree in the world is a redwood tree, which stands at a whopping 379.7 feet high and weighs over a million pounds. This enormous redwood begins with a small seed that can fit in the palm of your hand. But within that tiny seed lies all the DNA that will help determine the tree's size, weight, shape, and internal processes. All the complexities of that huge tree are right there in a little seed. As long as the seed remains a seed, however, we can't see everything that lies within it. We have to watch the tree grow to see its massive greatness revealed.

God's revelation of His triune nature in the Old Testament is like a seed. It would be wrong to imagine that Old Testament saints understood the Trinity as we do today. The New Testament has revealed God's threeness much more clearly. This does not mean, however, that the Old Testament has nothing to say about the distinct persons in the Godhead. The seed of God's threeness is seen even within the first few paragraphs of Genesis. The Trinity of God is present in the Old Testament, but it's revealed slowly like a growing tree. By the time we get to the end of the Bible, we can see the Trinity much more clearly than in the early books of the Bible. Yet the "DNA" (or fullness) of God's oneness and threeness were there from the very beginning. It was the revelation of the *complexities* of the Trinity, however, that flowered little by little.

Our first indication that God is not merely one but is also a plurality comes in the creation of mankind. God declared, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Why did God use the plural pronouns *us* and *our*? Was God talking to a group of angels who were witnessing His creation of man?

For several reasons, we must reject the idea that the "us" in Genesis 1 refers to angels or any other created being. First, God's speech in creation was His act of power (Heb. 1:3), not a conversation with angels nearby. Second, if the "us" referred to angels, then that would mean the angels participated in the creation of man. A belief like that must be thrown out since God alone is Creator (Neh. 9:6; Rev. 4:11). Third, man is unique in that he alone is made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Therefore, God wasn't referring to a general image or likeness shared between God and angels.



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HERMENEUTICS • SKILLS

INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE

Compare Numbers 6:24–26 and 2 Corinthians 13:14. In the Numbers passage, Moses is instructed to tell Aaron how he will bless God's people. Aaron is to ask the Lord (Yahweh) to keep them (or take care of them), be gracious to them, and give them peace. Go back to 2 Corinthians 13:14. Do you think that there is a relationship between "keeping" (or taking care of) God's people and loving them? Do you think having "peace" with God means having fellowship with Him? Did you notice grace is mentioned in both Numbers and 2 Corinthians? In the 2 Corinthians passage, which member of the Trinity is assigned the task of showing grace? Which is assigned the task of love (keeping)? What about fellowship/communion (peace)? What do you think the connection is between these two passages?

So Genesis 1:26 is telling us that it's appropriate for God to use plural pronouns when referring to Himself. God is not merely one but also three, and the persons are distinct. Three persons require a plural pronoun, which is exactly what we find in the first chapter of Scripture.

Other Old Testament passages distinguish the individual persons of the Trinity more clearly. Psalms 45:6–7 and 110:1 speak of Christ as distinct from the other persons in the God-head (see also Heb. 1:8–9). Isaiah 63:9–10 distinguishes the Holy Spirit from Christ, while also demonstrating the unity of mind and purpose between Them. This same distinction is made in Isaiah 61:1 as well.

The Old Testament distinguishes God the Son from the other persons of the Trinity when it speaks of the Angel of the Lord as a real person who interacts with the people of God. This Angel is given divine honor (Judg. 6:11, 18, 22–23), and He accepts divine honor from Joshua (Josh. 5:14). A mere created angel would never accept such acknowledgment (Rev. 22:8–9). Additionally, the Angel of the Lord speaks with authority, is

addressed as God, and has divine attributes (Gen. 16:13). And His name alternates between the Angel of the Lord and *Elohim*, or God (Zech. 12:8).

*Are the Father, Son, and
Holy Spirit fully God?*

NEW TESTAMENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRINITY

Thus far, we've seen that the Old Testament clearly teaches both God's oneness and God's plurality, or distinctions. Therefore, we notice the seed of the Trinity, but the details remain concealed.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament maintains God's oneness (Mark 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; Rom. 3:30; 1 Tim. 2:5; James 2:19; 1 John 5:20–21; Jude 1:25). At the same time, the New Testament develops the Trinity with much more clarity. The seed becomes a blossoming tree, revealing three distinct Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are distinct, yet They are all the one true God.

The account of Jesus' baptism reveals a triune view of God (Luke 3:21–22). As the Son is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends in a bodily form—the form of a dove—distinct from the Son's body. A voice from the Father, which is not the voice of the Son or the Spirit, declares, "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

The distinctions between the persons of the Trinity are not limited to activity here on earth. We can also see distinctions in the eternal activity within the Trinity itself. For instance, the Father is the one who eternally begets* the Son (John 3:16; 5:26; Heb. 1:3). But nowhere does Scripture say that the Son begets the Father or that the Father begets the Spirit. As the begotten one, the Son is the perfect image of the Father (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). The Son reflects the Father's glory and character even though He is distinct from the Father (Matt. 16:27; John 14:9; 17:1; Heb. 1:3). Conversely, the Father does not image the Son or Spirit.

begets: a creaturely way of speaking about the inner relationship between the Father and Son; in contrast with human begottenness, which refers to a once-and-for-all moment that brings someone into existence, the Father's begetting is an eternal act that communicates the person of the Son, not the Son's divinity (in other words, the Son is as much God as the Father is)

"I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one."

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS⁷

Scripture also reveals that the Father is the one who sends not only the Son (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 6:39, 57; 8:18, 29; 12:44–49; 17:18) but also the Spirit (Luke 11:13; John 14:16–17, 26; Gal. 4:6). The Son, in turn, also sends the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7; 20:22; 1 John 4:13). To sum up the orthodox Christian view of the Trinity, these are the activities within the Trinity: the Father begets the Son, the Son images the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. All this happens continuously forever, without beginning or end.

Not only are all three persons of the Trinity distinct from each other, but They are all equally God. The Father is God (2 Cor. 1:2–3; 2 John 1:3; Gal. 1:1; Col. 1:2–3; 2 Thess. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Eph. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2–3), the Son is God (John 1; 5:18–25; 20:28; Col. 1:15–20; 2:9; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:1–4, 6; 7:2–3; Rom. 10:9), and the Spirit is God (Isa. 6:9 with Acts 28:25; Acts 5:3, 9; 1 Cor. 2:10; 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 3:17; 1 John 4:13). But They are not separate gods. Rather, all three are the one God. Therefore, the New Testament—just like the Old Testament (Deut. 6:4)—is consistent in asserting that there's only one God. The Old and New Testaments demonstrate excellent harmony.

Although the Old and New Testaments complement each other, it's this very unity between them that makes the doctrine of the Trinity difficult to understand. The Trinity would be easier to grasp if each person of the Trinity were a god, with each person possessing His own individual divinity. This would result in a belief in three distinct, individual gods, or what is called **tritheism**. Or maybe we would find it more logical if the deity* were divided into three even portions so that each person possessed just one portion. This is the teaching of **partialism**, which views none of the persons as fully God but instead gives us three demigods.* Perhaps it would be less confusing if God were really just one person, who wore three different "hats" or appeared in three different ways—sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Holy Spirit. This teaching is called **modalism** and views God as a monad* like the Islamic god, Allah.

Instead, however, Scripture drives our minds almost to the edge of madness as we reckon with the true nature of His mystery. The mystery, then, is that all three persons are equally God—in His oneness. Think about what you just read: three distinct persons are all equally God. One God.



THE FATHER IS GOD	
2 Cor. 1:2–3	
Gal. 1:1	
Eph. 1:2	
Phil. 1:2	
Col. 1:2–3	
2 Thess. 1:2	
1 Tim. 1:2	
2 Tim. 1:2	
1 Pet. 1:2–3	
2 John 1:3	
THE SON IS GOD	
John 1; 5:18–25; 20:28	
Rom. 10:9	
2 Cor. 4:4	
Col. 1:15–20; 2:9	
Heb. 1:1–4, 6; 7:2–3	
THE SPIRIT IS GOD	
Isa. 6:9 with Acts 28:25	
Acts 5:3, 9	
1 Cor. 2:10; 3:16; 6:19	
2 Cor. 3:17	
1 John 4:13	

deity: the collection of attributes that make up the nature of God

demigod: a being who is only partly god, such as a mixture of a god and a mortal (Hercules being one example)

monad: a single being, without diversity



EQUAL PRIORITY OF THE ONE AND THREE

Here's what will really make your brain sweat. God's oneness is not the divine goo that holds three powerful supermen together. God's oneness is not a force that gives the three supermen their superpowers. Instead, God is absolutely one Being. As one, He is fully personal and relates to us. Yet at the very same time, He is absolutely three persons, each of whom is distinct in His work and individual personality. They do not borrow "godness" from each other, nor does each person have His own individual "godness." The three persons are one God—all equally God.

Many Christians tend to place the highest priority on God's threeness. Although there might be some good reasons for this emphasis, we must remember that our triune God is just as much one as He is three. Oneness and threeness are equal in priority. He is both at all times: never just one, never just three.

What happens if we give a higher priority to oneness or a higher priority to threeness? If we prioritize God's threeness over God's oneness, we fall into either tritheism or partialism. Perhaps we'll believe that we serve three gods with one impersonal, divine *stuff* holding them together. Or perhaps we'll believe we serve three demi-gods who share portions of the deity—like one bowl of soup split into three bowls.

On the other hand, if we prioritize God's oneness over God's threeness, we fall into modalism. In other words, we see God as an actor who dresses up as three different personas. Sometimes this one actor performs the role of Father. Other times, He performs the role of Son. And in other situations He plays the role of Spirit.

All these views are heretical: they defy the Scriptures in order to imagine God's nature as something it is not. It takes the strength of God-given faith, careful thought, and rigorous pursuit of knowledge to hold fast to Scripture's teachings about our God. Our God did not make a magical world in which we can suddenly, without any work, know and believe the intricate details of complex doctrine. Instead, He created a world in which we must work, practice, study, and humble ourselves. As we do so, the Holy Spirit helps us understand (as best we can) and believe (with all our hearts) God's Word (Eph. 1:15-23).

THINKING IT THROUGH 7.2

1. What clues does the Old Testament give us about God's plurality?
2. How does the New Testament show that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are fully God?
3. Evaluate the following statement: "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each possess a part of the deity of God." Is this statement biblical? Defend your answer.
4. Evaluate the following statement: "Father and Son are different roles, played by one God." Is this statement biblical? Defend your answer.
5. Why is it so important to insist on the equal priority of God's oneness and God's threeness?

7.3 THE BEAUTY OF THE TRINITY

If you're a football fan, you're no doubt familiar with the Hail Mary (a term that also refers to a Roman Catholic prayer). In a Hail Mary, the quarterback throws the football with all his might, though he's unsure whether the ball will land in the hands of a teammate. The quarterback simply throws the ball and just hopes for the best. Typically, a Hail Mary is used at the end of a game when the score is close and there's no more time for another play.

On November 9, 2002, the Kentucky Wildcats faced off against the Louisiana State University Tigers. With two seconds left on the clock, the Wildcats (the home team) were ahead 30 to 27. Though the Tigers had the ball, they were seventy-four yards away from the end zone. On the sidelines, the Wildcats were already celebrating their anticipated win by dumping Gatorade on their coach.

The ball was snapped to the quarterback. Players were running everywhere, causing the field to look like complete chaos. Fireworks exploded and fans ran onto the field to celebrate the Wildcat victory.

But then—something amazing happened. The Tigers' quarterback heaved the ball into the air, and it floated above the pandemonium, almost as if the world quieted down to see its spiral across time and space. The ball soared with perfect motion over the frenzied confusion of the people below. Then it tipped as it descended, bounced off the hands of a defender, and landed gently in the hands of a Tigers' wide receiver.

The Tigers won that day, even as the Wildcats' fans continued their celebration, unaware they had lost. To this day, fans call the Tigers' victory the "Bluegrass Miracle." Sports commentator Dave Neal called the moment "the most shocking, improbable, unbelievable sequence of events."⁸

When athleticism, physics, and hope all come together in one moment, we might call it . . . beautiful. We witness beauty when we see something seemingly impossible made possible—and in a surprisingly elegant way.

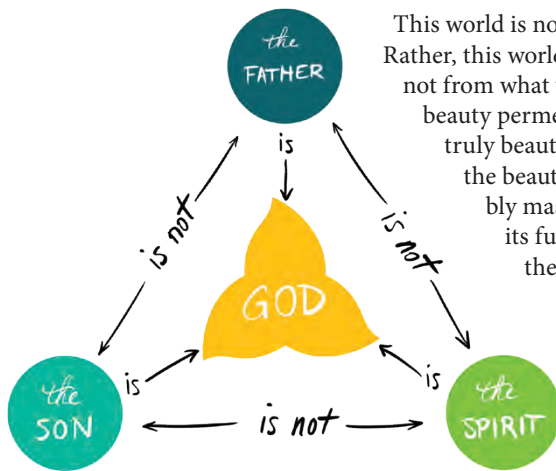


Why should I delight in the Trinity?

What about our triune God? Is He beautiful? On a quiz, you'd probably answer yes. But what do we mean when we say that God is beautiful? We can't see Him or hear His voice. But since we live in a world created by a triune God, we live in a world that reflects His triune nature. He made the world to mimic Himself (Rom. 11:36).

God's triune fingerprints are all over His world, His creatures, and His Word. For instance, you could identify a human as a multitude of individual chemicals. Yet we couldn't say that a human is *merely* a multitude of chemicals. A human, as a whole, is a single being. We know a person by who he is as a whole, not his plurality of chemicals. Even so, without the chemicals, we can't see or know the person. This is part of our Creator's triune fingerprint on His creation.

It should not surprise us that we live in a world that is both many things and yet one thing. It's a world in which photons are both innumerable particles and single waves. It's a world made up of an unthinkable number of atoms, but it can still be understood as one planet. None of this should surprise us because our Creator is three distinct persons, all three of which are one personal God.



This world is not beautiful simply because it is, in and of itself, beautiful. Rather, this world is beautiful because of what it reflects. The beauty comes not from what we see but from who is reflected there. Our triune God's beauty permeates His creation because His creation mimics Him—the truly beautiful one. This single idea should change our appreciation for the beauty of this world. When we look at the majesty of the impossibly massive Mt. Everest—from its invisible electrons and protons to its full single mass that towers over Nepal—we should think about the beauty of the triune God that Everest points to at its summit.

A ONE-DIMENSIONAL WORLDVIEW

But what about those who deny that our world is created by a triune God? How do they interpret the world they see? Those who deny our God have an interpretation problem (1 Cor. 2:14–16). In other words, as a person looks at the world, he has to interpret what he sees. Because of sin, the unbeliever can never interpret the world as an unbiased observer but interprets it as one in full rebellion against the triune God (Rom. 1:18). Those who rebel do not obtain the truth but suppress it in their sin.

Therefore, at the root of the unbeliever's misinterpretation of the world is his suppression of the truth (Rom. 1:18). He does not misinterpret the world because he is ignorant of God but because he despises God's authority as Creator and Architect of the universe (Rom. 1:19–20, 24–25). The unbeliever is already at war with the Creator as he begins his observation of the world.

Because the unbeliever has dismissed the triune Creator at the outset, the unbeliever normally sees the world either as a single unity or as a collection of many things—not both simultaneously. Early philosophers tried to see the world as a single thing. Thales thought that the world was essentially water. Heraclitus saw the world as essentially fire or constant change. Democritus thought the world was really just tiny atoms. Later philosophers, however, thought that the world was not unified at all but was really just a bunch of individual objects randomly bumping up against each other.

This confusion about the world is called the problem of the one and the many, or the **one-many problem**. The problem is that once people reject God, they tend to see the world either as unified or as a lot of individual objects. Just as one philosopher was convinced the world was a unity, another determined it was a plurality. This was a problem for philosophers.

The difficulties posed by the one-many problem became even more serious as people tried to distinguish right from wrong while still rejecting the triune Creator. For instance, John Dewey wanted public education to serve as a tool to socialize students into being better citizens, not better individuals. In his view, the individual finds his value and meaning only in the community (oneness). The community is the unified whole of a group of people, and all individuals are obligated to a single vision of what the best kind of community should be.



To Dewey, the individual is meaningless; only the community matters. Therefore, the individual reaches his full potential and meaning only within a community. Learning in school, then, is not about the individual's betterment but about socializing the individual into the ideal society. Dewey believed the world was one, not many.



At the opposite end of the spectrum is Oprah Winfrey, formerly a well-known talk show host. She now owns her own TV channel and magazine and is still very active in the world of media. Winfrey describes what motivated her to write her book, *Wisdom of Sundays*:

My intention with the book is to offer on every page an opportunity to find a way to be closer to yourself, closer to the heart that you believe, closer to the name you refer to God as being. . . . To find a way because I believe that there are all kinds of avenues, different paths leading to the same goal and the highest goal is the truest expression of yourself as a human being.⁹

Winfrey does not see a unified way to a single God. She sees many roads and many ways that lead to “the name you refer to God as being” (whoever that might be to you). Success depends on your experiences, beliefs, and hopes as an individual.

Perhaps your views are in logical conflict with a friend's views (if you're a Christian, for example, and your friend is a Muslim). But according to Winfrey, your views and your friend's views are both right as long as they are best for the individual's goals. In the end, all views are right. The many individuals of the world prepare their own path to God or a god. Winfrey seems to believe that the world is many, not one.

The unbeliever sees only one dimension of the world because he will not acknowledge the full triune beauty of God's nature bursting through all creation. God made us in His image, and we are all in His likeness (Gen. 1:26).

As a church, Christians constitute a single body (Rom. 12:4), but that doesn't mean that Christians are mindless, identical robots. They're unique individuals as well. The beauty of the church lies in its reflection of both God's oneness and God's diversity.

There is only one way to the Father—Jesus Christ (John 14:6). The single road in our spiritual walk is narrow (Matt. 7:14). Yet even though believers are all saved the same way, they often have vastly different testimonies. This diversity stems from the fact that God works with us and teaches us as a Father relates to His individual children (Rom. 8:16–17). But at the same time, we are His people, the one and only bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25–32; 2 Cor. 11:2). When we see our world, our salvation, ourselves, and each other in the light of His triune majesty, we begin to realize that the beauty we see is God's triune reflection in His creation.

THE RIGOROUS WORK OF PRAISE

Do your praises to God sound something like this: “Dear Lord, thank You for this day,” or, “Dear Lord, thank You for this food”? There's nothing wrong with thanking God for those things. But do you offer such praises just to take up time so you can think of what you're going to pray next?

Perhaps we need to be more thoughtful and deliberate in our praise to a triune God. Have you ever considered praising God for the different aspects of His triune nature? Do you thank Him for the specific works of the Son? What about the specific works of the Holy Spirit? What can you thank Him for in relation to His fatherhood? What about thanking Him for His personal love and care as our one and only God?

Praise is rigorous. It takes a lot of work to understand aspects of God enough to speak them back to Him in thanks. Use what you learned in this chapter, and prepare a prayer that praises God for His triune nature. Consider using this prayer when you're asked to pray publicly at your local church.



WORSHIPING IN UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Because God is triune, our praise should reflect both the unity (oneness) and diversity (threeness) of God. We'll cover this in more detail later in the textbook, but have you ever considered what the point of church is? Is it worship? If so, why is church so social? Is worshiping as a group really necessary? Why can't we just worship God by ourselves, in our own way, without the complications of other people—without the complications of church?

God's oneness and threeness are reflected in how He wants to be worshiped. The Christian, as an individual, is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). The Christian husband is personally responsible to love his wife, and the Christian wife is personally responsible to respect her husband (Eph. 5:33). The Christian, as an individual, is to speak the truth (Eph. 4:25), be fully convinced of his convictions (Rom. 14:5), determine his tithe (2 Cor. 9:7), and examine his own heart (1 Cor. 11:28).

At the same time, Christians are all members of a single body, the church (1 Cor. 12:20), which together makes up the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19–22). As members of that body, Christians are to submit to godly leaders, who teach the truth (Eph. 4:11–12; Heb. 13:17). On certain matters, believers should defer to the consciences of other Christians (Rom. 14:21–22). Although Christians are individuals, they are unified in the church body in “one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:4–6). The believer should never divide the body by acting as if he is superior to another brother in Christ. Instead, Christians are to have one mind (Rom. 15:6; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2; 1 Pet. 3:8) and one purpose (Jer. 32:39; Zeph. 3:9; Eph. 1:11; Phil. 1:27).

God demands a particular kind of worship—worship that emphasizes both the individual Christian and the church with equal priority. If you seek to be a faithful Christian as an individual while rejecting the unity and accountability of your local church, you can never produce worship acceptable to God. This is not some arbitrary rule that God decided to include in His big list of rules. Rather, our God, in Himself, is just as much one as He is three. He is both unity and diversity. The many individuals He has saved must also be unified in the church for their worship to reflect His triune nature.

Is it necessary for a believer to be connected to a local church? Indeed it is. The local church is a critical part of worship and accountability. Only in the church can a biblical unity develop among individual believers. If we are to worship the triune God of Scripture in the way that He has commanded, we must be connected to the local church.

THINKING IT THROUGH 7.3

1. Explain why we can describe the Trinity as beautiful.
2. How would you describe the one-many problem to someone who has never heard of it?
3. How does God's triune nature solve the one-many problem?
4. Evaluate this statement: “What's true for you is true for you; what's true for me is true for me.” What aspect of the one-many problem does this statement reflect? How would you respond?
5. Why is God's triune nature vital to understanding our role in worship? Give a specific example of how the Trinity affects our worship.

7 CHAPTER REVIEW

TERMS TO REMEMBER

Trinity
tritheism
partialism
modalism
one-many problem

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

Ephesians 4:4–6

UNDERSTANDING DOCTRINAL TRUTH

1. Explain the two ways people have attempted to eliminate the joy of the mystery of God.
2. Explain the equal priority of God's oneness and God's threeness.
3. What does it mean when a Christian says that something in this universe is beautiful?
4. Discuss the roles of both unity and diversity in the life of the Christian, who is a member of the body of Christ.

PRACTICING DOCTRINAL HARMONIZATION

5. How would you reconcile the Old Testament claim of God's oneness with the New Testament explanation of God's threeness?
6. Why does the unbeliever tend to see the world as either one or many?

RELATING DOCTRINAL TRUTHS; EVALUATING CLAIMS

7. Evaluate this claim: "God the Father in Christianity and Allah in Islam are both the same God. Christians and Muslims just don't realize it." Is this claim accurate? Why or why not?
8. Evaluate this statement: "God in His oneness cannot be personal." Is this claim accurate? Why or why not?
9. Suppose a friend of yours says, "I don't belong to a church; I just have personal devotions on Sundays." How would you respond to your friend?
10. How do the persons within the Trinity demonstrate Their differences? How do the persons demonstrate unity?

MAKING USE OF DOCTRINE FOR WORLDVIEW LIVING

11. Suppose a Jehovah's Witness comes to your door and claims that God is not triune. Use Scripture to demonstrate God's triune nature.
12. Write out a plan for a personal devotion time that incorporates deliberate, thoughtful worship of God that centers on His triunity. Remember that worship includes reading, singing, praying, and meditation.



CHAPTER

8

*What is
God like?*

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Scripture Memory

Rom. 1:18–20

Key Scriptures

Exod. 15:11

1 Kings 8:27

Ps. 136

Ps. 145:3

Ps. 147:5

Jer. 9:24

John 4:24

James 1:17

8.1 NO ONE LIKE GOD

People long to be free—no one telling them what they should do, when they should do it, and why they should be doing more. They want independence. And nothing says independence like a driver's license. For months, you might taste the freedom in small doses as you drive your parents around with your temporary permit. But then, before you know it, you're alone, cruising down Main Street with your windows rolled down, in a four-thousand-pound, aerodynamic machine with four cylinders blasting fire through a solid-block engine. And at that moment, you feel like you're fully grown, fully empowered, and fully independent. But . . . it's all an illusion.

Although you might feel independent, you find yourself driving home in a car that your parents paid for, a car that requires insurance that your parents paid for and that is taking you to a house that your parents paid for. You sit at a table with food that your parents prepared and paid for. Your parents even purchased the pants you just spilled gravy on! Your minimum-wage job barely covers the cost of your car's gas.

To provide all these things for you, your parents, in turn, depend on a business or organization. That organization is then dependent on legislation enforced or supported by the state and backed by the federal government. Furthermore, the federal government is composed of officials elected by the will of millions of people. And ultimately, all these things are in full subjection to God's sovereign work. For humans, then, independence is an illusion.

How is God different from His creation?

As you learned in Chapter 7, God is Yahweh, the I AM, the self-existent one (Exod. 3:14). God is absolutely independent. But the word *independent* really just means “not dependent.” If God is not dependent, then what is He?

To describe God’s independence, theologians speak of His **aseity**. It’s a Latin term composed of two parts: *a* meaning “from,” and *se* meaning “self.” Therefore, God is from Himself, or self-existent.

You come from two other people (your mom and your dad). Those two people each came from two other people (your grandparents), and so the story goes all the way back to creation. But God has no beginning (Ps. 90:2; Isa. 40:28; John 8:58; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 1:18). He is not merely the first being because He has always existed. Rather, He is the one who is His own satisfaction (Isa. 42:1; 48:11; Acts 17:25; Heb. 1:3) and power (Gen. 1:1; Job 26:7-14; Matt. 28:18; Col. 1:16-17; Rev. 19:1).

A philosopher once described God as the unmoved mover. In other words, God was the first cause of everything else. That might be true, but it hardly tells us the importance of God’s power or self-existence. What makes God’s self-existence so radical is that He did not *have to* cause anything else. He did not need to create anything because He was fully and absolutely satisfied in the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. He was not lonely. He did not lack community. He did not long for anything or anyone except His own being.

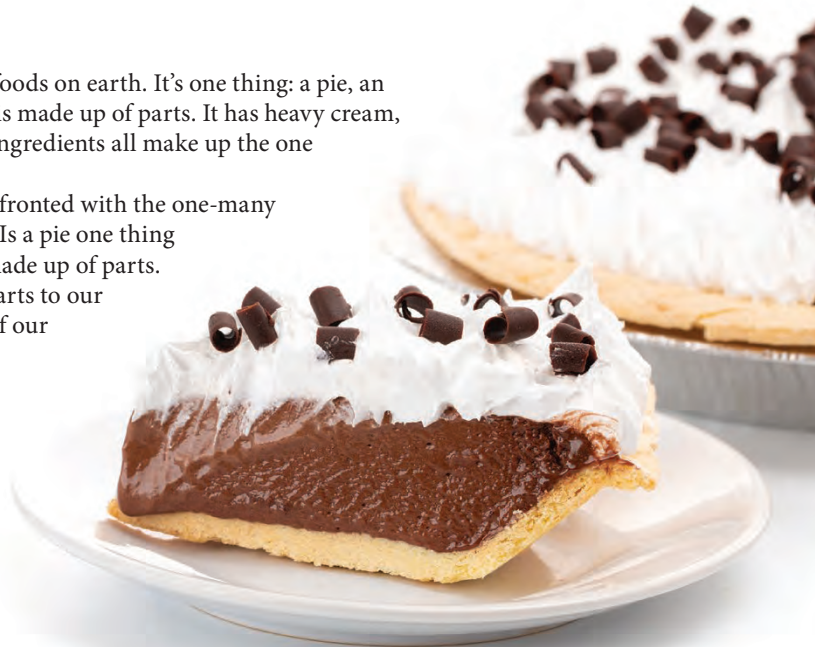
So now we walk to the limits of our thinking—the edge of our imagination—when we ask, “Why did God create?” If we understand God’s full independence and satisfaction within Himself, this question will be a mystery that grips our attention. If we say He created for no reason, we make His work arbitrary (or meaningless). If we say He created because He needed ____ (fill in the blank), then we are saying God needed something. All we can say in the face of this massive mystery is that it was His good pleasure to create.

A GOD WITH NO PARTS

French silk pie may be one of the tastiest foods on earth. It’s one thing: a pie, an amazing pie. But if you look closely, the pie is made up of parts. It has heavy cream, sugar, butter, chocolate, and a crust. These ingredients all make up the one thing we call french silk pie.

Remember that in Chapter 7, we were confronted with the one-many problem. Pie is an example of that problem. Is a pie one thing or many things? Well, it’s really one thing made up of parts. It’s the same thing with humans. We have parts to our being (soul and body). We even have parts of our body, but we still remain one thing.

What about God? Does God have parts to His person? Is one part of God His justice and another part His will? Does God divide His knowledge from His affections? Is His righteousness a different part of Him than His love is? How exactly are we to understand our God?



God is good.
We know what
"good" means
because
God is it.

Whenever we ask these things about God, we're asking about what He's like within Himself. When we say that God is loving, just, holy, and good, we typically call those things attributes. **Attributes** are distinctive traits we recognize in God's activity and person. But are these attributes parts of a whole? Are they small pieces of one God? When we stand back, do we see one God made up of individual attributes?

Scripture tells us that God is not like anything in creation (Deut. 4:15–16). God is a Spirit (John 4:24), and therefore, He does not consist of individual parts (Luke 24:39). When Scripture says that God is holy (Lev. 11:44) or that God is love (1 John 4:16) or that God is righteous (Jer. 23:6), it's not saying God possesses individual parts that make up a whole. Rather, the Bible speaks this way to help us understand that God is identical to His holiness, love, and righteousness.

If we say that one thing is identical to another, we're defining what that one thing is. For instance, you are not merely similar to a human.

Humanity is not simply a part of who you are—you are identical to humanity. You are human. In the same way, holiness, love, and righteousness are some of God's attributes. And God is identical to His attributes. His attributes are not parts of Him. Rather, He is identical to His attributes. This means that God is one—not the sum total of many parts. We call this unity in God His **simplicity**.

"HE IS ALL THOUGHT, [ALL WILL, ALL MIND, ALL LIGHT,] ALL EYE, ALL EAR, THE ONE ENTIRE FOUNTAIN OF ALL GOOD THINGS."

IRENAEUS¹

Chemistry teaches us that water is made up of parts: two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule. God, however, isn't like that—He is one pure thing. We call that "thing" He is His **essence**. The word *essence* simply refers to a person's most basic identity. Water's most basic identity is two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule. The most basic identity of God is His attributes. All His individual attributes are not a "them" but a single "Him." They are not different parts of God but are rather the one simple, personal God.

It's for our own sake that we make distinctions about God. We are creatures that understand things in a creaturely way. Hence, our finite brains can process only a little bit of information at a time as we think about an infinite God. Our best way to understand is by making distinctions.

We must not forget, however, that our limitations in thinking are not God's limitations. We can rightly say that God is love because He is identical to His attribute of love. We can rightly say that God is truth because He is identical to His knowledge. These attributes are not several individual things but are aspects of a God who has no parts. These attributes are one simple essence—our one, true, personal God.

We must also remember that the fact that we have finite minds and think in a creaturely way does not mean we're saying something false about God. God has communicated Himself to us perfectly, without error, and in absolute truth. God has then accommodated this perfect, inerrant truth to creatures. He communicated

in a way we can understand, not in the exact way He knows Himself. Therefore, understanding God in a creaturely way does not mean we understand God in a flawed way. Instead, we have a God who is powerful enough to communicate what He is like in a way that we can understand. Yet He is also able to maintain absolute truth in that communication.

THE UNCHANGEABLE GOD

Here's a science experiment. Take a glass, and fill it halfway with water. Then take a tablespoon of salt and dump it in. As you stir, you'll see the salt circling in the glass. Keep stirring, and you'll see a ghosting, which is still salt. Eventually, as the salt dissolves into the water, it will become almost invisible.

Did the salt change? Actually, no. The salt mixes with the water but does not change its molecular structure. The salt remains exactly the same as it was before it was wet. If you wanted to, you could even extract the salt back out of the water by heating it up.

The interaction between the water and salt is genuine. In other words, the two did not merely *appear* to interact. Instead, there was real interaction, even though the essence of the salt (its molecular structure) never changed once.

One of the more difficult doctrines of God is His **immutability**. The term *immutable* means “unchangeable.” Immutability is a difficult doctrine because Scripture reveals many interactions between God and His creation that look a lot like change. The Bible says, for example, that God sometimes “repents” of His actions (Gen. 6:6–7; 1 Sam. 15:11; Joel 2:13; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:9; 4:2). Scripture also speaks of God becoming **angry** (Exod. 4:14; Num. 11:1, 10; 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 13:10; Ps. 106:40; Isa. 5:25; Zech. 10:3) and subsequently turning away from His anger (Deut. 13:17; Josh. 7:26; 2 Chron. 12:12; 30:8; Jer. 18:8, 10; 26:3, 19; 36:3; Jon. 3:10). When Israel sinned against the Lord and built an idol, God said He would destroy the people and make a new people from Moses. Moses begged God to spare Israel, and the Lord reversed His decision (Exod. 32:7–14).



It sounds like God changes an awful lot! At the same time, however, Scripture tells us God never changes (James 1:17). He is “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8). He does not change His mind as people do (1 Sam. 15:29). He always does exactly what He intends to do (Pss. 33:11; 138:8; Dan. 9:4; Neh. 9:32; Phil. 1:6). His love endures forever (Pss. 106:1; 136:26). His faithfulness endures forever (Ps. 119:90). His righteousness endures forever (Pss. 111:3; 112:3). His name endures forever (Ps. 135:13). His Word endures forever (1 Pet. 1:25). God does not change (Mal. 3:6)!

How do we make sense of all this? To answer that question, we must keep two things in mind. First of all, when God interacts with His creation, He does so genuinely and personally. God does not merely *appear* to interact with humans. His in-

teractions with humans are never artificial or in name only. When God interacts with humans, He does so absolutely “in the moment” and in an absolutely true, present relationship. When Scripture says God was angry (Num. 32:10), He really was angry. When Scripture says God was pleased (1 Kings 3:10), He really was pleased. God is not like an idol with a carved smile but no real joy. He does not wear a mask that simply appears angry but is only a façade.

Second, we must remember that even in His interaction with creation, God at no point changes in His essence. He remains everything He was before creation began, and who He is never changes. Even when God the Son put on flesh and took on a human nature, God’s essence never changed—not even for a moment.

Although God’s interactions are absolutely real and personal, we cannot understand God the same way we understand a created

being. When we, as creatures, interact with others, we react. Those reactions affect us so that we begin to change. That’s why a seventy-year-old isn’t the same person he was at fifteen. People change.

God, on the other hand, is able to genuinely respond to human activity. But His responses are not “reactions to the unexpected.” God isn’t changing from one thing to another, nor is He getting any new information. He never suddenly realizes anything, nor is He ever uncertain. He never learns anything.

Not only does God know the future, but He has planned it, brings it about, and is present in it. Isaiah said, “With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?” (Isa. 40:14). No one has. He is both fully immutable in His being and fully genuine in His interactions.



PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Throughout this section, we've seen that God is not like His creatures. Even so, God has accommodated, or helped us understand, Himself. He relates Himself to us in a created world in a way that creatures understand. If He were to speak to us on His level, we would have no way to know Him.

Here's the mysterious part: when God reveals who He is in His Word—even though He speaks in a way we can understand—He never does so with falsehood or half-truths. No, God reveals Himself in absolute truth, but in a way understandable to us.

"The divine immutability should not be understood as implying immobility, as if there were no movement in God. . . . The Bible teaches us that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. . . . But there is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purpose, His motives of action, or His promises."

LOUIS BERKHOF²

Hence, there are ways we can understand God in truth, but we must remember that He's not like us. God is not composed of parts; He is not changeable; He is not a creature as we are. Yet God can reveal Himself in ways that we can understand that nonetheless remain true to who God is. God enables us, even as creatures, to understand Him absolutely truthfully.

This is all a mystery. When scholars try to erase the mystery, they sometimes make God a creature like us—He becomes a god with limits (Superman). Other times, they portray God as an impersonal presence who only seems to interact with us but really doesn't (a force). But if we allow for mystery, we can maintain the truth of Scripture without falling into error.

Although we hold this mystery in our beliefs, we do so for an important reason. For God to be who Scripture says He is, He must be fully powerful. It's not just that God is more powerful than we are or more powerful than we can imagine—He is all-powerful.

Therefore, He does not depend on anything outside Himself. He does not depend on the concept of love in order to be loving. He does not depend on the existence of time and space in order to have a place to dwell. He does not depend upon a substance in order to be filled or satisfied. He does not *depend* on the laws of logic in order to think. He is God, but humanity is dependent—fully dependent as a created thing.

God rules over creation not because He is the strongest of all beings in existence. Instead, He rules because He is the absolute one, the one who's the cause and source of life for everything else.



BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

At your part-time job, you make friends with someone who calls himself a Latter-day Saint, or Mormon. As you get to know each other, he asks what makes your view of God different from his. How would you use the Creator-creature distinction to answer him?

God can never be anything other than God. And man can never be anything other than man. Even as Christ takes on humanity, He never stops being God. The distinction between God and humanity is one of the most important distinctions to remember as we think about God. He is not like us (Num. 23:19; Isa. 55:8-9), but we must strive to imitate Him as creatures (Lev. 11:44-45; Eph. 5:1).

THINKING IT THROUGH 8.1

1. How are humans dependent by nature?
2. What makes God's existence so different from humanity's dependent nature?
3. How does God's personality differ from a human's personality?
4. Suppose a friend claims, "God changes His mind all the time. The Bible says so." How would you respond?
5. Suppose a friend claims, "I am beginning to understand God better now because He is so much like me." How would you respond?



8.2 THE INFINITE GOD

In the last section, we discussed the fact that even though we might feel independent, we have many limitations that cause us to be needy by nature. Limits, however, are important to us as creatures. In fact, we can't understand anything until we know its limits. In other words, we know what and where a person is because we can see the human form. We can see where the human body ends and the rest of the world begins.

Also, we can know how one thing is different from another by identifying limits. A hammer, for example, is not a screwdriver. Although a screwdriver has an advantage with screws, it's limited in its ability to manipulate nails. Limits therefore help us understand the world.

In this section, we're going to try to imagine something impossible to imagine—something that will stretch our thinking to its breaking point. We're going to think of someone who has no limits—the person of Almighty God.

Think about yourself sitting in your chair. Your body contains you. The chair in which you're sitting is in a room. That room occupies space in a larger building. That building is located on a plot of land—a very small piece of a vastly larger planet. The planet is contained within an enormous solar system, with several other planets revolving around the same star. And this solar system is actually a tiny fraction of an immense galaxy. Think of it—a single galaxy can be between 3,000 to 300,000 light years in diameter, and the closest galaxy to ours is 2.5 million light years away. Furthermore, our galaxy is but one of trillions of galaxies that we're aware of. And that's just what we can observe—it doesn't include the expanse beyond all that.

So what's beyond the universe? More universe? Just blackness? Is there a wall you eventually run into? What would be on the other side of that wall?

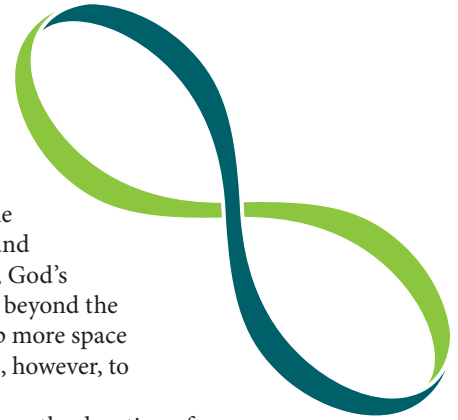
What we're grappling with is the concept of infinity. Our universe is not infinite; it has limits whether we can imagine them or not. But the universe is so big that it reminds us of infinity.

What, then, is actually infinite? Only God is infinite. But what do we really mean when we say that He's infinite? To answer this question, we need to know what God's infinity is, as well as what it's not.

GOD BEYOND SPACE AND TIME

To say that God is infinite is to say He has no limits. Many times, when people think of God's infinity, they wrongly think of God as a superbig being, who has lived a superlong time. But God's infinity doesn't mean He simply occupies all the space available in the universe. If that were the case, God would be contained within the universe, and nothing can contain God (1 Kings 8:27). Additionally, God's infinity doesn't mean He occupies space somewhere beyond the universe. This would mean that God simply takes up more space than the universe takes up. He would still be limited, however, to occupying space.

Furthermore, God's infinity is not limited to time, or the duration of one moment to the next. Even if we imagine time as having no beginning or end, it is still a created limitation. God is therefore not limited to space or time. He certainly fills all time and space, but His existence is also outside time and space. Nothing can contain God.



DOCTRINAL DILEMMA

GOD IS IN MY HEART?

Christians sometimes say, "God is in my heart." But if God is everywhere with His whole being, doesn't that mean that everyone is filled with God's whole being? What, then, is significant about God dwelling in Christians?

We can't grasp a God without limits since we only understand the world within the limits of time and space. How can God exist outside the limits of time and space by which we come to know anything in creation? It's because God is not His creation. He is not created but is the Creator. Time and space are created, and God does not rely on anything created. If God depends on something created, He ceases to be God.

We've seen what God's infinity is *not* in relation to space and time. Now let's consider how God does fill the space He has created. According to Scripture, God is all-present, or **omnipresent**.

When you were younger, perhaps you learned that God is everywhere. Maybe you vaguely understand what that means, but we often misunderstand. We understand what it's like to be in a large room. We can see all the objects in the room and even the people. Because we can quickly see all the people and objects in the room, we feel as though we really know what's happening in the room. We might think that God is "in the room" the same way we're in the room. He stands in a specific place in the room and watches.

"HEAVEN AND EARTH CANNOT CONTAIN HIM, . . . AND AT THE SAME TIME HE FILLS BOTH AND IS A GOD AT HAND."

LOUIS BERKHOF³

But that is not how God is present with and fills His creation. To say that God is present everywhere is to say that He's present at every point in all creation with His whole being. It is not that He's simply in the general vicinity of most places and has an excellent view of what's going on. No, God is a personal God, and even His presence is personal. He is not merely watching from a distance—He is ever present with His whole being at every point of His own creation (Ps. 139:7-10).

Why must God be infinite?

The Infinite Excellence of God

When we think of God's infinity, we often think of quantity (how much space, how much time). But Scripture also talks about God's infinite perfections, or His quality—"how excellent" (Ps. 8:1, emphasis added). According to Psalm 145:3, God's greatness is "unsearchable."

We can't even begin to construct a model in our minds that can do justice to God's absolute excellence. We cannot evaluate His excellence because nothing in creation is suitable to measure it. To evaluate God's excellence would be like trying to measure the volume of the sun with a plastic ruler. Psalm 96:4 exclaims that the Lord is great and that His greatness demands praise. Not only that, but this greatness is "to be feared." Why fear?

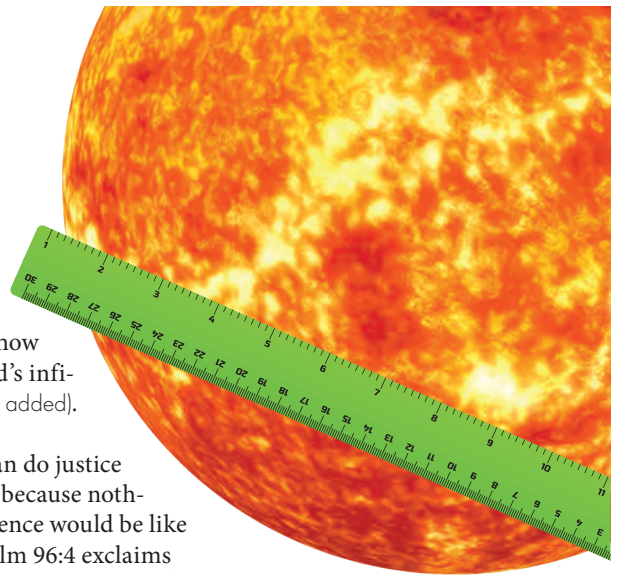
When you walk into a room at home, you know what to expect. You know what people and objects will be in the room. When you walk into the DMV,* however, your anxiety might go up a little. Although the DMV isn't a terrifying place (at least not most of the time), you may not know what to expect, where to sit, or in which line to stand.

Let's say, however, that you're summoned to meet personally with the king of Spain. Can you imagine your anxiety level as you board the plane for Madrid*? What customs do you need to know to approach a king? Do you shake hands, curtsy, bow, or do a combination of the three? What are the rules of etiquette in a palace? Will you remember which fork to use when you sit down to eat a formal meal? Will there be an interpreter to help you with the language barrier? Maybe you didn't even know Spain had a king! Such anxiety stems from the inescapable dread of encountering something so very different from you.

Now imagine encountering someone so absolute, so immense, so perfect, and so unthinkable that you're acutely aware of your own worthlessness and utter corruption. So back to our question: Why would God's greatness cause fear? It's because we're creatures standing in the presence of the uncreated, infinitely perfect God, who is not just valuable, but is value itself.

Although we bear the image of our Creator, He is nothing like us in His essence. In the presence of God, we are encountering pure, foreign perfection. In His infinite perfection, God utterly perplexes us when we consider Him and absolutely shames us when we compare ourselves to Him. God is not simply more perfect than anything else. Rather, God's perfection is an infinite perfection to which nothing else can compare.

Before an infinitely perfect God, we must be like Isaiah, who cried out, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). What's so important about God's infinity? God's infinity is part of what makes Him God. It's part of what makes Him worthy to be called God and worthy to be worshiped and feared.



DMV: Department of Motor Vehicles; called the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, or BMV, in some states

Madrid: the capital of Spain



Infinite in Wisdom

Imagine if your English teacher pulled you aside and said, “This year, we’re not going to use a textbook for our class. I want you to tell us everything we should know.” That might be pretty challenging! That’s because we know something only if we’ve learned it. There are many things to know in this universe, and we have no control over what those things are. The knowledge is already there; all we can do is find out what there is to know.

We don’t go to math class to create mathematical principles. We don’t go to history class to create what happened in the past. We don’t go to science class to create laws of physics. Instead, all the knowledge is already there. We just have to collect it, memorize it, and reproduce it on a test. At that point, we consider that information knowledge.



For us humans, knowledge is a visitor that comes to reside in our minds. Sometimes the visitor sets up residence and stays. You don’t forget, for example, how to ride a bike, what your name is, or when important moments of your life took place. Sometimes the visitor sneaks out the back door. You’ve probably forgotten the periodic table, fractions, documentaries, and the main course at dinner four weeks ago.

God’s knowledge is nothing like this. He does not find out the facts of the universe. Rather, He created those facts (John 1:3). Knowledge is not something outside of God that He discovers. His knowledge is not of foreign facts, but it’s the personal, intentional truth of His mind. He is identical to His knowledge.

For God, knowledge is not a visitor. It is as limitless as He is (Ps. 147:5), as personal as He is (1 Cor. 2:10–13), and as willful as

He is (Isa. 46:9–10). We call this kind of knowledge God’s **omniscience**. Thus when we speak of God’s knowledge, we’re referring to something unique. It is God’s limitless knowledge of Himself, a knowledge that is active, not passive, a knowledge that is personal (identical with Him), not a dormant storehouse of information.

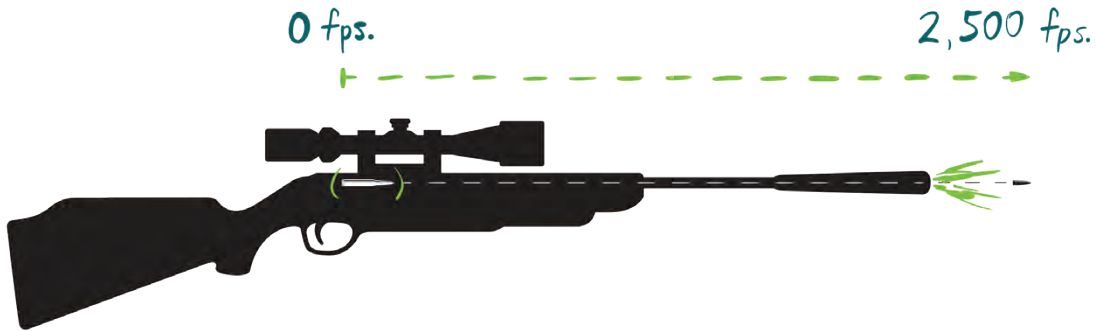
God’s knowledge is active because God is active. God’s knowledgeable activity is displayed in His creation. He does not merely make a universe—He makes one that’s massive, diverse, impossible to fully understand, and intricate in its complexity (Job 40–41; Ps. 19:1–6). Even when He made mankind, God did not merely create a biological bundle of tissue. He instead created a body both complex and coherent, both durable and fragile (Ps. 139:14). In other words, God’s knowledge is displayed in His wisdom.

Although we cannot see God’s knowledge, we are able to see its effect in the spectacular way our world was created. As we look at the minute details of how this world holds together, we are seeing God’s knowledge and wisdom at work, expressed by the harmony in His creation. When we see what results from the activity of God’s infinite knowledge, we see His infinite wisdom (Prov. 8:12–31).

Infinite in Power

When we speak of God's infinity, we can also think of His power as infinite. Because of His infinite power, God is named *El Shadday*, or God Almighty (Gen. 17:1). He Himself is the source of power (Exod. 3:14), upon which all things depend (Col. 1:17). Saying that God is infinitely powerful (or **omnipotent**) is one thing, but what can it mean?

In our small, creaturely way of thinking about power, we might recall that power equals work divided by time. When you increase work (force multiplied by distance) but decrease time, power is intensified. Thus in a high power rifle, you might find that a bullet can go from 0 to 2,500 feet per second as it leaves the muzzle. That means the velocity of the bullet increased to 2,500 feet per second within a few inches of space. Think of the power necessary to make that possible—it takes an explosion!



The Greek word often translated “power” in the New Testament is *dynamis* (Rom. 1:16). It’s where we get our word *dynamite*. Consider, then, what Scripture says: God’s “eternal power” is “clearly seen” in creation (Rom. 1:20). What we see on earth is the massive power to go from nothing to universe instantly! Time is at zero; work is at an incalculable sum. God’s power does not rely on a formula, of course, but the formula helps us see that His power is impossible to comprehend. God’s power is infinite because He is the source of power with no limits on intensity or supply.

WHAT DOES INFINITY MEAN TO ME?

The question we now face is this: How can an infinitely powerful, infinitely wise, infinitely present God be *my* God, who knows and cares about me? Often, we do not think in these terms. But if God is all-powerful, is He powerful enough to be personal to me? The answer is yes.

What’s hard for us to understand is that God’s power is strong enough to accommodate us, His creatures. Imagine how hard it is to truly understand not only the concepts of quantum mechanics but the math behind it as well. People who work in quantum mechanics can understand it well enough to make a living. But what would it take to explain those concepts so well that a college student could understand? What about a tenth grader? A third grader? That would take even greater power. The scientist would have to accommodate those complex ideas to those groups. He would have to be creative, use analogies, and not simplify things too much.

Similarly, God’s wisdom and power must be infinite. He is able to communicate knowledge about Himself so that we can understand. And yet His revelation is free from errors. He’s also able to do this in a personal way—He Himself is the one who reveals things to us in His Word. He does not merely plant knowledge in His Word for us to discover on our own but reveals these things to us personally (1 Cor. 2:10–13).



Because God is omnipresent, He doesn't merely observe us as though He's a spectator. He is personally and fully present—all of Him is present with you, and nothing is left out. God is never halfway there or partially present. He is “Emmanuel . . . God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Our God is fully with us, and there is nothing we should fear if we are His (Ps. 23:4).

God's presence is here right now, in time. But we do not have to worry about tomorrow because our God is not trapped in time. Rather, He demonstrates His limitlessness by reigning above all things (John 1:1–3; Eph. 1:3–4; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 1:8). He is not doing the best He can under the circumstances. He is displaying His infinite perfection from beginning to end (Pss. 18:30; 33:11; Heb. 6:17).

You never have to worry that God's power is insufficient for your struggles or needs. You can trust God's wisdom. He's not merely smarter than us, but His wisdom is infinitely useful to us and will remain that way for eternity.

THINKING IT THROUGH 8.2

1. Briefly explain what it means for God to be infinite.
2. What does it mean for God to be omnipresent?
3. How is God infinite in His power and knowledge?
4. Why must God be infinite?
5. How does God's infinity affect your personal life?

8.3 GOD OF HOLINESS, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND LOVE

One of the most misunderstood terms concerning God's character is *holy*. Perhaps you've been warned, "Don't have a 'holier-than-thou' attitude." Someone who is holier-than-thou believes himself to be better than others because he behaves better or holds to a higher standard of behavior. This, however, is not true holiness.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

God's **holiness** is foundational to who He is. It entails two features. The first is His devotion to Himself. This might sound strange; if we, as created things, were devoted to ourselves, it would be nothing more than selfishness. TV, movies, popular music, and social media reveal that there are plenty of people out there devoted to themselves. So why would one of God's most important attributes be that He is devoted to Himself?

It's because of who God is: He is "Holy, holy, holy . . . the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:3). "There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee" (1 Sam. 2:2). God is not just one being among others like Him. Neither is He a being with peers of any kind. Rather, nothing can even be compared to God. Nothing can compete! He is the ultimate one worthy of glory. Hence He is right to glorify Himself, love Himself, and devote Himself to His own glory and love. Jonathan Edwards put it this way:

"THE HOLINESS OF GOD CONSIST[S] IN HIS LOVE, ESPECIALLY IN THE PERFECT AND INTIMATE UNION AND LOVE THERE IS BETWEEN THE FATHER AND THE SON."

It's because of God's devotion to Himself that He does not fail us when we fail Him; in other words, "he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). Even His promises are secure because of His devotion to Himself (Ps. 110:1). This is why God commands us to be holy as He is holy (1 Pet. 1:16). He's saying, in essence, "Be devoted to me as I am devoted to Myself."

It would be selfish for us to be devoted to ourselves because we're not worthy of such devotion. No principle stands above God and declares, "No one can be devoted to himself. That's selfishness." Rather, God is the standard that tells us that He alone is worthy of devotion (Isa. 42:8). He is devoted to Himself not because He is selfish, but because He is the only one worthy of such devotion (Isa. 57:15).

The second aspect of God's holiness is His purity, or His goodness. God is holy in that sin does not color any thought He has, any choice He makes, any work He does, or any intention He holds. Sin is entirely absent from God. He is good in the most pure of ways (Mark 10:18).

As impurities are foreign to a piece of refined gold, so is sin foreign to God. He despises sin not merely because it makes good moments bad but because it's a





rejection of His very character. Sin is a plague; it is darkness; it is death. Our God is pure (1 John 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22); He is light (Isa. 60:19; John 1:5; 8:12; 2 Cor. 4:6); He is life (Gen. 2:7; John 1:4; 14:6; Acts 3:15).

Our God is free from even the most subtle infection of sin. This is His natural state: He is purely good.

This aspect of God's holiness is difficult for us to understand. For us, sin is pervasive: it's all around us and in us.

When we look at pictures on our phones, we see our best moments. Everyone is smiling, everyone is posing. These moments seem perfect in our memories. But perhaps you don't have pictures of that day when you fought with your sibling. You probably didn't snap any pictures of your mom's disappointed look when you opened your Christmas present and didn't like it. And no one took a picture when you secretly envied your sibling for the birthday present she got. Even though our phones record our best moments, they don't always record the failures, disappointments, miscommunications, and discontentment. Even when we try to enjoy life's best moments, sin is always lurking and poisoning our lives in some way.

But in God, there is no hint of sin. He is not like us. He is not simply holy for the most part. He's not just as good as He can be despite some issues. He is, rather, entirely without the dull buzz of sin that rings in our ears in this fallen world, coloring everything we think and say. God's goodness is unburdened by sin and unlimited in its beauty. When we say, "God is good," we are saying something infinitely true.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

It's because of God's holiness that He interacts with humanity in righteousness. God's righteousness is His absolute "rightness." The Hebrew word translated "righteousness" in the Old Testament relates to perfectly balanced scales. In other words, the scales used to measure are exactly calibrated to show the truth, or the exact weight of an item. Another word for righteousness is *justice*. To demonstrate justice is to reply to good or evil in precisely the right way.

From 1972 to 1999, a medical doctor named Harold Shipman (nicknamed "Dr. Death") killed 218 patients (some have estimated a total of 250). What would be the appropriate punishment for a doctor who earned the trust of his victims only to take their lives? And he did this hundreds of times, stopping only because he was caught. We might look at a man like that with disgust, perhaps thinking there's no way we could ever do such a thing.

If we think we're incapable of even the worst sin, we don't truly understand our own nature. God, on the other hand, is the righteous judge because He's not only pure but incapable of corruption. His justice is exactly right because He is holy.

Whenever God executes justice, He does so based on the ultimate standard of reality: His own nature (Jer. 9:24). God doesn't keep His promises just because it's the right thing to do or because it's common sense. It's not that God noticed that things work out best when we keep our word, so therefore He keeps His word. Instead, God keeps His promises



because that's who He is: the God who is faithful to His promises (Exod. 20:5-6; Deut. 7:9; 2 Chron. 6:14; Neh. 1:5; Ps. 145:13; Dan. 9:4). Whatever is right is based only on God's character, and He expresses that character in His Word so that we might distinguish right from wrong.

God's justice, then, is sinless. His justice is holy. In other words, God is not merely acting like a god—He is acting like the one and only true and holy God. His activity is as pure and right as He is. Therefore, whenever we come across a judgment from God that seems severe, we must remember that God doesn't get angry in the same selfish way we do. He never lashes out in anger before deciding to calm down and reconsider the situation. Whenever God's judgments seem harsh to us (1 Sam. 15:1-3; 2 Sam. 12:15-23), we must remember that we are impure and unable to judge rightly. We sympathize with sin instead of despising it. We want tolerance because we wrongly see sin as a hope for happiness and fulfillment. Not only do we believe sin's lies, but we want to tell those lies to ourselves and others.

God, on the other hand, is the only one who is absolutely right in His judgments, even though we won't always understand them. Just as there's mystery in God's righteousness, so there's mystery in how God demonstrates His righteousness in judgment. But the mystery doesn't mean there's something wrong with God. It just means our tiny minds can't fully grasp His awesome ways.

We are called to honor our God by trusting Him as our authority. If we believed only what we could wrap our heads around, we would deny most of reality. We would be like a dog who thinks there's no universe beyond his leash—that the whole world is a backyard and a doghouse. God is beyond us, but He is with us, too. He is unthinkable, but He has revealed who He is in a way we can understand. He is too holy, righteous, and good to be corrupted, yet He loves His corrupted people completely.

How does a holy God love me?

THE LOVE OF GOD

Maybe you've heard the old tale called "The Emperor's New Clothes." A proud ruler was once convinced that he was wearing unimaginably fabulous clothes. He was told that the only ones who could see his clothes were intelligent, competent, and worthy. Those who were unworthy couldn't see the clothes. But it was all a lie, of course, and the emperor ended up appearing in public without any clothes on.

Consider how we use the term *love* today. Few really know what it is. Most people imagine they know what love is and act as if only the intelligent, competent, or worthy can be in on the secret. Hence, they devour movies, books, and music that promise to demonstrate what love really is. They take it all in, pretending they know what it's all about.

But in real life, the world doesn't really understand love. For instance, whenever someone tries to define *love*, he ends up talking about what love *does* rather than what love *is*. He will say that love is sacrifice for the sake of someone else. He will say that love is putting someone else before oneself. He will say love is a



strong feeling that draws one person to another. Love often sacrifices for others, puts others before self, and results in feelings. But that's the work of love; it's not what love is. How would you define love?

The fast answer is that God is **love** (1 John 4:8). Remember that God is identical to His attributes. When Scripture says that God loves us (John 3:16), it means that the God who is love is acting in His love toward us. In other words, God is not tapping into some idea outside Himself called *love* and then relating it to us. Instead, He is love, and He acted in that love toward us, even when we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8–10).

Love Shown through Grace

God demonstrates His love in three major ways. First, He demonstrates love through grace. What is grace? Think of it as God giving people His gifts even when they don't deserve them. He supplies even unbelievers with comforts and allows them to prosper (Ps. 145:9, 16; Matt. 5:45). Even though the world has rebelled against God, the Lord still graciously takes care of everyone (Acts 14:17).

And if God shows grace to the unbeliever, how much more will He do so to the believer? Even the believer continues to sin—a lot. Because of His holy character, God could rightly be done with His people, but He constantly brings them back to Himself (Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:7–8). He remains faithful even when they fail (2 Tim. 2:13). He continues to give them gifts, even though He's already been abundantly gracious in giving them the faith to believe (1 Cor. 12:4–7).

The only good in the believer is Christ, and yet God calls him to enjoy God (Ps. 37:4) and delight in being in His family (1 John 3:1–2). It's in Christ that all the Christian's benefits are found. He is the benefactor, and His people receive those benefits without being worthy or even sufficiently grateful (Eph. 1:3–6). Grace, then, is God's act of loving us, giving us what we do not deserve.

Love Shown through Mercy


Another way God shows His love is through His mercy. If grace is getting what we don't deserve, then mercy is not getting what we do deserve. Apart from Christ, we would all be dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). Nothing about the Christian draws God to him—nothing attractive, no potential, no hope.

Before conversion, the Christian is not merely dead in sin—he's disgustingly sinful (Eph. 2:3; Rom. 1:24–32). He's not even repentant or sorry. He's proud of his sin, and sin is what defines him. It's his identity (Rom. 5:12). He lies dead in the filth of sin, and he smiles, believing himself to be better than God. He's rotten right down to the bone.

Notice, however, that Paul continues: “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4–5).

“But God.” Those words come not when the believer comes to his senses and finally understands his predicament. Rather, those words come in the middle of full rebellion. God holds back the wrath the sinner deserves (mercy), and gives him faith and eternal life (grace).

Even the unbeliever finds at least some mercy. Even though the unbeliever continues to rebel, God holds back His ultimate punishment until the final judgment (Rev. 20:11–13). Instead of pouring out His full wrath immediately, God chooses to wait to execute His judgment. But that waiting will one day end. One of the most sobering realities is that for those who do not repent, there is ultimately no mercy (Matt. 13:50; 25:46; Rev. 21:8).

The background of the page is a dramatic, dark painting. It depicts a massive, towering wave of dark blue and black water, with white foam at the crest, crashing down. In the foreground, a small, solitary figure stands on a dark, wet beach, looking up at the immense wall of water. The sky is dark and stormy, with some light reflecting off the water's surface. The overall mood is one of awe and the overwhelming power of nature or God.

“The floods of God’s vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are continually rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power.”

JONATHAN EDWARDS⁵

hesed: (kheh'-sed) a Hebrew word that has the idea of a binding or committed kindness to a person or group; sometimes called covenant faithfulness

Love Shown through Persistence

The third way God shows His love is through persistence. Remember that God is infinite. And if God is infinite, so is His love. His love is persistent in that it knows no end. In Psalm 136, the psalmist lists God's blessings. Then at the end of each verse, he states, "For his mercy [*hesed*]* endureth for ever." This same statement is repeated throughout the Old Testament. God's lovingkindness—His mercy—is as infinite and eternal as God Himself is.

God is love, and He's not moody like us. God demonstrates His love affectionately to His people (Titus 3:3–7). As a father shows affection to his son, so God shows affection to His children (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

And God's great affection for His people doesn't last for just a while. God's love is not on and off—it's forever (Pss. 106:1; 107:1; 117; 118:1; 136:1). His affection can end only when He ends. There's no end to God's love because there's no end to God. There's no limit to His love because He has no limits. There's no lack in His love because He fills all in all (Eph. 1:22) with a personal, affectionate love.

Don't be deceived by the way the world defines perfection, justice, and love. Ask instead, "What does it mean for God to be love? What does it mean for God to be just? What does it mean for God to be holy?"

When we think of our own relationship to God, we shouldn't be asking how other people are loving God or how other people are trying to be holy. Rather, we should be thinking about how God is devoted to Himself in love and how this devotion motivates Him to demonstrate His justice. We should be thinking about how worthy He is to be devoted to Himself. As we see God's devotion to Himself, we should be humbled by our constant struggle to be devoted to Him.

**"HOLINESS IS . . . THE PURITY OF LOVE'S DEVOTION
TO GOD. HOW PURELY DOES GOD LOVE GOD? THAT'S
HOW HOLY GOD IS. HOW PURELY DOES A MAN
LOVE GOD? THAT'S HOW HOLY A MAN IS."**

JONATHAN LEEMAN⁶

THINKING IT THROUGH 8.3

1. Explain the meaning of God's holiness.
2. How is God's holiness related to His righteousness?
3. Defend the claim that God determines what is right and wrong.
4. Summarize the three main ways God demonstrates His love.
5. How does God's love affect the way you should love your classmates or siblings?

8 CHAPTER REVIEW

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

Romans 1:18–20

UNDERSTANDING DOCTRINAL TRUTH

1. What does it mean for God to be independent?
2. How is God infinite in regard to space and time?
3. Explain the meaning of God’s righteousness.
4. What is love?

PRACTICING DOCTRINAL HARMONIZATION

5. How does God demonstrate grace and mercy to those who repent?
6. On some occasions in the Old Testament, God ordered entire groups of people to be destroyed. Consider, for example, God’s command to exterminate the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:2–3. How do God’s orders to destroy the Amalekites demonstrate His righteousness?

RELATING DOCTRINAL TRUTHS; EVALUATING CLAIMS

7. Why is it important to recognize that the Creator is distinct from the creation?
8. Suppose a friend claims, “God is not infinite in knowledge. He simply knows everything that is possible to know.” How would you respond to your friend?
9. Suppose a friend claims, “If right and wrong is just whatever God commands, then right and wrong is arbitrary.” How would you respond to your friend?
10. Many would define love as simply putting others before oneself. Is this an accurate definition? Why or why not? Use Scripture to defend your answer.

MAKING USE OF DOCTRINE FOR WORLDVIEW LIVING

11. Write a prayer that you can say when you’re afraid, sad, or frustrated. Include praises to God about His infinite wisdom, presence, power, holiness, righteousness, or love. Ask the Lord to help you trust in His character.
12. Many times, we don’t show love to others because we haven’t prepared ourselves for those moments when people need love. Develop a plan for loving others even amid a specific conflict in your workplace, home, or church.

TERMS TO REMEMBER

aseity
attributes
simplicity
essence
immutability
omnipresent
omniscience
omnipotent
holiness
love



CHAPTER

9

*Is God really
in control of
His universe?*

SOVEREIGNTY AND PROVIDENCE

Scripture Memory

Eph. 1:11

Key Scriptures

Ps. 147:5
Isa. 45:7
Ezek. 36:26
Rom. 1:18
Eph. 2:1–5
Col. 1:17
Heb. 1:3
Rev. 19:7–9

9.1 THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF GOD

In 1975, Muhammad Ali was the boxing heavyweight champion of the world. That year, Ali—perhaps the most popular, bombastic, and well-promoted championship boxer of all time—took on a nobody. You’ve probably never heard of Chuck Wepner. At the time of the fight, neither had anyone else. An older boxer, Wepner appeared to be washed up. It was supposed to be a quick victory for Ali.

During the fight, however, Wepner refused to go down. No matter how many times he was hit, he kept his feet planted and his gloves up. Ali was visibly frustrated; Wepner seemed unaffected by Ali’s constant barrage of punches and just kept on coming back. After his fight with Ali, Wepner required twenty-three stitches. But round after round, he remained toe-to-toe with Ali, head forward and determined.

Finally, in the fifteenth and final round of the match, with just seconds left, Wepner went down. It was the first time he had ever gone down in his entire career. And even then, much to Ali’s shock and irritation, Wepner got back up. The referee called the match anyway, but at least Wepner ended the fight on his feet!

What was it that was so inspiring about a nobody fighting the heavyweight champion of the world? It was his will to keep pushing forward and never give up. Wepner had a goal, and he persevered against all odds to reach it. His perseverance in the ring was a witness to his persistent will.

Whenever we talk about someone’s **will**, we’re referring to his internal drive toward a goal. You demonstrate the action of your will in many diverse situations, both good and bad: working hard in your studies, getting your driver’s license, disobeying your parents, or arguing with your siblings. We typically have a picture in our head of how we want life to go. We then make choices to craft the world we have pictured in our minds. Our inner drive to insist on our choices is our will in action, and the picture of the world that each of us crafts is called a plan. Our will therefore carries out our plans.

But what about God's will? When we ask about God's will, we're really asking about His power to do what He has planned. And as we consider this matter, we're faced with many disagreements that have arisen throughout the history of the church. But we won't examine all the historical disputes right now. Instead, we will simply investigate the Bible's answer to this question: What is God's will, and how does He carry it out?

GOD'S SOVEREIGN GOVERNMENT OVER THE WORLD

According to Scripture, God governs all things as He pleases. He waters the earth and makes it thrive to testify of His favor toward His creatures (Lev. 26:3-4; Deut. 11:13-14; 28:12). He regulates drought, blight, hail, and storms as signs of His judgment (Lev. 26:19; Deut. 28:22; Isa. 28:2; Amos 4:9; Hag. 2:17). Even the wind is under His full control (Exod. 16:13; Num. 11:31; Ps. 104:3; Jon. 1:4). Remember what the disciples said after Jesus calmed the storm: "even the winds and the sea obey him" (Matt. 8:27). Job summarized the intricate activity of God's rule over nature (Job 26:5-14). The dew and the frost both come from God (Job 38:27-29).

God determines who comes into this world (Pss. 113:9; 127:3; Gen. 30:2) and how long each person will live (Job 14:5). Both the poor and his oppressor live only because God has given them life (Prov. 29:13). Someone accidentally kills his neighbor? Even this isn't outside God's control (Exod. 21:13).

God separates men (such as the apostle Paul) for special callings even before they're born (Gal. 1:15-16). God places whomever He wills as leaders of nations and governments (Rom. 13:1). He manages the most minute details of this world, such as the rolling of a die (Prov. 16:33). God actively reigns over the entire universe (Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11).

Scripture has made God's power over His creation obvious. The next question then is this: Is God's will identical with whatever happens in creation? To answer, we need to distinguish between how our wills work and how God's will works. There are both similarities and differences between the two, but we have to think of the similarities as "kinda sorta." The similarities are not identical, but they do help give us some idea of what God is like.

For instance, we know what it's like for a person to make a plan and then use his will to accomplish that plan. Similarly, God also has a plan. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus said that He was sent by the Father to do His will (John 17:4-5). Jesus didn't speak His own words but the words the Father commanded Him to say (John 7:16; 12:49). Even Jesus' judgments were not His own but were based on the Father's will (John 5:30). Even before the world was created, the persons of the Trinity made a plan (John 17:5). God is ruler of His creation. His will is perfect and just, even if we don't understand it. And God's will is just as all-knowing and all-powerful as God is.



God is not like us. His plan for the world was established between the persons of the Trinity before even one molecule came into existence (Ps. 90:2; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:20). This plan is perfect because God is perfect (Ps. 77:13). God wills His plan into existence through the work of the three persons of the Trinity (Gen. 1:1-2; John 1:3). And all three are still actively making His plan come about in this world (John 14:26).

Therefore, as God carries out His established plan according to the counsel of His own will, we are witnessing His **sovereignty** (Eph. 1:11). God's sovereignty points us to several vital truths:

- God is the Creator and Owner of all things (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 24:1).
- God upholds all things by His power (Heb. 1:3).
- God stands as the indisputable authority over all things (Luke 10:19; Rom. 13:1; 14:11).
- God decrees the beginning and end of all things (Lam. 3:37; Prov. 19:21; Rev. 22:13).
- God carries out all His decrees as the almighty King over all things (Ps. 24:10; Rev. 19:16).

GOD'S WILL VERSUS HUMAN WILL

Any discussion about God's sovereignty always seems to lead to a discussion about human free will. Maybe you've asked yourself questions such as "How free am I when I make choices?" or "Does anything influence my choices?" Philosophers and theologians have asked and debated these questions for centuries. The term *free will* is thus very significant in the world of philosophy. In this section, we'll discuss how Scripture reveals that both God's will and humanity's will are active in this world.

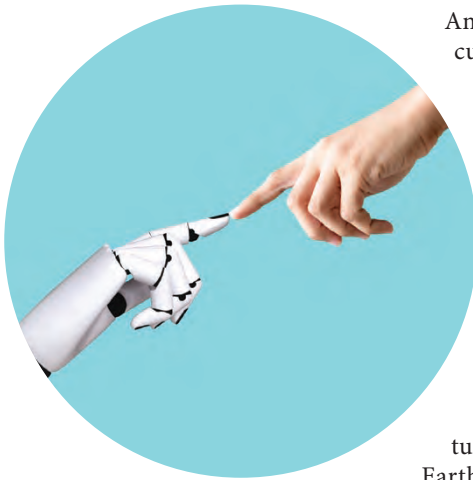
As we begin, we must avoid the ditches on both sides of the road. On one side of the road is the robot ditch. The robot ditch is the error of thinking that God's will is like our will. And if God's will is just like ours, then we can imagine what it's like for God to willfully control all things. If you were to get everyone to do exactly what you want, you would have to turn all people into robots. No one would have his or her own will.

Earth would be a planet full of preprogrammed machines, each one designed to do only your will. Thankfully, however, God does not act like us. His will isn't just like our will, so He doesn't control the world by turning mankind into robots.

On the other side is the ditch of self-rule. The ditch of self-rule is the error of thinking that God needs to be fair, just as we would be if we were God. To be as fair as possible (as we define fairness), God must give each person the right to rule his or her own life. A person can choose whether to follow God, but it would be unfair if God interfered with our choices. Until we die, we are our own masters. Thankfully, however, God is not limited to what we think is fair, nor has He made humans into little, independent gods.

"Just as we must not misconstrue God's sovereignty so as to make people mere puppets, so we must not press man's freedom to the point of limiting God's sovereignty."

JERRY BRIDGES¹



I deserve this!



Nobody tells ME what to do.



That's fair.

Scripture holds together what we so often want to separate. Think about Joseph's brothers. They chose to sell Joseph into slavery and were responsible for what they did. In fact, when Joseph tested them during the time of famine, they concluded that God was judging them for their sin (Gen. 42:21–22; 44:16). Certainly, they knew they were responsible for what they had done.

And yet the whole time God was sovereignly at work to bring about His plan. As Joseph told his brothers, “God sent me before you [to Egypt] . . . to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God” (Gen. 45:7–8). Why did Joseph say that they had not sent him down to Egypt, when very clearly they had sold him to serve as a slave in Egypt? Joseph was not denying that his brothers were responsible for their actions. He was not saying that God had turned his brothers into robots and forced them to do wrong. No, Joseph knew they had chosen to do wrong: “Ye thought evil against me” (Gen. 50:20). At the same time, however, Joseph also knew that “God meant it unto good” (Gen. 50:20). God had His own purposes that He brought to pass.

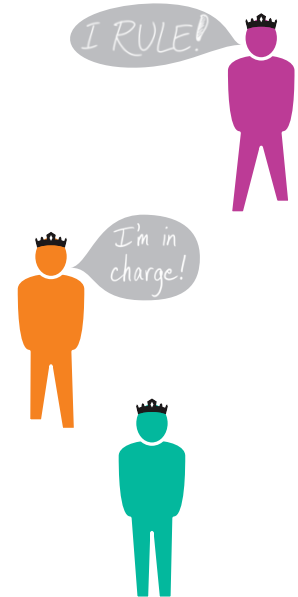
Or consider what Jesus said about Judas: “And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed” (Luke 22:22). God had determined that Jesus would die on the cross and even be betrayed by Judas (Ps. 41:9). Nevertheless, Judas was not a robot. He was fully responsible for his betrayal of Jesus. Accordingly, great trouble awaited Judas because of his sin.

Or think about the prayer of the early church in Acts 4:27–28: “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” From before the foundation of the world, God had determined that the crucifixion of Jesus would atone for sin. Thus Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and the Jewish people all did what God had determined so that Jesus would die on the cross. At the same time, however, none of these people were robots. Rather, they all made real choices for which they would be held responsible.

How then should Christians respond to this mystery? We must avoid the temptation to trim either one side or the other—whether God's sovereignty or mankind's responsibility. We must instead accept that whatever Scripture says is true. We must trust that although our finite minds can't fully grasp the mystery, it is nonetheless fully clear in the infinite mind of God.

Just as the rails of a train [track], which run parallel to each other, appear to merge in the distance, so the doctrines of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, which seem separate from each other in this life, will merge in eternity. Our task is not to force their merging in this life but to keep them in balance and to live accordingly.

Joel Beeke²



MAKING GOD INTO OUR OWN IMAGE

For many centuries, Christians have differed on how to reconcile God's sovereignty with human freedom. Nevertheless, all orthodox Christians are in agreement about many foundational truths. The views of John Wesley and John Calvin, for example, are often in conflict with one another. Yet there is more agreement between these two than initially meets the eye.

Wesley acknowledged God's “overruling hand which governs the inanimate creation; which sustains the sun, moon, and stars in their stations, and guides their motions,” as well as God's “care of the animal creation, every part of which we know

is under his government.” Wesley also speaks of God’s “superintending providence which regards the children of men.”³ In other words, Wesley understood that God was not ignorant of what was to come in the future and how to take care of His children because He is the Creator who rules His creation. On the other side of the spectrum, John Calvin states that God is the only Almighty One “because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel.”⁴

Both Calvin and Wesley, from different points of view, agree with the orthodox Christian position that God is the owner and ruler of His creation. He therefore executes His governing power over the past, present, and future of that creation.

open theism: the system of theology that limits God’s power over humanity’s free choices and His knowledge of future events; allows humans to maintain full freedom of will

Many, however, think it’s unfair for God to be entirely sovereign. Therefore, some theologians began a movement called openness theology, or **open theism**.^{*} Open theists sought a logical way to show that humans are responsible for their actions. Thus, in their view, God needed to give up full control of the world in order for humans to make free choices. At the same time, He would be unable to know the future with absolute certainty. God therefore would not have exhaustive knowledge of coming events, such as humanity’s future choices, natural events, changes in political power, and more.



You see, in order for you to be fully free, it’s not enough for God to have a plan that’s flexible and inclined to change. For instance, if God already knows exactly what you will do tomorrow—every decision, every move, every thought—how can you be free to do anything other than what God knows will already happen? Let’s say that God knows that tomorrow you will begin brushing your teeth at exactly 7:11 a.m. and finish brushing at 7:13 a.m. How then could you be free to brush your teeth at 7:09 instead?

According to open theists, you would not be free under these conditions. And it was on this basis that open theists concluded that God

could not know everything that will happen in the future. In one article, six leading open theists argue, “God does not determine every thing about the future, but he does determine whatever he chooses to.” For them, God does know particular things that will happen. He even determines that some things happen. But God cannot know everything or determine everything (even *most* things) without interfering with our free choices. In fact, sometimes God’s plans simply won’t happen. The open theists maintain, “God takes the risk that we will not do everything God wants us to do.”⁵

According to open theists, sometimes what God wants comes to pass, while other times it doesn’t. In many cases, it’s all up to us, for God depends on human free will. The bottom line is this—God cannot guarantee that He will accomplish all His desires since man’s free will is powerful enough to prevent them. God, in turn, relies on creation for the accomplishment of His plan.

Think of the assumptions that open theists make. They assume that in order for humans to be truly free, God’s sovereignty must be redefined. God cannot have sovereign control over the future because that would be unfair and take away

mankind's right to choose. As long as God isn't fully in control of the world, humans can maintain their right to a free will as defined by philosophy. Open theists so value human free will that they conclude that God must limit His sovereign control over the world so that He cannot know the future exhaustively. Thus God willingly "risks" His plans for the sake of human freedom.

This view of God denies Scripture's descriptions of God's power (Gen. 17:1; Exod. 3:14; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3) and knowledge (Ps. 147:5; Isa. 46:9–10; 1 Cor. 2:10–13). In the end, it seems that the God of open theism looks a lot more like man and man like God—God has been made into man's own image. Open theists have created a God that doesn't merely condescend to man but that ceases to be God entirely. It appears open theists have made God so impotent* that He's hardly worthy of worship.

impotent: lacking power, strength, or vigor

Open theists do not merely distort who God is, but they also cast doubt on whether He's even able to take care of us. If God risks the future on our free actions, how can we depend on Him when troubles come? Can we really pray with confidence if God may not know for sure what will happen in the future? If God has left the future open to the free choices of His creatures, then can we really know that He's able to keep all the promises He's made? If God risks His plans for human freedom, are not His promises at risk as well?

*How does God's sovereignty help me
face the challenges of life?*

GOD'S PERSONAL, SOVEREIGN CARE

Not only did the God of the Bible create the world, but He also holds it together (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). It's incredible to think about God's act of creation, but it's equally incredible to consider His constant preservation of what He has made (Neh. 9:6; John 5:17). He is constantly working, meticulously caring for every square inch of His creation in every single moment of its existence. He ensures that all His will is executed exactly as He has promised for His own glory (Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16). God even has a special care for His people. Not only did He provide salvation for them, but He also

- watches over them (Pss. 33:18; 34:15),
- turns their hearts to Himself (Deut. 30:6; Ps. 51:10; Jer. 24:7; Ezek. 36:26; Rom. 2:29),
- directs their lives (Ps. 119:35, 133; Prov. 3:6),
- protects them (Ps. 121:5–8),
- disciplines them (Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:5–7),
- provides for them (Matt. 6:30–33; 1 Pet. 5:6–7), and
- prepares for their eternal future (John 14:2).

God's constant work of preserving His creation—and specifically His people—is called **providence**. God's sovereignty tells us that He has a plan and that He's bringing it about by His will. God's providence, on the other hand, is His day-to-day work of preserving and caring for His creation within that plan.

The best place to see God's providence is in Scripture. In fact, Scripture is a record of God's providence. As God's Word, Scripture continues to speak to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, constantly reminding us of God's providential work in our lives today.



God did not merely make a plan and set it in motion, only to sit back and just watch the preprogrammed software do its work. Instead, God's providence is personal and active. Our God does not merely watch us—He is intimately involved in every detail of our lives. God's sovereign kingship over His creation is not a philosophical problem, nor is it a curse. Instead it is a comfort, a blessing, and a grace to us! An old hymn describes God's sovereignty in this way:

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.⁶

Sometimes life is painful. People we love go away. Things we were hoping for never seem to come. People we trusted betray us. We feel alone when we need others the most.

In such times, we find ourselves wondering whether the God we cannot see really does see us and care for us. If we are God's, how are we supposed to experience His personal care? After all, hasn't God promised to be our help? Doesn't He tell us not to be afraid or sad since He's our God who "will uphold" us with His "right hand" (Isa. 41:10)?

In his first epistle, Peter tells us how to receive help from the Lord in times of trouble. In chapter 5, Peter tells the "younger" to "submit yourselves unto the elder" (1 Pet. 5:5). As a young person, you should seek older, godly people in your church—including your parents—to guide you and serve as your mentors. You should be honest with your mentors and share your personal struggles. Your mentors, in turn, can give you godly advice and pray for you. They can check up on you and help you in your personal battles with sin.

But seeking help from mentors takes humility. To submit yourself to an older person in your church is to admit that you need help. And the fact that you need help reveals that you're weak and prone to rebel against God's Word. Therefore, this kind of accountability is not easy.

But there's a consequence for rejecting this humility. If you resist this humility, God will resist you, "for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). To refrain from asking for help is not humility—it's self-righteous pride. Failure to ask for help is one of the many ways we protect ourselves from criticism or the work of change. But if you "humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God," He will lift you up at the right time (1 Pet. 5:6). When you humble yourself, admitting your weakness and the need for accountability, you can boldly cast "all your care upon Him" (1 Pet. 5:7). Why can you give all your cares to the Lord? The answer is simple: because "He careth for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

The almighty, all-sovereign God, who carries out His established plan by His perfect will, cares personally for you. He cares for you in every part of your life, in every moment of the day, and in every trouble, no matter how small. He expects you to humble yourself for your own good. And as you do so, He works His care through His representatives: godly people in your church, including especially your parents and your pastor. He is caring for you as He works out His plan. He is caring for you even in those moments when you feel the most alone. If you are His, He is caring for you right now.

We serve a God who is ever personal with us. We can therefore rejoice that, as our sovereign God, He is constantly preserving us in His loving providence.



THINKING IT THROUGH 9.1

1. Using Ephesians 1, summarize the idea that God is sovereign.
2. Throughout church history, Christians have differed on how to reconcile God's sovereignty with human freedom. At the same time, all true Christians agree upon some foundational truths about God's sovereignty. What must all orthodox Christians believe about God and His creation?
3. Open theists claim that God has a limited knowledge of the future. Explain the problems with the open theist view.
4. Define the term *providence* in your own words.
5. Develop a plan to approach an older person in your church or your parents to hold you accountable in your spiritual life. The plan should include (1) an explanation of the purpose of your meeting, (2) a brief explanation of your expectations for meeting with this person in the future, (3) a weekly check-in time (through video chat, phone call, or personal meeting), and (4) an initial prayer request for the first week.



9.2 THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

tsunami: a long, high wave in the sea caused by an earthquake

The day after Christmas in 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean created a tsunami,* causing a series of waves, some up to a hundred feet high, to slam into Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand. In some areas, there appeared to be only some light local flooding at first. For a few moments, children played in the shallow water. Very soon, however, the black mountains of water consumed everything in their path. The waves came crashing down upon thousands of unsuspecting people, who were unprepared for such a catastrophic event. Some trains were trapped by the water, and massive waves crushed the cabins, filling them with water as hundreds drowned inside.

After the water receded, people began looking for their family members in the debris. Thousands of bodies were laid in long lines as mothers, fathers, and siblings wailed over their deceased family members. Many held their loved ones tightly, cradling their lifeless bodies and unwilling to let them go. It is estimated that over 220,000 people died in just a single day.

Now let's go back several decades. In the 1920s, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin rose to power in Russia. In his desire to retain power, Stalin initiated what was later called the Great Purge. His goal was to purge the country of political enemies, ethnic minorities, and other citizens who appeared to threaten his communistic ideals. Stalin wielded absolute power to imprison and, in many cases, violently execute his opponents. And very often, imprisonment simply meant a slower, more painful death.

It is estimated that Stalin is responsible for between 680,000 and 1.2 million deaths in the Great Purge itself. But his cruel, bloodthirsty reign didn't stop with the Great Purge. He subsequently played a part in the starvation, mass incarceration, and outright murder of millions of others. In the end, Stalin was responsible for millions more deaths than even Adolf Hitler was during the Holocaust.

Many would classify both the tsunami in the Indian Ocean and Stalin's genocidal killing spree as evil. The first example is a natural disaster; the second is an atrocity initiated by humanity. But what exactly is evil? Is it evil when earth's tectonic plates shift underneath the ocean? If we call Stalin evil, then what exactly are we calling evil? Is it the act of killing millions, or is the act of killing millions a result of the fact that Stalin is himself evil? Would Stalin be less evil if he killed even one fewer person? What about ten fewer? A million fewer?



DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Before we can answer these questions, perhaps we need a solid definition of *evil*. In Isaiah 45:7, God says, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.” Does God then create evil? The word *evil* in this passage is translated from the Hebrew word *ra’*, which has at least two different meanings. *Ra’* can refer to evil in the sense of a malicious act intended to hurt another. But it can also refer to the pain and misery one brings upon another.

Note that the second definition does not include intent. In other words, *ra’* can refer to the pain and misery brought about by one who is not malicious. *Ra’* is a general word, which can be used in different ways depending on the context. In some contexts, the word translated *evil* in Isaiah 45:7 refers to **calamity**—an event that brings about great distress and often suffering. Scripture often uses this word to refer to God bringing about a severe tragedy or difficulty upon someone.

This calamity that God brings upon humanity is not evil in the same sense that we usually think about evil. Instead, calamity is the hardship and even destruction that He brings upon what He has created. Since God is the owner of all things, He’s the only one who has the right to bring such hardship (1 Chron. 29:11–12; Job 41:11; Ps. 24:1; Eph. 1:20–21; 1 Tim. 6:13–16; Rev. 4:11). Sometimes He brings calamity as punishment to the wicked (Job 31:3; Pss. 11:6; 59:5; Isa. 3:11), while other times, He brings calamity for the good of His people (Ps. 145:9; Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 4:17). Furthermore—and here’s what’s so hard for us to understand—God always brings calamity for His own glory (Prov. 16:4; Rom. 11:36; Phil. 2:13). He is the potter; we are the clay (Rom. 9:21). God is therefore just and right to bring about calamity in the lives of His creatures. As a good Father, He uses suffering to make His children more like Himself (Job 1:21; Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:12–13).

Whenever we think about calamity, we must remember that it’s a result of living in a fallen world. In an unfallen world, there would be no destruction, sickness, death, or pain. But when sin entered into the world, “death reigned” (Rom. 5:14). Hence, part of the curse of sin is the presence of calamity in our world. Our fallen creation groans because of the curse of death, bringing suffering and heartache (Rom. 8:22). The only remedy is for the Lord to return and redeem His groaning creation (2 Pet. 3:13).

When God brings calamity, the hurt is real. The suffering is devastating, and the day of sadness is not superficial. We must never think that because calamity is from God, it is no longer serious, personal, and truly painful. At the same time, the calamity that God brings is not sinful, nor



DOCTRINAL DILEMMA

AN ACCEPTABLE AMOUNT OF EVIL?

Some people have argued that the real problem is that there’s way too much evil in the world. The amount of evil so outweighs the amount of good that there’s no way God can be both all-good and all-powerful, they assert. They say that a good God would not allow this much evil in the world. This amount of evil is disproportionate to the good that remains.

One problem, however, is that there’s no way to know what “disproportionate” is. In other words, the way things are in the world now is the only way we’ve ever known. Imagine, for a moment, we lived in a world where there were 50 percent more evil. People in that world might also argue that evil is disproportionate. If the amount of evil were indeed reduced by 50 percent, would that satisfy those who complained? Maybe, maybe not, but that reduction would have placed them in a world with as much evil as our world has. Thus how could we really ever know what a disproportionate amount of evil is? Can you recognize any other logical problem with this argument?



does it make God any less loving, magnificent, or glorious. There's no contradiction between God's good character and the suffering He brings about in the lives of His creatures. Everything God does, including calamity, always reflects His perfect goodness, justice, and holiness (Exod. 15:11; 34:6; Pss. 77:13; 99:3-4; Isa. 6:3; 30:18; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 4:8; 15:4).

Therefore, God's number one goal for Christians in this life is not to be comfortable. Instead, His number one goal is for His people to become more and more like Christ (John 13:34; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:1; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:1-2; Phil. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 John 2:6).

Clearly, then, God's use of calamity (even when He uses evil people to bring calamity [1 Chron. 21:1; Job 1:7; 2 Pet. 2:15]) is not evil. But we're still left with a lingering question: What about the evil of someone like Stalin? That kind of evil is called moral evil. **Moral evil** refers to malicious acts of calamity by humans, who have no right to do such acts. The right to perform acts of calamity requires ownership, goodness, righteousness, and holiness. But outside of Christ, no man is good (Ps. 14:1; Rom. 3:12), no man is righteous (Ps. 143:2; Rom. 1:18; 3:10), and no man is holy (1 Sam. 2:2; Rom. 1:23; Eph. 2:3).

Here lies the problem: If God is absolutely loving and good *and* He is absolutely powerful, why is there evil in the world? We can see the logical problem this poses:

1. If God is absolutely powerful, He has the power to make a world without evil.
2. If God is absolutely good and loving, He would want evil to stop.
3. Evil remains in the world.
4. Therefore, how is God absolutely powerful, good, or loving?

Again, however, we must be sure we're clear what we mean by *evil*. First, let's consider what evil is not:

- Evil is not an impersonal force in the world that has slipped its way past God.
- Evil is not a generic, impersonal concept that infects the minds of otherwise good people.
- Evil is not just anything that brings pain to people.

Instead, when we talk about evil, what we mean is *sin*. When a human being brings calamity upon God's creation and he has no right to do so, he is violating God's law. Any violation or neglect of God's law constitutes sin and moral evil. Therefore, the true problem of evil is this:

1. If God is absolutely powerful, He has the power to make a world without sin.
2. If God is absolutely good and loving, He would want sin to stop.
3. Sin remains in the world.
4. Therefore, how is God still absolutely powerful, good, and loving?

In other words, *why did a holy, all-powerful God create a world in which humans were able to violate His law?* This therefore is the truly difficult question for Christians to answer.

GOD'S WRATH AGAINST EVIL

As we discussed in Section 8.3, Scripture teaches that God is holy. Hence, He cannot be the author or cause of sin (Ps. 5:4; James 1:13-14; 1 John 1:5; 3:5). We must remember that both calamities from God and moral evil from human beings all stem from the Curse that came when Adam sinned against God. Sin is not natural because God made everything good and in harmony with Himself. At creation, all things were as they should have been. But then Adam's sin changed everything and brought the judgment of God (Gen. 3:14-19). All creation is cursed now that Adam's sin has brought death into the world (Rom. 5:12). Thus all of God's activity (including



calamity) from the Curse until the end of time is part of His work of redemption—not only of His people but of heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1–5).

When we see the effects of sin and the Curse, the question that arises is this: Why was there such a high penalty for Adam's sin? Couldn't God just forgive him? Why did He have to bring a universal curse of spiritual and physical death? We'll discuss sin in more detail in Chapter 18, but let's consider three factors.

First, perhaps we raise these kinds of questions because we think so little of God. In other words, because we have a sinful nature, we're inclined to believe the lie that sin is not that bad and that God shouldn't be so offended by it. By believing this lie, we betray a low view of both God and sin—we see God as less than holy and sin as less than severe.

Second, as we learned in Section 8.3, God's commands are based upon His very character of righteousness and holiness. Thus whenever we disobey Him, we're not just rejecting His commandments—we're rejecting God Himself.

Third, God has every right to establish the conditions that His creatures are to live by. Those conditions are not unjust, unclear, or unloving. Adam knew he represented all mankind, and he knew the conditions by which he was to live as a representative. He knew that those conditions were a reflection of God's very character. Therefore, God was faithful to His own character when He followed through with cursing creation and bringing about the penalty of death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23).

God is not merely disappointed by our sin as if He were mildly embarrassed by it. Rather, He is filled with an anger that is as almighty as He is. This fierce anger of God is called His **wrath**. God's wrath against sin demonstrates His unimaginable holiness (2 Chron. 36:16; John 3:36; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:5–6; Col. 3:6). He hates the wicked (Pss. 5:5; 11:5; Hosea 9:15) and the acts of the wicked (Ps. 101:3; Prov. 6:16–19). He gives the wicked over to their own destructive ways (Rom. 1:24–27) and prohibits them from entering His kingdom (Matt. 7:21–23; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Eph. 5:5). He calls the wicked, as well as their actions, an abomination (Deut. 25:16; Prov. 6:16; 16:5).



DOCTRINAL DILEMMA

EVALUATING RELIGIOUS CLICHÉS

When tragedy strikes our nation or our families, people begin to ask questions. People often ask whether the tragedy was deserved because of some personal, familial, or societal evil.

In 1981 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner wrote this book to respond to his own son's death just a few years prior. Today, the title of that book has become a cliché that people often ask when bad things happen. Based on what you have learned so far, how would you answer the question raised by Kushner? Why do bad things happen to good people?

*Why do bad things
happen to good people?*

GOD'S GOODNESS IN THE MIDST OF EVIL

If God truly hates disobedience, why did He create a world in which humans were capable of disobeying His law? Certainly, we can see some benefits to God's plan. As the Redeemer and Savior of a hopeless, helpless people, God demonstrates His infinite love for His people (Lam. 3:22–23; Ps. 78:38; Jer. 31:34; John 3:16; Eph. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 4:10). He is the one who sacrificed for them. The one who was offended showed the greatest love to the ones who committed the offense.

And yet all this doesn't really answer the question—it simply explains the benefit of God's sovereign plan. The real answer remains veiled in God's mind.

If we attempt to reason out God's plan, we end up in one of two heresies. If we try to answer the problem of evil by limiting God's power, we create a god in our own image, one who does the best he can with what he has to work with. This is not the God of the Bible. If, however, we answer by limiting God's love, we create an impersonal, abstract god. Nothing in Scripture would support this brute of a god.

Instead, we are to be satisfied with the truth as Scripture describes it to us: God is all-loving, all-good, and all-powerful. His plan is holy, righteous, and good. This plan includes humans who were made in such a way that they could violate His law. It's a tension, no doubt. But we would expect a tension in the works of an infinitely wise, holy, good, and righteous God. This tension demonstrates a limitation in our finite minds, not a weakness in God's work or Word.

The problem of evil really isn't a problem. Although our minds are too feeble to understand all of God's ways, there's plenty to rejoice in. Though sin is in the world, God is exceedingly merciful and loving. He has made a way for mankind to be reconciled with Himself. This act of forgiveness and acceptance is not merely a legal documentation. Rather, the one who is rightfully filled with wrath has become Father to all who repent and believe in Christ. The Holy Spirit reveals the depth of our sin and the misery of our guilty state (John 3:5–6; Eph. 3:16–17). The Father pours His wrath upon His own Son for our sake (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The Son is raised from the dead so that we might have life in His kingdom (John 11:25–26; 1 Tim. 3:16). And even though they used to be like dogs who constantly returned to their own vomit (Prov. 26:11), God's people are now invited to come to His table and eat of His food. Christians are no longer God's enemies—they are His children (Ps. 23:5; Song of Sol. 2:4; Rom. 8:14–17; Rev. 19:7–9).

We might not know why God made the world the way He did, but when we look upon His gracious favor and His loving mercy, we can confidently sing, “How marvelous, how wonderful is my Savior's love for me.”⁷

“When God gets us alone through suffering, heartbreak, temptation, disappointment, sickness, or by thwarted desires, a broken friendship, or a new friendship—when He gets us absolutely alone, and we are totally speechless, unable to ask even one question, then He begins to teach us.”

OSWALD CHAMBERS⁸

THINKING IT THROUGH 9.2

1. What is the main distinction between calamity and moral evil?
2. How would you explain Isaiah 45:7?
3. How would you explain the “real problem” in the problem of evil?
4. What does the Bible teach about God's disposition toward sin?
5. How does God's disposition toward sin relate to the problem of evil?

9 CHAPTER REVIEW

TERMS TO REMEMBER

will
sovereignty
open theism
providence
calamity
moral evil
wrath

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

Ephesians 1:11

UNDERSTANDING DOCTRINAL TRUTH

1. What is the difference between God's sovereignty and God's providence?
2. What do open theists wrongly assume about God's sovereignty?
3. Identify the two kinds of "evil," and explain how they are different from one another.
4. Explain what Scripture means when it speaks of God's wrath.

PRACTICING DOCTRINAL HARMONIZATION

5. How is our will different from God's will?
6. Using Scripture, explain the relationship between God's holiness and His disposition toward sin.

RELATING DOCTRINAL TRUTHS; EVALUATING CLAIMS

7. Explain why God's sovereignty does not lead to robotic obedience.
8. Does God ever take a risk on the future? Use Scripture to defend your answer.
9. Suppose a friend says, "God is sovereign, but He gave up some of His power to allow for evil to happen in the world." How would you respond to your friend?
10. What benefit is there from living in a world in which God is our Redeemer?

MAKING USE OF DOCTRINE FOR WORLDVIEW LIVING

11. How do Psalm 41:9 and Luke 22:22 demonstrate God's sovereignty and humanity's free choice at the same time?
12. Suppose a friend asks you, "If God is so powerful, why is there so much evil in this world?" Respond to your friend, and support your answer with Scripture. (*Hint: Define the real problem of evil.*)



CHAPTER

10

Who is
God the Father?

GOD THE FATHER

Scripture Memory

1 John 3:1

Key Scriptures

Deut. 32:6

John 3:16

John 6:37–40

Eph. 3:14–15

Eph. 4:6

1 John 5:20

10.1 THE FATHER'S PERSON

Think of all the relationships that exist today: teacher-student, pastor-church member, best friends, “frenemies,” siblings, girlfriend-boyfriend, husband-wife, coworkers, parent-child, doctor-patient—the list goes on. Some of these relationships have been around since the time of Adam and Eve. But is there a relationship that is older than the existence of people? Older than the existence of the universe? Is there a relationship that isn’t just old—it never began? It just always was? Our God is a three-person God. He is a God of relationship. Within God lies a relationship we all recognize. The relationship of Father-Son is not just *a* relationship, but rather it is *the* relationship at the heart of God Himself.

The first person of the Trinity is the Father. He is distinct from the Son and the Spirit (Luke 3:21, 22). His fatherhood, however, exists because of the Son. Without the Son there would be no fatherly identity. The distinction between the Father and the Son allows for the relationship they have with each other (John 3:16; 5:26; Heb. 1:3). Father-Son is not a formal relation. It is a personal one. This means the Father-Son relation in the Trinity is not merely a title. The Father-Son relation in the Trinity is the actual relationship going on between the first and second persons of the Trinity. The relationship is possible because They are truly distinct persons who truly are in personal relationship. And yet, with the Spirit, They are the one true God.

Although all this is hard to understand, we do understand the relationship between a father and son. However, here’s the strange thing we must consider: when we talk about the Father and the Son we are *not* using the concept *father-son* as an earthly template to better understand the complexities of the persons of God. *Father-son* is *not* an analogy that we apply to the first and second persons of the

Trinity, as if those persons are not really Father and Son but that's how we like to think of Them. Instead, earthly fathers and sons are the ones who imperfectly imitate the real thing. This means fatherhood itself is not merely a concept, but rather it is the proper and actual identity of the first person of the Trinity. Fatherhood, then, is as fundamental as God. This relation was never created. It just always existed in God. It will never end because God will never end.

**“GOD IS NOT ‘AS IT WERE’ A FATHER;
HE IS THE FATHER FROM WHOM
ALL FATHERHOOD ON EARTH IS DERIVED.”**

HENDRIKUS BERKHOF¹

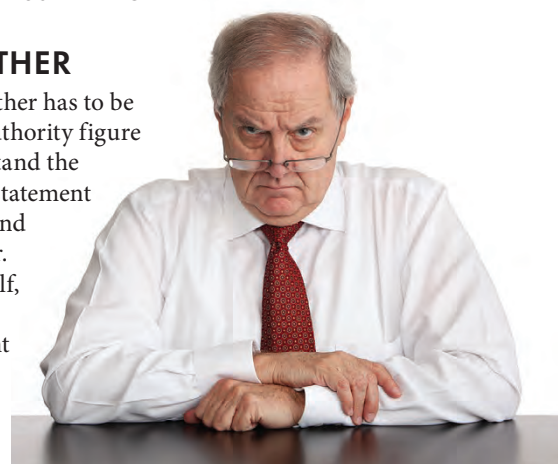
THE AUTHORITY AND PROVISION OF THE FATHER

Popular TV personality Stephen Colbert sarcastically stated, “A father has to be a provider, a teacher, a role model, but most importantly, a distant authority figure who can never be pleased. Otherwise, how will children ever understand the concept of God?”² Although Colbert is looking for a laugh here, his statement seems to reflect how many people view God. People rightly understand that our earthly fathers are imitators (good or bad) of the true Father. But because they find God's law as repulsive as they find God Himself, they cannot help but see the hopelessness of trying to please the God whom they have offended. But who is the Father, then? Is He a distant authority that cannot be pleased? To answer this question, we will investigate how the Father is described in the Old and New Testaments.

Even though the Old Testament does not fully develop the concept of the Trinity, God is still referred to as the Father of His people. Deuteronomy 32:6 tells us that the rebellious children of Is-rael acted foolishly. Moses sternly reminded them that God is their “father that hath bought” them, “made” them, and “established” them. Notice the activity of the fatherly God. As a creating Father, He made them. As a redeeming Father, He bought them for His own. As a sovereign Father, He established them as a particular people.

God's fatherhood demonstrates both His authority over His people and His care for them. This fatherly work of care and authority is all over the Old Testament. As Father, He is “our Redeemer” (Isa. 63:16); we are “the work of [His] hand” (Isa. 64:8); He is “the guide of my youth” (Jer. 3:4). God calls Himself “a father” (Mal. 1:6), and He is called “father” as the one who is the Creator of His people (Mal. 2:10). His power and care are almost indistinguishable in the sight of His children.

In the New Testament the designation of fatherhood is assigned to the first person of the Trinity in a more specific way. As the eternal Father, we see His authority and care over mankind in John 3:16, in which He loved with such a powerful love that He gave His Son for our sake. In that verse, fatherhood's two hands can be seen: one of *caring provision* and the other of the *authority* necessary to be the Provider. In God's dealing with humanity, we can see the Father exercising His authority as Provider when He directs the Son. Throughout the book of John this pattern is distinctly expressed. Jesus acknowledges the Father's authority as He states that He was



Is God a distant authority figure who can never be pleased?

sent by the Father to do the will of the Father (17:4–5). Jesus also said that He was not speaking His own words but the words the Father commanded Him to say (7:16; 12:49). Even Jesus’ judgments were not His own but were judgments based on the Father’s will (5:30). Although the Father’s authority is undeniable, as shown in Jesus’ obedience, at the same time all this authority is exercised for the sake of love. This love is poured out upon His people (14:21, 23; 16:27; 17:23), and this love is poured out upon Christ Himself, the one who came on the Father’s behalf (15:9, 10; 17:26).

What we see in the ultimate Father is authority exercised in love. He holds authority as Provider (John 5:26–27) so that He might show His love by providing (caring) for His children. It is true that Jesus loves His people and gave Himself up for them (John 10:15). But we must also remember that if John 3:16 teaches us anything, it is that the Father’s love is the focus. His love is the cause of the provision. The Father loved with an almighty love—an all-encompassing love—a love so intense, the provision for our salvation would be His only Son. A Father laid down the life of His Son as provision for an ungrateful, unloving, unbelieving people (Rom. 5:8). The two factors making our salvation possible are (1) the authority of the Father, making Him the only one able to send the Son, and (2) the love of the Father, motivating His provision. Is this a distant Father—a mere authority figure? The Father is closer to His people than any other father (or a mother) could ever be. He has given more than we could ever understand. He began His work of provision already loving us—and loving us long before we were ever able to love Him back. He is not merely God; He is our Father.

What makes the Father distinct?

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE FATHER

When we make a distinction between the Father’s authority and His provision, we are nevertheless recognizing that those two things are interdependent. We are also recognizing a distinction between who He is (His person) and what He does (His work). As we saw above, the Father’s provision (His work) is possible because of the authority He holds (His person). He is the one from whom the Spirit proceeds (John 15:26) and from whom the Son is **begotten*** (John 3:16). He does not proceed from anything or anyone. He is not begotten but is the Begetter. His distinction within the Trinity is vital to understanding His person. But what about His distinction from other gods?

Of course, He is not a cruel master who abuses those under His authority. He is not like the ancient god Baal who required self-mutilation of his servants and sadistic, oppressive slavery. God’s love, particularly the Father’s love, takes hold of His people, drawing them to Himself gently and with tender care (Hosea 2:14). Perhaps the distinction between Baal and God the Father is easy to see. But what about gods that people worship today? What about Islam? Who is Allah? Isn’t *Allah* just Arabic for “God”? True. But what do *Muslims* mean when they use the word *Allah*? Do Muslims worship God the Father but just don’t know it? Some people think that is exactly the case.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian who wrote an influential book called *Allah: A Christian Response*. In that book he argues that there are several similarities between Allah and the God of the Bible. In fact, he claims, these similarities show that

begotten: In reference to God the Son, this word holds two ideas within it. First, it refers to the uniqueness of God the Son in terms of being the Father’s “one and only” Son. Second, it refers to the Son’s preexistent sonship. The Son never began being generated by the Father, but He is eternally generated by the Father. In other words, the Son never began. He is coequal with the Father in substance and glory but always as the Son.

if Christians and Muslims “*could point to God, both would point to the same thing.*”³ Volf is claiming that Allah and the God of the Bible are so similar that they are the same person. Volf’s final list of similarities is as follows:

GOD		ALLAH
✓	God is one.	✓
✓	God is Creator.	✓
✓	God is distinct from His creation.	✓
✓	God is good.	✓
✓	God commands us to love God.	✓
✓	God commands us to love our neighbor. ⁴	✓
ARE THEY THE SAME PERSON?		

Because Volf believes this list applies to both Allah and the God of the Bible, he believes we have sufficient proof that Muslims and Christians are really worshiping the same God if they live their lives trying to love God and their neighbors.⁵

Finding similar terms in different religions is not hard. Only when we start asking how one *defines* those terms do we find the striking differences. For instance, let’s take the statement, “God is one.” How is that defined? If all we mean by this statement is that we believe in only one God, we can say this about Christianity, Islam, and even Shaktism. What’s Shaktism? It’s a Hindu religion in which there is only one god, but that god takes a lot of different forms. But at the end of the day, they hold to their god being only one. There are about forty other religions you can choose from that could claim the same general statement, “God is one.” Most of these religions have some kind of creation myth and believe their god is good and that god wants us to be nice to each other. General statements can easily fit into many radically different religions. General statements, however, do not prove real similarities, nor do they prove that two very different religions are both worshiping the same God.

Let’s look at just the first statement: “God is one.” What does a Muslim really mean by this? By way of background, Islam began to evolve around AD 610 when the founder of Islam, Muhammad, allegedly began having his visions. This was long after the Bible was written, and much of Islam is a reaction to Christianity. Muhammad refused to allow his prophecies to be written down. It was only after his death that the **Qur’an** (the “holy” book of Islam) was written. The Qur’an is not like our Bible. It is not many books, each divided into chapters and verses. Instead it is just one book with 114 chapters, which are segmented into verses. The chapters are called **suras**. Also, the Bible is one overarching story of God’s creation, man’s fall, and God’s redemption of man. The Qur’an, on the other hand, does not have a unified idea or story. It is an assortment of teachings, stories, and religious ethics. Although it is difficult to see much organization in the Qur’an, it is there that we can find out what “God is one” means to Muslims.

blasphemy: the act of offending a god or religion by defaming the character of that god or religion



For Allah to be *one* in the way Islam means it, the Trinity (in its entirety) must be rejected. Therefore, any reference to Jesus Christ as God is **blasphemy**.*

“Those who say, ‘God is the Messiah, the son of Mary,’ are defying the truth. Say, ‘If it had been God’s will, could anyone have prevented Him from destroying the Messiah, son of Mary, together with his mother and everyone else on earth?’”⁶

Qur’an 5:17

Here the Qur’an is saying that Jesus was merely a man whom Allah could have destroyed if he wanted to. But does Islam really teach that it is blasphemy to say Jesus is God? Qur’an 5:72 maintains, “Those who say, ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary,’ have defied God.” Well, maybe Muhammed was just confused about who Jesus is. Maybe he didn’t realize that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity. Sura 5:73 continues, “Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God. If they persist in what they are saying, a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist.” Is it possible Muslims believe God had a son but that son just wasn’t God? The Qur’an clearly states that “it would not befit God to have a child. He is far above that” (19:35). In Qur’an 5:116–18 Jesus Himself allegedly states that He never claimed to be God and should not be worshiped and that He only taught His disciples to worship Allah.

What are we left with, then? Muslims believe in a god that is not triune. Their god is a monad. This god is not a father; Allah can have no child. And Jesus is most certainly not God and not to be worshiped, nor did He ever teach any such thing.

The Bible tells us one cannot reject God the Son and then think it is possible to know God at all. Jesus said that if you know Him you know the Father, and if you have seen the Son you have seen the Father (John 14:7). Not only is the Son to be worshiped and declared God’s Son (Matt. 14:33), but also He is God Himself (Heb. 1:3).

First John 5:20 tells us that the Son has come to give us understanding of the Father and that we are united to the Father through the Son. The end of the verse proclaims, “This is the true God, and eternal life.” Having explained that the true God is the God who is the Father known through His Son, the very next verse flatly states, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” There is no better way to say it. All other gods are idols, including Islam’s Allah. In order to believe in the one true God, that God must be identified as the God of Scripture who is the Father, the sender of His Son, made known to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Outside of that God there are only idols—manmade fantasies which are mute, powerless, and not worthy of worship.



THE GOODNESS OF THE FATHER

A feminist columnist wrote about what she considered to be a major problem with our society: the perceived necessity of fatherhood. In her article “Are Fathers Necessary?” she describes the role of fatherhood as essentially interchangeable with any kind of partner. In her estimation, a lesbian partner could fill the role of parent just as effectively as (and probably better than) a father. For her, fatherhood is irrelevant. She writes, “The bad news for Dad is that despite common perception, there’s nothing objectively essential about his contribution. The good news is, we’ve gotten used to him.”⁷

As you watch TV commercials it does not take long to see that advertisements often involve a Neanderthal-like, out-of-shape male that messes something up and an intelligent, put-together female who must come to the rescue. Television shows and movies are packed with plots in which the male character is a bumbling idiot and the female character must fend for herself. Action movies often no longer have men saving women but rather women saving themselves. And none of this is by accident.

Today, fathers are viewed as detached, clueless children who emerge from their “man caves” in time to eat the dinner their mommy-wife made for them. A father is nothing more than an oversized kid—incapable, incompetent, and in the way. Why is this perception of fatherhood so popular in our culture? Why this constant denigration of fatherhood? The truth is there is almost no better way to denigrate God than to mock, ignore, or hate that which is so basic to God: His fatherhood.

One of the oldest creeds in Christianity is the Apostle’s Creed, in which the first words are, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Within that first line we see the two hands of fatherhood once again: authority (Almighty) and provision (Maker of heaven and earth). First graders can learn the Bible Truth question: “Why should you glorify God?” The response: “I should glorify God because He made me and takes care of me.” What speaks of fatherhood better than this? God the Father is a father right down to His core. As a father, He will never leave His children or forsake them (Josh. 1:5). He is not a stingy father but gives His children gifts far beyond what they had hoped for (Matt. 7:11; Eph. 3:19–20). He is a father for the fatherless (Ps. 68:5). He not only lavishes His children with His love (1 John 3:1), but He sees them as having real worth (Matt. 6:26). And as a good father, He even disciplines His children (Deut. 8:5; Heb. 12:5–7), lovingly and eagerly forgiving them when they repent (Luke 15:20–23). He is the Father of fathers. May it be that you know this heavenly Father as yours, that with the apostle Paul, you might long for and love this personal Father God who is “Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:6).



Unless God is our Father, we are orphans. But God’s own Son has become our Older Brother. He comes through his Spirit, with his Father, to live with us. The Holy Spirit dwells in our lives, making us a suitable dwelling place to receive the Father and the Son! As a consequence, by the Spirit we learn that we are not abandoned and unloved, but rather that we are loved by the Father, by the Son, and lovingly cared for by the Holy Spirit (*Jn. 14:21*).

Sinclair Ferguson⁸

THINKING IT THROUGH 10.1

1. How is the first person of the Trinity distinct from the second person?
2. Describe the two “hands” of God’s fatherhood.
3. How do these two hands distinguish the Father’s person and work?
4. When a Muslim says God is one, what does he mean?
5. When a Christian says God is one, what does he mean?



10.2 THE FATHER'S WORK

poet laureate: a poet who is officially commissioned by a governing authority to write poetry as a representative of the people under that government

Robert Hayden (1913–80) was the first African American poet laureate* in the United States. He grew up in Detroit. His birth parents separated before he was born, so he was taken in by foster parents, a very poor couple. His foster father was the only father he knew. His father worked day in and day out to support the family. Hayden wrote a poem about his father entitled “Those Winter Sundays.” In those days people would often turn off their heat at night to save money. That made for devastatingly frigid mornings in eastern Michigan. The poem recalls the process his father went through—getting up “in the blueblack cold,” lighting the furnace “with cracked hands that ached from labor in the weekday weather.” For all that his father did for him and the family, he adds, “No one ever thanked him.” Hayden also recalls that he would speak “indifferently to” his father “who had driven out the cold” and even polished young Robert’s shoes for him. He ends the poem with a question: “What did I know, what did I know of love’s austere and lonely offices?” In this poem, Hayden is lamenting that he did not appreciate the sacrifice of provision from his father. It was a thankless job. And even though no one acknowledged his father’s work, his father just kept providing, kept working—out of love for his family.

Hayden brings out two descriptions of fatherhood. He says it is both lonely and austere. By *austere* he means that fatherhood can be solemn and brutally difficult work. A father’s work is not always attractive. Often it is painful, usually unappreciated. Sometimes it requires patience when being patient is agonizing. Sometimes it requires action when acting is heartbreaking. The Fall and the Curse make the work of fatherhood even harder. Not only is the ground cursed with thistles and thorns, but also thorns and thistles grow in the heart of man (Gen. 3:18; Jer. 17:9). Although a father’s physical work was increased by the Fall, so was the work of fatherhood itself. It often becomes an austere and lonely office.

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The heavenly Father is no exception. We often think of how sad it was for Christ on the cross to cry out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Yet we rarely think about the gut-wrenching moment in which the Father heard those words from His suffering Son, dying painfully and innocently. The Father sent the Son to die, and in the Son’s death He calls out to His Father. We cannot imagine or understand that moment, but Scripture tells us that the Father “set forth [Christ] to be a propitiation” (Rom. 3:25). A **propitiation** is one who takes on the full wrath of the offended party for the sake of the guilty party. The Father placed His Son on the cross to take on the Father’s wrath, the just penalty for believers’ sins. His work of provision for His children is a hard work. It is austere, often forgotten, and rarely appreciated. Yet the Father provides—and provides selflessly. In this section we will discuss the Father’s work of provision in creation, providence, and redemption.

How does the Father relate to His world?

THE FATHER’S PROVISION IN CREATION

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The first words of Scripture tell us of God’s initial provision for man. He provided not only man’s existence but also the totality of the universe as an environment for him to live in. The work of creation was a triune activity. This means that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all active in creation. They were not, however, all active in the same way. Scripture tells us that the Father created all things through the Son (Ps. 33:6; John 1:3, 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:3) and also through the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Pss. 33:6; 104:30).

What does it mean that the Father’s work of creation is *through* the Son and the Spirit? It is not as easy to understand as some make it out to be. First Corinthians 8:6 tells us that all things are from the Father, and all things are through the Son. This means that the Father didn’t say to the Son, “Go make the world while I supervise.” Instead, Scripture tells us that *all things* are *from* the Father but brought about through the Son and Spirit. This includes *the work*, as well as the will to do the work. So both the determination to do the work of creation and the activity itself are from the Father and brought about through the Son. This means that the Father is active in creation in a real way. An ancient church father named Irenaeus helps us understand this idea. In reference to creation, Irenaeus said that the Father was not in need of angels or some outside assistance “as though He had no Hands of His own.” Instead, He created all things with His true hands: the Son and the Spirit.¹⁰

Or think about God’s work in creation by way of His speech. “God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). Think about how speech works. When a person speaks a word, there are three components: the one speaking, the word spoken, and the breath to give the word power to be heard. When the Father speaks (1 Cor. 8:6), He speaks the Word (John 1:1–2). This Word is spoken with the power of the Spirit-Breath* (Ps. 33:6). All three are actively at work. The Speaker acts. The Word acts. And the Breath acts. Each one’s work is distinct, yet the work remains the one act of the one true God.

In creation, the Father provides through His everlasting Hands—the Son and the Spirit. He is not a divine supervisor, but rather He is the almighty Provider at work in the Son and the Spirit—who are all three, one. As we look upon God’s creation, we are looking at handiwork, provision, and a world built in love.

Spirit-Breath: The Hebrew word for Spirit is ruakh, meaning breath, wind, or spirit.

THE FATHER'S PROVISION IN PROVIDENCE

Imagine living in a world with no governmental authority. No familial authority. No bosses. No authority at all. You might enjoy your freedom for the minimal amount of time you managed to stay alive. If you didn't crash on a highway on which no one was accountable to drive safely, you might get caught between the crossfire of people settling their disputes without any restrictions. You might not have power at your house since the people at the power plant decided they didn't feel like working anymore. You might not even have clean water since the people at the water treatment facility decided they didn't feel like working either. You might find yourself starving to death as well since the stores were thoroughly looted and emptied on day one. You might want to turn to your parents for help, but they might be gone. After all, they would no longer be responsible for you. As you navigated this new, post-apocalyptic world (again, for the very short amount of time you would survive), you might begin to wish for authority.

Where does authority come from anyway? A philosopher named Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) thought that authority is necessary because humans are afraid of what would happen if it weren't there. So humans must set up these mini-contracts with everyone around them to stay safe and live well. For instance, if you don't hurt me, I won't hurt you. If you do nice things for me, I will do nice things for you. But is that where authority comes from? Is it born from human fear? Was it established simply by humans deciding they would survive best if there were authority structures in place?

Romans chapter 9 speaks of the authority of God over mankind. For instance, God promised to bless Jacob but not Esau (9:11–13). He made this promise before they were born. The verses say that neither brother had done anything good or bad when this promise was made. This means God did not look into the future to see which would earn His favor. If that were the case, these verses would be meaningless. It would be obvious why He promised to bless Jacob and not Esau. Instead, Scripture tells us that without any consideration of their personal works or future decisions, God made the promise to bless one and not the other (9:14–16).

Paul then asks the question that is on the mind of anyone who reads these verses. How are we, then, to blame for how things turn out? For who can resist the will of God Almighty (9:19)? The answer to this question is in verse 21: "Hath not the potter power over the clay?" In this verse we see a contrast that is almost forgotten in our society. God is the Maker (potter), and we are the thing made (clay). In other words, Paul is asking, don't we expect the Maker to have power over what He made? And what kind of power are we talking about? No doubt, God has power. He can create and destroy, consume and produce. We learned about His omnipotence in Chapter 8. But that is not necessarily what is being talked about in this verse. When Paul asks whether the potter has power over the clay, the Greek word he uses for power is *exousia*. This word can often mean *authority*.

Although our traditional use of the word *power* often has to do with physical energy, *authority* has to do with morality. In other words, God has the authorization to do what He wills. It is not merely that He is the strongest one and therefore is able to bully His will into reality. Being the Creator of all things means He is the rightful, authorized Owner of all things. He conducts His will of absolute ownership as the only one who has the right to do so. We stand before God as clay resting on the pottery wheel waiting to be molded by the potter.

As God relates to His creation, God the Father is the source of all authority. Christ obeyed the Father (John 6:38; 14:31) and was given authority by the Father (Matt. 28:18). The Spirit was sent forth from the Father (John 14:26; 15:26), and He obeyed the Father (John 3:34; 16:13–15). God the Father demonstrates not that He is more powerful than Christ and the Spirit, for all three are the one true God. Instead God the Father demonstrates His authority as Father.

What does the fatherhood of God mean to our sinful world? Our world is in chaos. Violent crime is a daily reality. Hate for fathers permeates the media. More and more young people find themselves directionless, unmotivated, and lost in this world. Authority is despised, unless it is our own authority. Make no mistake, a world that shows its hatred for God-ordered authority is really showing its hatred for God. But it is the Creator's fatherly authority that our chaotic world desperately needs.

What does the fatherhood of God mean to Christians? The answer is that the Father's care for us is not theoretical. It's not an act from the past that might help us today. His care is not a button He presses from far away. Instead, the Father governs our world in a personal way. By His authority, He places people, institutions, and governments over us as fatherly rulers for our good. Yes, we live in a sinful world. People often fall short of the work they are supposed to be doing as image-bearers of God. Sometimes they abuse their authority in terrible ways. But God remains the authority over all creation. When your parents are protecting you, they are showing you the fatherhood of God. When laws are made to keep you safe, the government is showing you the fatherhood of God. When your pastor condemns your sin from the pulpit, he is showing you the fatherhood of God. Your heavenly Father is caring for you through His constant work in this world. He ordains authorities and providentially works through them to care for you. Whether it is the authority He grants to His Son (Matt. 28:18), the authority He grants to the government (Rom. 13:1–4), or the authority He grants to your parents (Eph. 6:1–3), His care and work in your life are detailed, structured, and personal. He is the Father of providential care.



DOCTRINAL DILEMMA

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE?

Romans 13:1–7 is clear. Christians are to submit to their governing authorities because God is the one who placed those authorities over them. But what happens when those governing authorities become abusive or take away Christians' rights? Just a few years after the book of Romans was written, Nero would come to power and butcher Christians in horrific ways. And what about Acts 5:17–32, which tells the story of the apostles disobeying their authority as Peter stated, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (5:29)? Compare these two passages, and answer the question: When is it permissible for a Christian to disobey his governing authority?

THE FATHER'S PROVISION IN REDEMPTION

As we think about the Father's provision in redemption, remember what has already been said about John 3:16. The central figure in that verse is the Father. His love culminates in His provision as He sends His only Son. Those who believe in the Son receive eternal life. But how do they receive this eternal life? As we look further in the Gospel of John, we find that Jesus is the one who raises them up on the last day (6:40) and that it is the Son who gives them this eternal life (10:28). But what about the Father? What part does He play in this whole process?

To answer that question we must ask another question about those receiving eternal life. To whom will Christ give eternal life? John 3:16 is clear: “whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” The answer to the question of who will receive eternal life is any who believe.

Our next question then is, who will believe? A few chapters down in John 6, Christ says, “[H]e that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (6:35). So who are those who come and believe? Christ says, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” (6:37). Notice the order here. The Father gives those who shall come. Part of the Father’s work in redemption is the work of gathering and providing Christ with His sheep. In other words, their coming and believing is on the basis of the Father’s giving them to Jesus. Who will come and believe? All that the Father gives the Son. The Father is not just providing salvation for these people. He provides His Son with an inheritance of believers.

Jesus also assures His listeners in John 6 that those whom the Father has given Him will never be let go. Why does Jesus seem to be so confident of this? Couldn’t He lose at least one? Not at all. In fact, He gives proof that they will never be lost. His proof is this: “And this is the will of him that sent me” (6:40). Jesus is saying that His proof that no one will be lost is the Father’s sovereign will. What is the Father’s will? It is this: “that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day” (6:40).

No one can pluck believers from the hand of either the Father or Son because the Father’s will is set on keeping them. Jesus makes this clear as He says, “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (6:38–39). The Father’s love for His people grounds His determination to provide salvation for the sheep, and as a good father, He provides those sheep to His Son. The salvation of the sheep is as secure as the Almighty’s will. This will is ironclad because our heavenly Father never lies (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18) and never changes (James 1:17).

Our God is not distant. He is not a strange thing we cannot know anything about. He does not relate to us in an unfamiliar way. Our God is ever personal, ever present, ever good. He is a father to His children and is the source of fatherhood in whom all authority is seated. He does not just bear the *title* Father, but He also *acts* fatherly to His children. As a good father, He is the provider of creation, provider of the governing care that directs our lives, and provider of salvation, even at the expense of His own Son. First John 4:10 says it most clearly: “Herein is love, not that we loved God [the Father], but that [God the Father] loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

God is no longer our Judge, who through the law has condemned and imprisoned us. God is no longer our Tutor, who through the law restrains and chastises us. God is now our Father, who in Christ has accepted and forgiven us. We no longer fear Him, dreading the punishment we deserve; we love Him, with deep filial devotion. We are neither prisoners, awaiting the final execution of our sentence, nor children, minors, under the restraint of a tutor, but sons of God and heirs of His glorious kingdom, enjoying the status and privileges of grown-up sons.

John Stott¹¹

THINKING IT THROUGH 10.2

1. How was the Father active in creation?
2. How does the Father in particular work providentially?
3. What role does the Father play in the salvation of Christians?
4. How do the roles of the Father and the Son differ in redemption?
5. Briefly summarize one aspect of the Father’s work.

10 CHAPTER REVIEW

TERMS TO REMEMBER

begotten
Qur'an
suras
blasphemy
propitiation

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

1 John 3:1

UNDERSTANDING DOCTRINAL TRUTH

1. How does the Father bring about His provision of creation and redemption?
2. What two concepts distinguish the Father's person and the Father's work?
3. How did the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work in creating the world?
4. How does God the Father care for you providentially?

PRACTICING DOCTRINAL HARMONIZATION

5. Summarize the person and work of the Father.
6. Using John 3:16 and 6:37–40, explain how anyone comes to Christ for salvation.

RELATING DOCTRINAL TRUTHS; EVALUATING CLAIMS

7. Suppose a friend of yours declares that the God of the Bible and Allah of Islam are the same God. How would you respond? Be sure to include appropriate Scripture verses in your response.
8. How does today's culture denigrate fatherhood? Why does it matter?
9. Why is Thomas Hobbes wrong about where authority comes from?
10. Defend the idea that God the Father is a good father.

MAKING USE OF DOCTRINE FOR WORLDVIEW LIVING

11. Using God the Father as an example, formulate characteristics of a good earthly father.
12. Create a seven-day schedule in which you praise God the Father each day for a particular provision He has supplied for you.



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