

Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology

With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including God's
Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity

Lesson Three: Theology—The Doctrine of God (An Overview)
Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

For Reading at Home Prior to Class

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Remember where Theology fits
within systematic theology.

Review the logic of the loci in the next slides.

The Six Loci of Historic Christian Systematic Theology

1. **Theology:** What the Bible Reveals about God
2. **Anthropology:** What the Bible Reveals about Mankind
3. **Christology:** What the Bible Reveals about Jesus Christ
4. **Soteriology:** What the Bible Reveals about Salvation (This doctrine is also called **Pneumatology** and **The Application of Christ's Redemption**, What the Bible Reveals about the Holy Spirit, the key agent in applying Christ's redemption for our salvation)
5. **Ecclesiology:** What the Bible Reveals about the Church
6. **Eschatology:** What the Bible Reveals about the Last Things or The End Times

The Six Loci of Historic Christian Systematic Theology: Biblical Derivation and Meaning of the Greek Terms

1. **Theology** < θεός (*theos*) → God + λόγος (*logos*) → word, subject, message
2. **Anthropology** < ἄνθρωπος (*anthrōpos*) → mankind + *logos*
3. **Christology** < Χριστός (*Christos*) → Christ, the Anointed One + *logos*
4. **Soteriology** < σώζω (*sōzō*) → save, keep safe, preserve, rescue, make well + *logos*; cognate: σωτήρ (*sōtēr*) → Savior, redeemer, deliverer, preserver.
Pneumatology < πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) → Spirit (the Holy Spirit); wind, breath + *logos*. **The Application of Christ's Redemption**, specifically to individuals.
5. **Ecclesiology** < ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) → assembly, congregation, church < ἐκ (*ek*) → from, out of, away from + καλέω (*kaleō*) → call, name, summon, invite → literally, (the ones) called out (by the Lord) + *logos*
6. **Eschatology** < ἔσχατον (*eschaton*) → last + *logos*: individual and cosmic end

The Integration of the Six Loci of Historic Christian Systematic Theology

The Logic of the System and a Summary of the Six Main Doctrines of the Bible

- 1. Theology:** Everything starts with God. Essential aspects of God include his triune being; that he is creator; owner; most holy, righteous, and just, such that nothing unholy ever enters his presence; steadfast love to the core of his being; and for his being completely perfect in every way.
- 2. Anthropology:** God created humans perfect, even to a limited extent in his image, but the first ones disobeyed God; this sin, which has resulted in cosmic disharmony, so corrupted themselves and their posterity that we cannot come into God's presence and have eternal life without his help. In love, God gave his law to teach his will, his plan of restoration, and to restrain sin to prevent chaos in the now sinful and evil world. What's his plan?
- 3. Christology:** Since God is love, he is unwilling to destroy sinful humans who bear his image, but to preserve his holiness, righteousness, and justice, he instituted his plan to have one perfect human being represent all others, fulfill all the law, and credit that righteousness to all people who believe in and follow him. To accomplish God's perfect will for human beings, that one righteous human also had to be divine; the only One who could fulfill all God's law is his only begotten Son, the Redeemer, Savior, and Lord Jesus Christ, who did so in his First Coming to earth in his life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. The whole Bible focuses on Jesus Christ. Thus, Jesus, and only Jesus (John 14:6), makes salvation, living forever in the presence of God, possible. How?
- 4. Soteriology:** This explanation of salvation explains how the Third Person of the triune God, the Holy Spirit, applies the redemption and salvation Christ has provided to all individuals who believe in and follow Jesus.
- 5. Ecclesiology:** This doctrine explains how God calls out, sets apart, brings together, and equips those whom he has redeemed in a new (i.e., renewed) covenant, the church, all those from every race and nation, to work together to most effectively bring to and implement the Good News of salvation throughout the whole world.
- 6. Eschatology:** When the time is right in God's sight, he will bring the present age to a conclusion and restore his original plan in a new (i. e., renewed) heaven and new (renewed) earth. How he has already begun to do so, is seen in what the Bible reveals about the Last Things, or The End Times, including what occurs when we die and what occurs at the end of history, when Christ Jesus returns in his Second Coming.

Eschatology: The Doctrine of the Last Things

What will occur at the end—the end
of my life, and the end of history?

What?! Why are we talking about eschatology at the beginning?

Systematic theology is supposed to be a logical progression.

1. Eschatology comes from the Greek word, ἔσχατον, transliterated *eschaton*, which means last. Why then are we beginning with eschatology, actually the first part of it?
2. As theologians Anthony Hoekema and Jürgen Moltmann have observed, eschatology is at the core of Christian theology and the plan of God's redemption and renewal of his creation. In his classic text, *The Bible and the Future*, Hoekema writes, "PROPERLY TO UNDERSTAND BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY, WE must see it as an integral aspect of all of biblical revelation. Eschatology must not be thought of as something which is found only in, say, such Bible books as Daniel and Revelation, but as dominating and permeating the entire message of the Bible."
3. Hoekema then quotes Moltmann as follows: "From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of the Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set...Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, and of every Christian existence and of the whole Church." As we will see when we study the Biblical teaching of the church, the church is the major human means through which God is fulfilling his plan of redemption of his creation, a reality that has profound, extensive, and very practical implications and applications.

Eschatology Continued

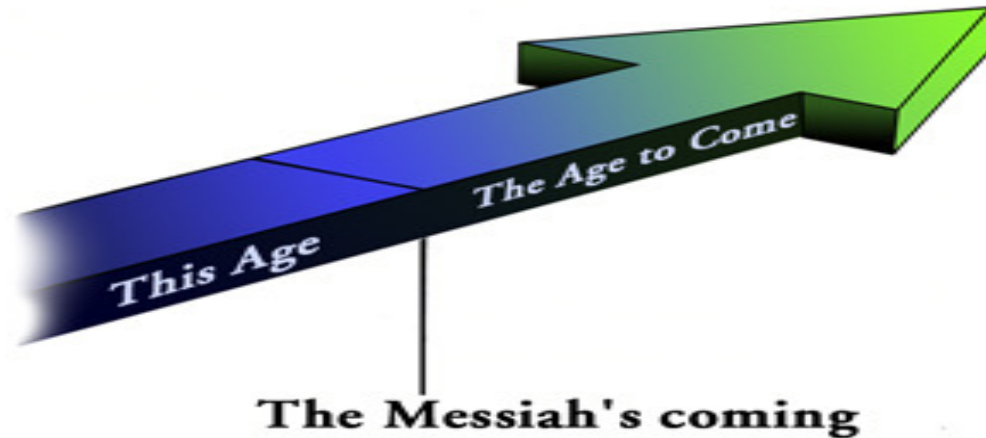
4. We see what Hoekema and Moltmann mean when we observe already in Genesis 3:15 where God proclaims what Biblical scholars call the protoevangelicum, literally the first Gospel, or the first proclamation of the Gospel, the good news of God's plan of the redemption of his creation, including the salvation that he is bringing in Jesus Christ, to whom the whole Old Testament points and Whom the New Testament presents and explains.*
5. This first proclamation of the Gospel...
 - a. comes immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. God acted fast; he loves his people who alone bear his image, and he would not permit them to languish in the lamentable situation they brought upon themselves devoid of hope.
 - b. Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis are the preface of the Bible. The whole remainder of the Bible is the progressive unfolding of God's plan of redemption of his creation in Jesus Christ.

* See also the article by Arie C. Leder, "Reading the Bible Backwards: From the Ending to its Beginning and Back Again," in the Calvin Seminary *Forum*, Spring 2014, pp. 3-5. Dr. Leder is Professor in Old Testament Studies at Calvin Theological Seminary.

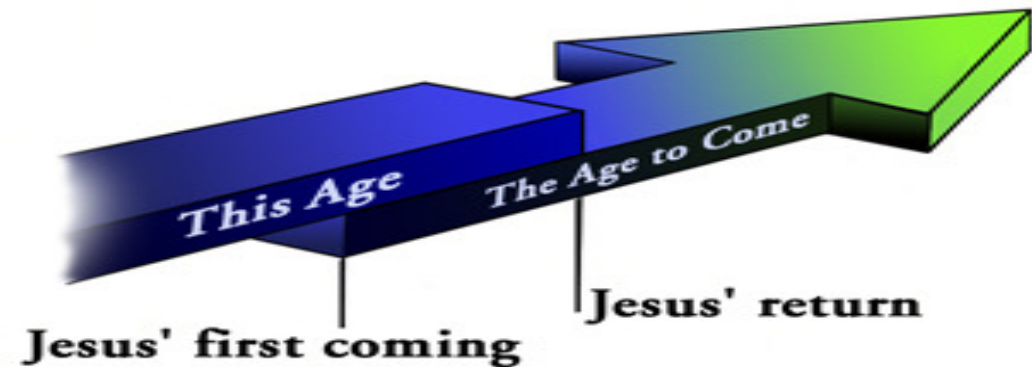
Eschatology Continued

6. Another place to discuss eschatology, in addition to the end, the sixth of the loci, is in Christology, which we will do.
 - a. Historically, the Biblical term, “the last times,” (e.g., 1 Titus 4:1; 1 Peter 1:20; Jude 1:8) refers to the entire time between Christ’s First Coming (also called his First Advent) and his Second Coming (or Second Advent).

Old Testament View



New Testament Additional Revelation



Eschatology Continued

6. Therefore, another place to discuss eschatology, in addition to the end, the sixth of the loci, is in Christology, which we will do.
 - b. In other words, Biblically speaking we are now in the last times, because this is the last part of God's plan of redemption in Jesus Christ.
 - c. We'll return to this subject more in our study of Christology and also when we undertake our study of eschatology in its traditional, and indeed also proper, place at the end of our study, the last of the loci, when we carefully consider what the Bible teaches about the culmination of God's plan of redemption when Jesus returns to accomplish everything, (Matthew 5:18) including the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the New Heaven and the New Earth.
 - d. We'll examine and evaluate in the light of God's Word four main worldviews.
 - 1) Everything will stay the same as it is forever. (A depressing perspective)
 - 2) Everything will improve and mankind will finally "get it right." (Neither a likely nor realistic view)
 - 3) Mankind will destroy everything. (An even more depressing view)
 - 4) The Biblical view: Jesus Christ is Lord; he is coming again, and he will judge and destroy evil and bring his righteous believers into the presence and service of the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to live with him in glory forever in the new heaven and the new earth.
 - e. Biblical eschatology has profound and pervasive implications and applications, which we'll also reflect on in our study of this subject. To cite just one example, since our triune God has established his plan of redemption, whereby we can relate to him by virtue of being credited with Christ's righteousness by faith (Romans 4), we don't have to worry about any aspect of the future: today, tonight, tomorrow, or forever! Those in Christ can commune with God and receive his all-sufficient help: "all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:27)

A Question about the Preceding Section

So OK. To properly understand the main message of the Bible, that it is the gradual unfolding of God's revelation of his plan of redemption in Jesus Christ, how do we answer the question of why this is all necessary?

Among many related questions: Why is any redemption needed? Why are certain behaviors sinful? Why will there be a final judgment?

Countless people are asking these questions, especially in this postmodern age (*op cit.* and the larger, unabridged, [Essential Christianity](#) PowerPoint), and in order to fulfill our God-given calling to help people understand, and to understand more ourselves so we can help others, we need to start with God. Until we consider God, there is no final answer to these questions—everything finds its meaning in him: in who he is, in what he is like, in what he has done, and in what he is doing. Therefore, let's begin.

Theology: The Doctrine of God

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)

Who is God; what is he like; what has
he done; and what is he doing?

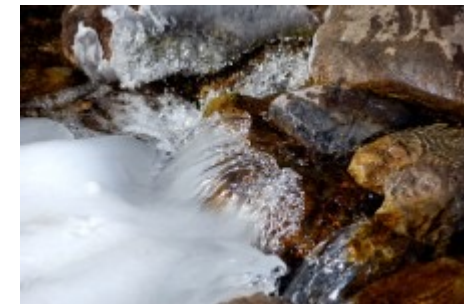
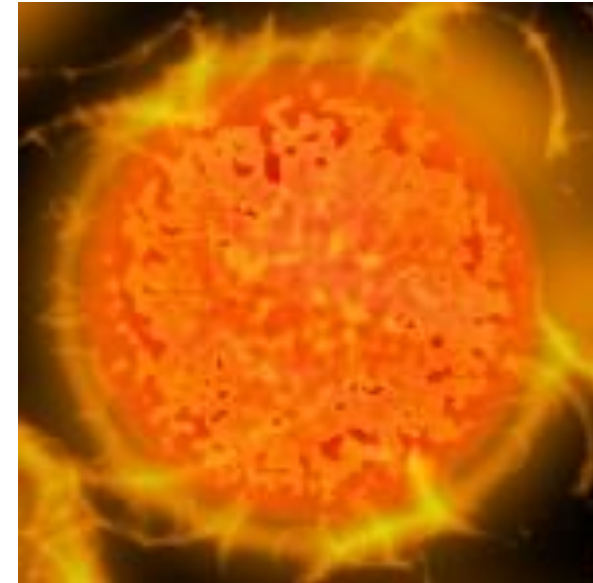
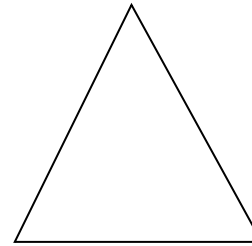
Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Theology is a study of all the Bible teaches about God, including who he is (e.g., triune, owner, sovereign, personal, transcendent and immanent), what he is like, and how he is involved with his creation and the goodness it had when he created it out of nothing. Theology includes what the Bible teaches about God's character, that while he is essentially love to the core of his being, that love issues forth in his other characteristics or attributes, including being Most Holy, righteous, and just. The Bible explains what those qualities of God's essence are like and their significance to his creation, including to us. This section comprises highlights, implications, and very practical applications of the Biblical doctrine of theology. The study of who God is and what he is like is the essential starting point of all theology. In order to make sense out of life and to understand Christianity, including the rest of the six main doctrines, we must know who God truly is, what he is like, and how he is engaged in his creation, especially with us human beings who alone bear his image and are the crown of his creation.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

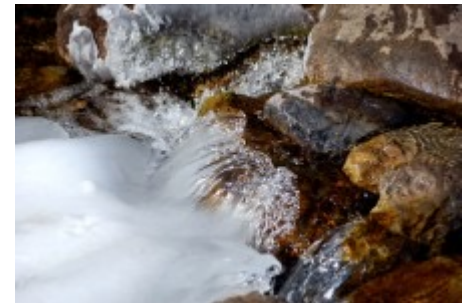
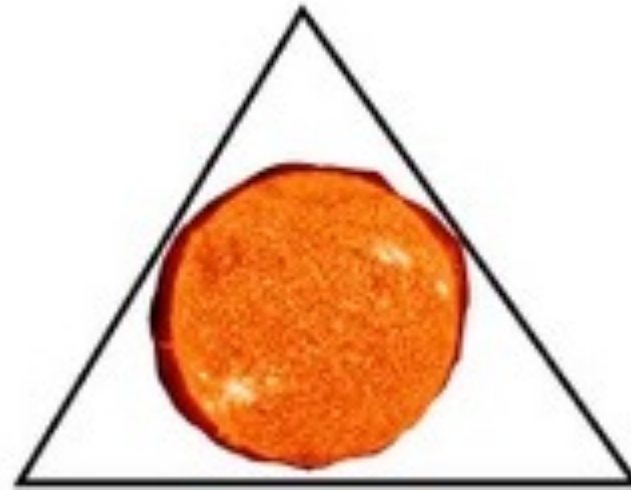
- In the triune God, three distinct Persons share one substance. God is one.
- All three Persons coexist at the same time and have for eternity but are one in essence.
- What phenomena and graphic descriptions exist to help us understand God's triune being?
- A point does occur where all three forms of water do coexist simultaneously in thermodynamic equilibrium at a singular temperature and pressure called the triple point, but not at atmospheric pressures we experience.
- Of all the symbols for the Trinity, the sun is one of the best, for it shows that it is reasonable for an entity to have three simultaneously distinct components that simultaneously share one substance. (Romans 1:20)



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

- To avoid confusion, the sun symbol should be within the triangle.
- Students have mentioned other symbols that demonstrate the reasonableness of something being three and one at the same time including the following:
 - + Colors composed of the three primary colors.
 - + Light being composed of energy, heat, and pressure.
- **Question for Reflection and Discussion:**
Do any others come to your mind?

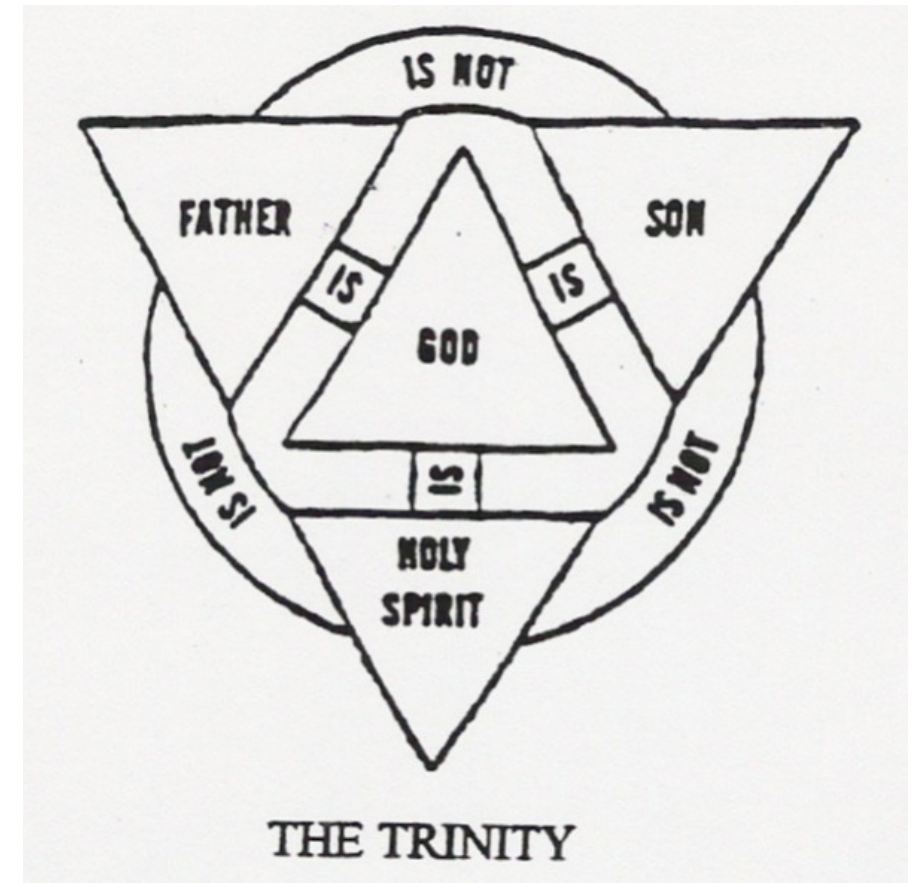


Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

- In addition to symbols from the natural order, that God has built into his creation to point to him (Romans 1:20), humans have made graphic symbols to try to visualize and understand the Biblical revelation of God as being three distinct Persons who share one substance, one essence.
- Here is one ancient symbol, referred to as the shield of the Holy Trinity, that has been found in medieval stained glass. The words, usually in Latin, read logically in any direction.

The Shield of the Holy Trinity



Original Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:4

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד׃

'eḥād
one

yehwāh
Yahweh
(LORD)

'ēlōhênû
our God

yehwāh
Yahweh
(LORD)

yiśrā'ēl
Israel

šəma'
hear

Original Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:4 (Cf. Mark 12:29)

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד׃

'eḥād

yehwāh

'ēlōhēnū

yehwāh

yisrā'ēl

šema'

one

Yahweh

our God

Yahweh

Israel

hear

(LORD)

(LORD)

יְהוָה (*yehwāh*), Yahweh, the LORD < אֶהְיֶה (*'ehyeh*), I AM < הָיָה (*hāyāh*), to be

God's name, Yahweh, the LORD, communicates that he is the ground, the fundamental logical condition and basis, for all that exists. And there's more...

Original Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:4 (Cf. Mark 12:29)

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד׃

<i>'eḥād</i>	<i>yehwāh</i>	<i>'ēlōhênû</i>	<i>yehwāh</i>	<i>yisrā'ēl</i>	<i>šəma</i> ´
one	Yahweh	our God	Yahweh	Israel	hear
	(LORD)		(LORD)		

יְהוָה (*yehwāh*), Yahweh, the LORD < אֶהְיֶה (*'ehyeh*), I AM < הָיָה (*hāyāh*), to be

- “God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” (Exodus 3:14)
- “‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was born, I am!’” (John 8:58) The Jews to whom he was speaking, clearly understood that Jesus was identifying himself with God; that is why they picked up stones to kill him. (8:59)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

- "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3)
- "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4)
- "there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." (1 Corinthians 8:6)
- "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus," (1 Timothy 2:5)
- See also Isaiah 44:6; 46:8-9; Mark 12:29.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The triune God consists of three distinct Persons who share one substance, one essence. God is One.
- He is not composed of divisible parts as humans are, e.g. with a body and a soul. The whole being of God is in each of the Persons. (E.g., John 14:9-11)
- All three Persons exist at the same time and have for eternity.
- All of his attributes, his characteristics, are one with him; thus, e.g., he is love; he is life; he is truth; he is just.
- "'The most important [commandment],' answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'" (Mark 12:29)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

- In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation (χαρακτήρ [*charaktēr*], reproduction, exact likeness) of his being (ὑποστάσεως < ὑποστασις [*hupostasis*], substance, underlying essence), sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." (Hebrews 1:1-3)
- The triune God consists of three distinct Persons who share one substance. God is One.
- "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

We'll explore more of the practical implications and applications of this doctrine when we focus on each of the three Persons who share one substance. To begin we can also say:

- Since all three Persons share one substance and are one God who is perfect, all three are in accord, and when we pray, all three know what we need and function in unity to provide what we need.
- All three Persons exist at the same time and have for eternity.
- Of all the symbols for the Trinity, the sun is maybe the best, for it shows that it is reasonable for an entity to have three distinct components that share one substance. (Romans 1:20)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

Passages where all three Persons are alluded to or mentioned specifically:

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)
- “Then God (אֱלֹהִים [’*ĕlōhîm*]) said, ‘Let us make man in our image...’” (Genesis 1:26-28)
- “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8)
- “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” (Isaiah 61:1)
- “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 28:19)
- See also Genesis 11:7; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Ephesians 2:18; 1 Peter 1:1,2

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The triune God consists of three distinct Persons who share one substance. God is One.
- All three Persons exist at the same time and have for eternity.
- The Old Testament Hebrew word translated God is אֱלֹהִים (’*ĕlōhîm*), which is a plural word translated in other Old Testament (OT) texts as gods, when referring to the idols and false gods. The context of a given passage tells us whether ’*ĕlōhîm*, is referring to the one true God or to the false gods that are part of demon worship. (1 Corinthians 10:20; Isaiah 44:6; John 8:44; 14:6) The context is clear, e.g., in Genesis 1:1, while ’*ĕlōhîm* is plural, the verb is singular, which occurs throughout the OT when ’*ĕlōhîm* refers to the one and only true, triune, God.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

Passages pertaining to the Father:

- "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name," (Matthew 6:9)
- "your Father in heaven...causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45)
- "I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father." (John 8:38)
- "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17; Malachi 3:6)
- "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation (χαρακτήρ [*character*], reproduction, exact likeness) of his being (> ὑπόστασις [*hupostasis*], substance, underlying essence), sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." (Hebrews 1:3; cf., Colossians 2:9)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The triune God consists of three distinct Persons who share one substance. God is One.
- All three Persons exist at the same time and have for eternity.
- In historic Christian theology this unity of the three Persons is called the **hypostatic** (< Greek *hypo*, under + *histēmi*, cause to stand = *hypostasis*, substance, essence, basis, subsistence, substructure) **union**, as we see in Hebrews 1:3. Notice especially the Greek words in the parentheses, including both the English transliterations and the translations. Thus the three Persons of the Trinity share an underlying substance the essence of their unity.
- The term is also applied to the union of the two natures of Christ Jesus, the divine and the human. The Lord credits righteousness to us who believe in him and do God's will. (Romans 4:1, 24-25; cf. 8:1-4; Matthew 7:21) See more below in the section on Christology.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

Passages pertaining to the Son:

- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made...." (John 1:1-3a; cf. Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2)
- "yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." (1 Corinthians 8:6)
- "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:23)
- "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son," (John 3:16 Greek, NASB)
- "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30; cf. 5:18; 10:38; 14:11, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me; ...at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.")
- "Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The triune God consists of three distinct Persons who share one substance. God is One.
- "Before Abraham was born, I am." (John 8:58) Here is another reference to Jesus' deity. See Exodus 3:14, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."'" In John 8:58, Jesus was identifying with God, which is why the Jews picked up stones and tried to kill Jesus.
- All three Persons exist at the same time and have for eternity.
- Of all the symbols for the Trinity, the sun is maybe the best, for it shows that it is reasonable for an entity to have three distinct components that share one substance. (Romans 1:20)
- God the Father has created everything through Christ Jesus.
- Jesus reconciles us with the Father.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

Passages pertaining to the Holy Spirit:

- "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." (John 14:26 NASB)
- "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me," (John 15:26 NASB)
- "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹⁰If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness." (Romans 8:9-10 NASB) Theologically, this reality is referred to as the mystical union of the believer with Christ Jesus; it is true and operative even though invisible.
- "...no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3)
- "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (Ephesians 4:30)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The triune God consists of three distinct Persons who share one substance. God is One.
- All three Persons exist at the same time and have for eternity.
- Pertaining to Romans 8:9, Biblical literature scholar, R.C.H. Lenski, explains "No one is to think that 'God's Spirit' is the divine Spirit in general, as so many who deny the deity of Christ and the Trinity conceive him. This Spirit is equally God's and Christ's; and by naming him thus, all his saving power is indicated. These two designations also serve as the basis for the *Filioque* of the Nicene Creed. Making the Spirit equally God's and Christ's constitutes a *testimonium illustre de S. Trinitate*, Bengel." (*Lenski New Testament Commentary – The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 511)
- In Ephesians 4:30, the verb, grieve, shows that the Holy Spirit is a person and not just an impersonal influence. Only a person can be grieved. (See Walter L. Liefeld commentary on Ephesians 4:30 in *The NIV Study Bible*.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Triune

- Father: He is the Creator (Deuteronomy 32:6; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2; James 1:17) and Giver of “Every good and perfect gift” of all we value and enjoy. (James 1:17)
- Only begotten Son Jesus Christ: He reconciles us with the Father. All things were created through him, by him, and for him, and in him they hold together. As Lord over all we need not fear the world going out of control. (Psalm 8:6; John 1:3; Hebrews 2:6-8; 5:5 (Greek, NASB); Ephesians 1:18-23; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2; Romans 3:21-26; 1 Corinthians 8:6)
- Holy Spirit: He applies Christ’s redemption to us, gives us saving faith, guides us into all truth, and helps us. (1 Corinthians 12:3; John 16:13) He also regenerates us, i.e., gives us new birth (e.g., John 3:1-8), sanctification (e.g., Galatians 6:7-8), and gifts to serve (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:4ff.)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- For more of the practical implications and applications of the doctrine of the Trinity, see the sections on Theology, Christology, and Pneumatology/Soteriology.
- For more on the Trinity specifically, see my essay, “Who is God, and what is he like? Part 1: What is the Trinity?” <https://fromacorntoak12.com/who-is-God/>.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Here in these previous slides we have one of the many reasons why the early church began to formulate a system of Christian theology. The Bible from the first chapter of Genesis through the last chapter of the Book of Revelation reveals God as being triune, but the words triune or Trinity do not appear anywhere in the Bible. The doctrine is there, but it is not developed all in one place.

This is why we need theology: to help us bring together all the passages in the Bible that teach each of the six main themes of God's Word. Doing so enables us to understand these vital doctrines for ourselves and to be able to explain them to others in fulfillment of our Lord's Great Commission to us in e.g., Matthew 28:18-20.

Theology: The Doctrine of God

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)

Who is God; what is he like; what
has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Incommunicable Characteristics

Theology: What Are God's Incommunicable Characteristics?

God's incommunicable characteristics are those aspects of his being that he has in macrocosm that are unique to him. He does not share them with any other being, human or otherwise.

God is unlike any of the false gods that have been made in the image of sinful human beings. The false gods (actually the demons behind them, since the false gods don't even exist) do evil as do those who make them.

God's incommunicable characteristics, or attributes, are typically identified as follows. A brief explanation and indication of their practical blessings will be presented in this section. His incommunicable characteristics include his being infinite, transcendent and immanent, perfect in every way including totally good, eternal, everywhere present, independent, immutable, unchangeable.

A Very Important Aspect of Learning

In all of life, and especially in the most important matters of life and eternity, look for relationships, implications and applications. For example, when considering the Bible's teaching about God being holy, indeed that he is most holy, in Hebrew terminology, holy, holy, holy, look for what that means in many related aspects of life. Ask, "What does God's being most holy mean for how I treat other people whom he also loves and who bear his image?"

To help us make those connections, most of the PowerPoint slides in this course will have two columns:

Doctrinal Subject

Biblical basis, texts

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Implications and applications

As you read and study, think about connections and inferences. This course is designed to help us do so.

A Very Important Aspect of Learning and Wisdom

As we look for these relationships, implications and applications, we seek to understand—and be able to help others understand—the connections with God’s Word, the Bible. We learn to “connect the dots” between the Word and the other aspects of life.

In doing so, we mature in Christ. The learning we seek—cognition (knowledge, facts), affect (feelings, emotion), and behavior (acting in accord with, obeying, God’s Word)—with the help of the Holy Spirit produces wisdom that enables us to mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:13) and become oaks of righteousness (Isaiah 61:3) in order to serve God most effectively.

As we prayerfully read and study, thinking about the Bible and historic Christian doctrines, and the additional subjects within the Bible and outside the Bible, such as research from sound science, seeking to “connect the dots” in order to make sense of what we are reading, *it is essential to incorporate the latter within the former*. God’s Word and its theological framework is the criterion and light we need in order to have wisdom (Proverbs 9:10) as well as knowledge and to please God. We thereby learn to relate God’s Word to daily life and to eternity.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Infinite, Transcendent

“The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.

⁵Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,
⁶who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?” (Psalm 113:4-6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Because God is transcendent, over all, and infinite, he has no limitations and thus no needs.
 1. Regarding his being: he is perfect and unlimited in every way, e.g., all-knowing (or omniscient); all-powerful (or omnipotent); all-wise; totally good; all-loving; completely righteous; and as will also be explained below, holy, holy, holy.
(Deuteronomy 8:17-18; 32:4; Job 38-39; Psalm 18:30; 139; Isaiah 6:3; 10:13; 25:1; 40:26; 50:2; Jeremiah 51:15; Revelation 4:8)
 - + Nothing can control or interfere with him; he sees what is going on all over the world; he sees our needs and he is able to help us; he accomplishes all his purposes. (Isaiah 55:11)
 - + He is in full control of everything; we need have no anxiety. (Philippians 4:6)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Infinite, Transcendent

“The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.

⁵Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,

⁶who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?”

(Psalm 113:4-6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

2. Regarding time: he is eternal; he is above time and not subject to its limitations. (Psalm 90:2; 102:12; 25-28)
 - + God will never grow old, become feeble, and die. He will always “be here for us.”
 - + No one can ever “get rid of God.”
 - + He will never be succeeded by a malevolent being.
 - + We will never be alone, no matter where we are on earth or in space. (Joshua 1:5; Hebrews 13:5)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Infinite, Transcendent

- “The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.
⁵Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,
⁶who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?” (Psalm 113:4-6)
- “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

3. Regarding space: he is everywhere present, or omnipresent, and even beyond the universe. (Psalm 113:4-6; 139:7-12; 2 Chronicles 2:6)
 - a. There is nowhere in the cosmos we can go that God is not already there (and been there from everlasting) to help us. Neither does he just “show up.” He’s already here!
 - b. Nothing can contain, confine, or be confused with God. He is not one with his creation. He, not his creation, is to be worshiped.
 - c. When problems arise and people ask, “Where is God in all this?” ask them, “What is one thing that occurred today that you value, that you see as good?” Then ask them, “What else do you see that is good?” If a person has difficulty seeing anything good, help him or her by making suggestions of the many, even countless, ones surrounding him or her, e.g., “Are you breathing pain free? Do you have a loved one? How about the sun?” Then remind him or her of James 1:17, saying, “In all these ways, there you see the hand of God.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Immanent

As we have just seen in the preceding slides, God is transcendent. Nevertheless, he reveals in his Word that he is also always immanent. This reality about God is unique to the Biblical faith.

- “He raises the poor from the dust And lifts the needy from the ash heap, ⁸To make *them* sit with princes, With the princes of His people. ⁹He makes the barren woman abide in the house As a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord!” (Psalm 113:7-9 NASB)
- “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,” (Psalm 46:1-2)
- “and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20; cf. Deuteronomy 31:8; Joshua 1:5; Hebrews 13:5)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- All other religions view their god or whatever is divine as either transcendent or immanent but not both. For example, Deism and Islam see God as transcendent even to the extent of being aloof and uninvolved with humans or our condition. The religions whose gods are in the world, e.g., Hinduism, are part of the world and act like humans but are not transcendent. The Bible reveals that God is both transcendent and immanent.
- Because God is immanent, he is with us; he is involved in our lives; he knows what we need; and he is ready and able to help us. (Psalm 46:1) Because of his transcendence, which we studied earlier (e.g., Psalm 113:4-6), he is fully capable of supplying all we need.
- In his immanence, we see him in a loving, caring relationship with his people. He is with us in all the difficult times we experience and helps us cope with, manage well, and overcome those difficulties, and even emerge from them stronger.
- You never have to wonder where God is when challenging times occur. He is right there with you. Ask him to help you, and then be confident that he will, and even already is!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Immanent

“your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God.” (1 Corinthians 6:19)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Carefully observe the difference between what Jesus said and what the monist philosophy and theology maintains. That God dwells in us does not mean we are one in essence with God, which is what New Agers believe and why they say everyone (and everything) is God.
- The Greek and the context in 1 Corinthians 6:19 clearly refers to believers individually. (Previously in the third chapter he used a similar expression except with the plural referring to the whole church.) Though God dwells in us he is still different from us and far transcends us, as we've seen. We must recognize both his transcendence and his immanence.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Immanent

- “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16 [context is plural, referring to the church])
- “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God.” (1 Corinthians 6:19 [context is singular, referring to individual believers in Christ])

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Notice a striking blessing in these passages. When Paul says your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, he uses the special Greek word, ναός (*naos*), the sanctuary where God dwelt. Paul did not use the word, ἱερόν (*hieron*), which referred to the whole temple complex with its buildings and courts.
- “...*naos*...denotes the shrine proper, the sanctuary. The word points us to the very presence of God. This is brought out explicitly with the assertion that the Spirit dwells in the Corinthian believers. *The Spirit of God* is not a common expression. It emphasizes the connection of the Spirit with the Father, and underlines the deity of the Spirit. The Spirit is God as He dwells in the Church. The words of [1 Corinthians 3:16] are sometimes applied to the individual believer, but it is vi. 19 which speaks of the individual believer as God's temple. [In 3:16] the thought is that of the whole community of believers as God's shrine. *Temple* is singular, but *ye* is plural. The reference is to the Church.” (New Testament scholar, author, Leon Morris)
- Great holiness is thereby attributed to your body!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Immanent

- “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.” (Deuteronomy 4:39)
- “The Lord is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. ⁵Who is like the Lord our God, Who is enthroned on high, ⁶Who humbles Himself to behold *The things that are* in heaven and in the earth? ⁷He raises the poor from the dust And lifts the needy from the ash heap, ⁸To make *them* sit with princes, With the princes of His people. ⁹He makes the barren woman abide in the house As a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord! (Psalm 113:4-6 and 7-9 NASB)
- “For this is what the high and lofty One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’” (Isaiah 57:15)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Contrary to false religions that portray the divine as either all transcendent (e.g., Deism) or only immanent (e.g., the New Age religion and other forms of pantheism), the Bible always portrays a balance between God’s transcendence and his immanence.
- These two complementary aspects of his being, transcendence and immanence, occur together in many Bible texts, e.g., Deuteronomy 4:39, Psalm 113:4-9, and Isaiah 57:14-15.
- Consider another implication especially applicable in some Western countries: The attributes of God being both transcendent and immanent free us from any concern when some try to “get God out of the schools” or “remove God from the public square.” Since God is transcendent and omnipotent, no little human being, or any number of humans, will ever remove God from anyplace. Since he is also immanent, omnipresent, and loves us, he will always be with us, as he has promised. (Joshua 1:5; Hebrews 13:5, Matthew 28:20) We never have to worry.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Independent

- “...the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.” (Psalm 33:11)
- “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.” (Psalm 115:3)
- “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.” (John 5:26)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- This attribute is called in theology, God’s aseity (< L. *a* [from] + *se* [oneself]); i.e., his self-origination, self-existence, self-derivation, self-sufficiency, autonomy, independence.
- Because God is independent, he is in full control of everything; nothing in the universe can control, prohibit, or interfere with him and the accomplishment of his purposes. (Isaiah 55:11; Job 42:2) He has no needs; he is all-capable. (Acts 17:25)
 - + He is totally able to help us with all we need, and nothing can interfere with his doing so for us.
 - + He is able to keep all his promises.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Immutable, Unchangeable

- “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numbers 23:19)
- “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)
- “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)
- “...you remain the same, and your years will never end.” (Psalm 102:27)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We never have to wake up in the morning and wonder if God “had a bad night” and now “has it in for us.”
- We never have to be concerned about God getting in a bad mood and “taking it out on us.”
- We can always depend on God. He is trustworthy. He keeps his promises. He is consistent.
- God does not contradict himself; he will never say one thing in his Word and something contrary to a human being. This is one reason why the Bible must be held as our standard, our criterion, for discerning his will and determining what is right and what is wrong.
- We can always come to God in prayer and know that he listens in love and acts with power as he always has and as he always will.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Immutable, Unchangeable

- “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)
- “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)
- “...you remain the same, and your years will never end.” (Psalm 102:27)

Practical Benefits

A Question for Reflection and Discussion:

What other practical benefits of God’s attribute of being unchangeable can we list? (See also Malachi 3:6.)

Practical Benefits of God's Incommunicable Characteristic of Being Immutable

- God remains faithful to his covenant with his people; he is dependable.
- His love is unchangeable, and therefore we don't need to fear.
- Once you follow him, he will not change.
- No matter what happens or circumstances we can trust God.
- God is our helper and satisfaction.
- His love is unchangeable so we can trust him.
- God will never let us down; we can count on him. He will not say one thing now and the opposite another time.
- God loves those who love him; that is unchangeable.
- That could be the foundation for the whole church.
- We can have security.

Original Hebrew of Genesis 1:1

1.1. בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

hā'āreṣ wě'ēt haššāmayim ēt 'ēlōhîm bārā' bĕrē'sît

the earth and the heavens * God created In the beginning

* A primary particle indicating the accusative case (grammatical case that marks the direct objective of the verb) in Hebrew and is not translated.

The Hebrew text, not the transliteration or the translation, is from [The Lexham Hebrew Bible](#) (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

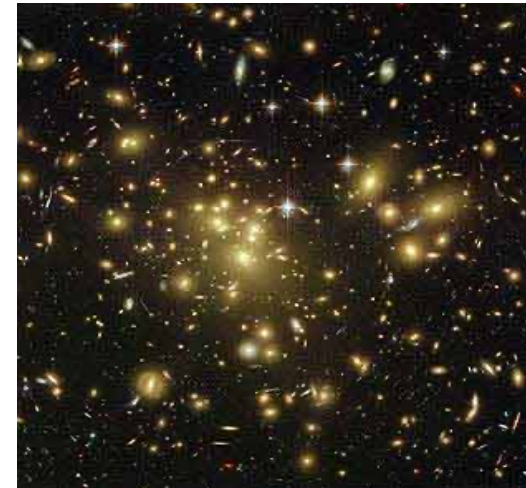
God Is Creator

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)

- Only God creates. In the Bible God is the sole subject of the verb to create, בָּרָא (*bārā*), i.e., to make something without using a preexistent substance (ex nihilo, out of nothing).
- God has always existed. There has never been a time when God did not exist.
- No other being is ever the subject of *bārā*, which is why in the light of his revelation of who he is, what he is like, and what he does, I maintain it is important to classify this characteristic of God as one of his incommunicable attributes.
- “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.” (Psalm 147:4) God knows each of the one trillion stars in the Abell 1689 galaxy (hubblesite photo at the right); we have all we can do to name whole galaxies usually just with numbers and letters.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- That God is so great and the only one in the whole cosmos who can create something out of nothing, we are assured that he can always supply anything we now, or ever will, need.
- We are comforted by knowing that no malevolent being can make something out of nothing that would harm us.



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

God has accomplished his creating in and through his Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. All things originate in the Father but come through the Son. (Colossians 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2)



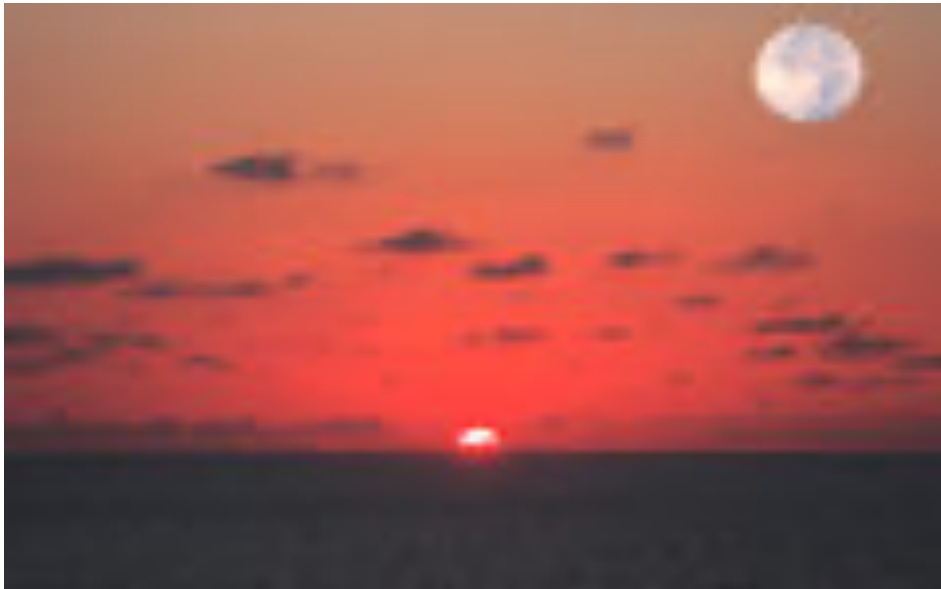
Meaning and Practical Benefits

Four of the great overarching themes that run throughout the Bible are creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Due to the fall, without redemption, the creation would be destroyed. As we will consider further and more closely, God is most holy, and he will not compromise his integrity by associating with that which is sinful and evil. Yet because his being is essentially love, which includes justice, he is not willing to destroy his creation but chose from the beginning to redeem and renew it, and at great cost to himself. (Romans 8; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 21:1)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)



Meaning and Practical Benefits

- While God formed the universe by creating many things out of nothing, he also used some of those things to make others. For example, in Genesis 1:16 we read that God had made (translating the verb, אָסָאָה [‘*āsāh*] to make, as being in the pluperfect tense) the sun and the moon (implied in 1:3-5, “Let there be light....”).
- And God has given much of it to us to enjoy yet as caretakers. (Genesis 1:26-29)
- True scientific research helps us discover countless aspects of God’s general revelation, that which he has built into his creation for all to see (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:20).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)
- When, in Genesis 1 the Hebrew word, יום (*yôm*, day), is interpreted as an indefinite period of time, as it is sometimes used elsewhere in the Bible, rather than a twenty-four-hour period, as it is also used elsewhere in holy Scripture, we typically see the Bible’s account of God’s creative acts occurring as scientists have discovered in their careful research.

Meaning and Practical Benefits



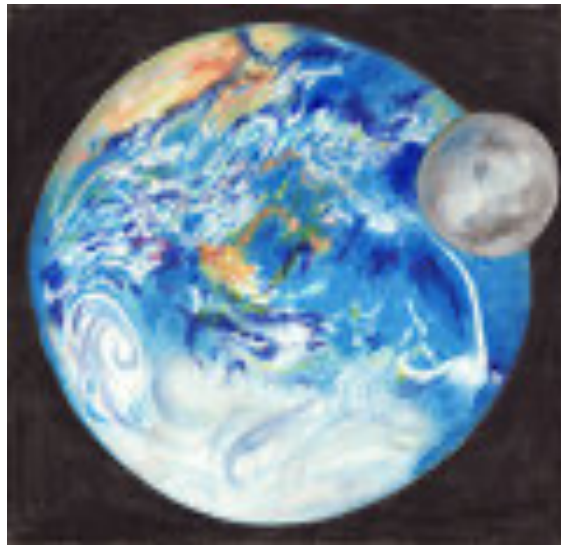
Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

According to analysis of lunar rock samples brought back from the Apollo moon mission, the earth existed for some 340,000,000 years without the moon but with conditions too inhospitable to permit life, such as too heavy and thick an atmosphere. From evidence discovered, astronomers believe that about 4.25 billion years ago a body at least the size of Mars and one-ninth the mass of Earth struck our planet almost head-on, becoming absorbed for the most part into Earth. That blast propelled the thick atmosphere into outer space, and replaced it with an atmosphere and other elements that would permit life as we know it; made a cloud of material that would coalesce to form the moon; slowed Earth's rotation to a rate that would permit life; and stabilized the tilt of Earth's rotation axis to protect the planet from climatic extremes that would extinguish life.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

- “God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.” (Genesis 1:16)



Meaning and Practical Benefits

Astrophysicist Hugh Ross, a Christian, observes that “this amazing collision, for which we have an abundance of circumstantial evidence, appears to have been perfectly timed and designed to transform Earth from a ‘formless and empty’ place into a site where life could survive and thrive...the number of conditions that must be fine-tuned—and the degree of fine-tuning needed for each of these conditions—for life to possibly survive that is manifested in this single event argues powerfully on its own for a divine Creator. Even if the universe contains as many as 10 billion trillion (10^{22}) planets, we would not expect even one, by natural processes alone, to end up with the surface gravity, surface temperature, atmospheric composition, atmospheric pressure, crustal iron abundance, tectonics, vulcanism, rotation rate, rate of decline in rotation rate, and stable rotation axis tilt necessary for the support of life. To those who express the desire to see a miracle, we can assure them they are looking at one whenever they gaze up at the moon.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

- “For the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead [Greek: θεϊότης (*theiotēs*), Divinity];...” (Romans 1:20 KJV)
- “Then God said, ‘Let the waters teem with swarms [שָׂרָצִים (*shārats*), teem, swarm] of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.’ God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good....Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind;’ and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind...; and God saw that it was good.” (Genesis 1:20-25 NASB)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- From this understanding emerges a well-spring of aesthetic appreciation of the natural phenomena all about us.
- How many species of animals and plants did God create? *Science Daily* estimates there are now:
 - Animals: 7.77 million
 - Plants: 298,000
 - Fungi (molds, mushrooms): 611,000
 - Protozoa (single-cell organisms with animal-like behavior): 36,400
 - Chromista (e.g., brown algae, diatoms, water molds): 27,500
- Clearly God is creative and values variety.
- For us to appreciate the beauty of God’s creation, use all five senses when observing all these many different aspects of God’s creation.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

“For the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead [Greek: θεϊότης (*theiotēs*), Divinity];...” (Romans 1:20 KJV)



Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Since the world in which we live and all within it have been created, and since the Creator, as we'll see further, is essentially loving, good, and sovereign, we observe countless evidences everyday that we are not accidents in a chaos that is out of control.
- Having been planned, we have a profound sense of value and purpose. Recognizing the mathematical precision in which the elements of the universe have been formed and function, we sense meaning in the cosmos and its components. Our being here is significant; our lives matter.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Creator

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)
- “For the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead [Greek: θεϊότης (*theiotēs*), Divinity];...” (Romans 1:20 KJV)



Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Nonbiblical views that try to explain what is, such as the theory of macroevolution, offer no meaning, purpose, or hope. With tragic consequences, they offer no explanation for or need of a relationship with the triune God who has revealed himself in the Bible and in his creation. (Cf., e.g., Romans 1:20)
- Recognizing that we are part of God’s creation, and in humility accepting our place in that creation, gives us a strong sense of security. Our sovereign and loving Creator is able to protect what he has created and what belongs to him.
- Together with what follows, that he has also revealed, his reality is exceedingly comforting! Sleep well tonight, and live in the peace and joy which transcends understanding tomorrow and in the days ahead.

Theology: The Doctrine of God

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)

Who is God; what is he like; what
has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Communicable Characteristics

Theology: What Are God's Communicable Characteristics?

The outstanding Dutch minister and theologian, Wilhelmus à Brakel, has well-written that all God's attributes "are equally incommunicable as far as their [essence] is concerned. This distinction [between incommunicable and communicable characteristics] is merely made for the purpose of comparison. God has created man in His image and likeness....This does not imply that...a sinner becomes divine and is a partaker of the very being and attributes of God." (89-90) What the Scripture means by man being created in the image of God, is that some attributes of God's being, which he has in macrocosm, he has built into us in microcosm; these attributes are called God's communicable characteristics. They are attributes of God in which we see a small resemblance in human beings. God's communicable characteristics, or attributes, include his being a living being; his holiness; knowledge; wisdom; love, grace, mercy, forbearance; righteousness; truth; sovereignty; power.

A brief explanation and an indication of the practical blessings of these attributes will be presented in this section. We will return to his communicable characteristics when we study the image of God in the doctrine of anthropology.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God and His Spirit

As we saw in the section on God's triune being, he is a spiritual being and personal, living in relationships, within himself and, we see here, with people whom he has created.

- "This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God." (Isaiah 44:6)
- "Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing?...Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal...From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.' They know nothing, they understand nothing;...No one stops to think...Half of it I used for fuel...Shall I bow down to a block of wood?...a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?' Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you,..." (Isaiah 44:10, 16-21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- On every page of the Bible, we see that God lives and acts. His very name in Hebrew, יהוה (Yahweh) comes from the root word יהי (hāyāh), meaning "to be." Thus, the only true God lives, is the ground of all being, and is able to help his people. The true God has made mankind in his image; false gods are made by fallen men in their image. Any false god made by humans is unable to help anyone; it cannot even stand up by itself. "...it cannot move. Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his trouble." (Isaiah 46:7)
- "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me." (Isaiah 46:8-9)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God and His Spirit

As we saw in the section on God's triune being, he is a spiritual being and personal, living in relationships, within himself and, we see here, with people whom he has created.

- “And God spoke all these words: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.’” (Exodus 20:1-3)
- “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God’? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.” (Isaiah 40: 25-28)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- “[God] gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:29-31)
- No idol or any false god can do this. In his love for people, the one true God desires people to turn to him, the only one who can help them.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God and His Spirit

The one true, triune, living God is a spirit, and thus he does not have a shape. He is invisible. (1 Timothy 6:16) All idols are false gods and cannot help themselves; they cannot even stand up by themselves. They cannot help anyone.

“A man...looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.” (Isaiah 40:20)

“The craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer spurs on him who strikes the anvil. He says of the welding, ‘It is good.’ He nails down the idol so it will not topple.” (Isaiah 41:7)

“The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not...take up their names on my lips.” (Psalm 16:4)

“the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God...” (1 Corinthians 10:20; cf. Isaiah 44:6; John 8:44; 14:6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits: An Idol Does Not Live, Hear, or See, and Cannot Help

(The apples are offerings from a worshiper of this Buddhist idol.)



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God and Is Spirit

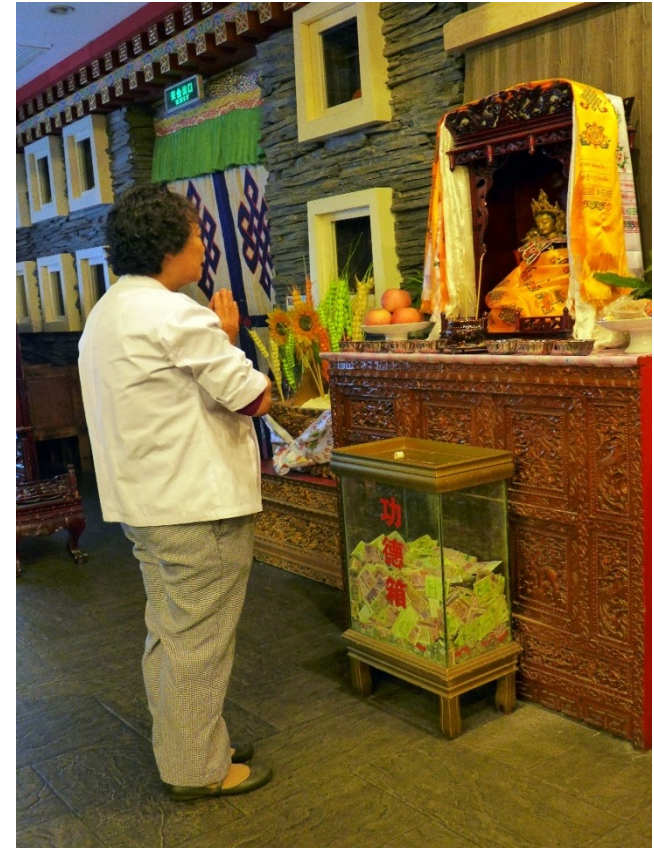
God's command that we never make or worship an idol is not only because it is a dishonoring and rejection of him. It is also because he loves us and always desires what is best for us. Worshiping an idol, something far beneath human beings, dehumanizes and destroys the one who turns to it for help. The idol can do nothing for anyone.

“...it cannot move. Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his trouble.” (Isaiah 46:7)

“The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not...take up their names on my lips.” (Psalm 16:4)

“Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:19-21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits: An Idol Does Not Live, Does Not Hear or See, and It Cannot Help



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God Is Spirit and Personal, Engages in Relationships

- Jesus plainly pointed out to the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar, Samaria, that “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24)
- “...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.” (1 Timothy 6:15b-16)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The believer in the one true triune God who is spirit, worships him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24),
 - + with no physical representation of him,
 - + in faith, not by sight,
 - + believing in and following the only Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
 - + experiencing the love and succor of the only living, powerful, personal, and true God.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God Is Spirit and Personal, Engages in Relationships

“O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD...For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:1-4; 13-18)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

God is a personal being. We read in Psalm 139:1, “...you know me.” The Hebrew word is יָדָה (yādha’); it is a covenant word meaning to know intimately, personally, relationally. God knows us intimately; he doesn’t just know about us. Even before our birth, he knew us, and he interacts with individuals. (Psalm 139:1-18; Jeremiah 1:4-10) He communicates with his people, listening to what they say and genuinely changes circumstances according to their requests which accord with his perfect will. (Exodus 3; 1 John 3:21-22; 5:13-15)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God Is Spirit and Personal, Engages in Relationships

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Understanding that God is spirit and personal means he is a living being. As such he cares about you and me, and he provides all-sufficient help wherever we are and in whatever circumstances we exist.
- As spirit he is not limited by time and space. Neither do other obstacles and constraints that hinder the rest of his creation encumber him.
- Since he is personal we can engage in a relationship with him, unlike we would be able to do if he were only an impersonal “force.” Therefore, you need never be lonely wherever you are in the world.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The Triune God: The Only Living God Is Spirit and Personal, Engages in Relationships

- “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.” (Psalm 116:15)
- “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)
- “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” (Ephesians 4:30)
- “[Grace in Christ Jesus]...has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Timothy 1:9-10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God has feelings. He grieves when his holy children die. (Psalm 116:15; John 11:35) He also grieves when we sin. (Ephesians 4:30) He loves us, having done so even before we loved him (Romans 5:6-11; John 15:13).
- The one true God has destroyed death. (2 Timothy 1:9-10)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Holy, Holy, Holy

- “In the year [740 B.C.] that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’” (Isaiah 6:1-3)
- “Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’” (Revelation 4:8)
- "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'" (Leviticus 19:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Holy means separated from, uncommon, pure, upright. Essentially, it means separate from the sin and evil of the world.
- The Hebrew grammar, lacking the superlative, expresses the concept of “most” or “greatest” by repeating the word three times.
- His holiness is the only one of God’s attributes that is repeated three times.
- Even though our language can express the superlative, repeating holy, holy, holy when addressing God in prayer helps us sense this aspect of God’s character in a very special way. Try it!
- Since God is love to the core of his being, it is encouraging to include God’s being most holy in the context of his love. (1 John 4:8 “...God is love.”) For example, in the praise part of our prayers we can say, “Dear triune God, holy, holy, holy and all love, including most gracious, most merciful, and most patient are you alone!”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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- "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'" (Leviticus 19:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Understanding God’s holiness and the holiness he requires of his people is a key to understanding many of his laws, teachings, and actions in the Bible, e.g., why he will not allow that which is sinful or evil in his presence. We must remember, and help others know, that we come into God’s presence on his terms, not on our terms.
- Corporate implications: Many people saunter lackadaisically into God’s sanctuary for worship without sensing God’s being holy, holy, holy; they view God as a pal, almost as a peer, their great friend in the sky (“the man upstairs”), and they act disrespectfully toward God. Consider, e.g., how they dress (immodestly), laughing with each other during worship, using electronic devices for other than worship, drinking coffee and eating.
- **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:** What other examples can you cite? How can we help people to keep in mind that God is holy, holy, holy and act accordingly in his worship in his sanctuary?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Holy, Holy, Holy

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Understanding God’s holiness and the holiness he requires of his people is a key to understanding many of his laws, teachings, and actions in the Bible, e.g., why he will not allow that which is sinful or evil in his presence.
- Individual implications: Almost all of the problems people have could have been avoided if they kept God’s being most holy in their consciousness and obeyed his law. They would not have done what they did that resulted in such a painful situation, e.g., the couple who have been committing adultery. The woman is despondent that her paramour will not divorce his wife and marry her, and she has low sense of self-worth.
- **A Question for Reflection and Discussion:** How can we help people to keep in mind that God is holy, holy, holy and act accordingly in their lives?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Holy, Holy, Holy

[Put yourself in the context of this passage and read it with the tone of voice of the apostle John and the four living creatures.]

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’” (Revelation 4:8-11)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Notice the additional meaning of the three-fold praise, “glory and honor and power.” The numbers in Revelation are also symbolic; three is a spiritual number.
- Since our triune God is holy, holy, holy, and he does not permit that which is sinful and evil to come into his presence, he makes it possible for us who are sinners (Romans 3:23) to enter his presence and have communion and communicate with him by being credited with Christ’s righteousness through faith. (Romans 4)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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- "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'" (Leviticus 19:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

A Question for Reflection and Discussion: What should we do, and avoid doing, when we enter God’s sanctuary, in order to glorify and honor him, to connect with him most meaningfully, and help ourselves and others benefit most from the worship service?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Perfect

- Moses sang, “I will proclaim the name of the LORD. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:3-4)
- “The LORD...is righteous; he does no wrong....and every new day he does not fail....” Zephaniah 3:5
- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Since God is perfect, you and I can have no small comfort in always being certain that no matter what God causes or allows to occur in our lives, he doesn't make mistakes. That awareness should be one of the bases, or basic assumptions, the starting point, for our perception of and trying to understand the circumstances we engage. For believers in Christ, “who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,” God works in all things for our good, even though that good may be perceived only in retrospect after time, sometimes substantial time, has elapsed. (Romans 8:28)
- Whatever we experience that is unpleasant he will help us overcome. (2 Corinthians 12:10; Philippians 4:11-13)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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- Jesus said that God is perfect, and he calls us to be perfect. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Since God is perfect, he has no needs. He is not inadequate in any way; therefore, he can always help us.
- God defines perfection. His perfection is the standard by which he and we determine what is perfect. The converse is not also true.
- We call something perfect if it conforms to God’s standard. God is not to be judged, and neither are others, by our standard of what we think is perfect. Our perception is finite and flawed by sin. (Romans 3:23)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Perfect

- Jesus said that God is perfect, and he calls us to be perfect. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Since God is perfect, this means he never makes a mistake.
- It means if ever I wonder why God didn't do something, I need to begin my reasoning with the basic premise of his perfection, which means that I need to conform my understanding to him and his ways; he, being perfect, never has to conform to my limited, flawed, and sinful, ways.
- This understanding helps us make sense out of our circumstances. That sense often occurs in retrospect but especially within the perspective of God's perfection. For example, today I was disappointed when a friend said he couldn't visit as we had planned. But during his absence, I received a call from a beloved member of our family who needed to talk with me then about a challenge he was having. I was able to help and was delighted to have the conversation with him that we had, which could only have occurred because of God's perfect changing of my schedule! He also made possible my friend to come for that visit only 48 hours later!
- It also helps us to learn from our circumstances.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Perfect

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- Moses sang, “I will proclaim the name of the LORD. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:3-4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Since God is perfect, he does not make mistakes. Furthermore, it is not that he doesn't make mistakes because he's had so much practice: he has never erred and he never will.
- Therefore, when something painful occurs in my life, (not if, since we live in a fallen world where everyone sins) I can rule out any thought that God is at fault; he is not; he never was; and he never will be culpable.
- In order to make sense out of, and manage, what has occurred and what I should do now, I turn to him and ask him to help me, directly and indirectly through the church, the body of Christ, where I can find more true wisdom that is helpful.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

- God's goodness is proclaimed throughout the Bible.
- David, whom God disciplined due to his heinous deeds, praised God saying, "You are forgiving and good, O LORD, abounding in love to all who call to you." (Psalm 86:5; cf. 25:7-10)
- In two other psalms we read, "...the LORD is good and his love endures forever." (Psalm 100:5a)
- "You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees." (Psalm 119:68)
- Jesus said, "No one is good—except God alone." (Mark 10:18)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- When people say that God "has a dark side," they are disclosing a human tendency to make God in their own fallen image, which has been done in all other religions apart from the Bible.
- To cite only a few examples, in Greek mythology we see gods portrayed as greedy, lying, and sexually promiscuous, among many other negative characteristics, typical of corrupt human nature rather than of divine perfection.
- How wonderful to contemplate, always know, and be assured that God is totally good and that he will always treat us well!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

- God's goodness is proclaimed throughout the Bible.
- "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5)
- "'...I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.'" (Matthew 5:44–45)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The goodness of the one true God revealed in the Bible is seen in the kind and bountiful blessings he continually bestows upon all people, the absence of any flaw, or "dark side," in him.
- People who claim to see a "dark side" in God do not understand or know the God who has revealed himself in his Word. Instead, they have made a god in their own fallen image.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

“And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”
(Hebrews 12:5-11)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The goodness of God is also seen in the reality that everything he does or allows is for the ultimate good of others, *even when that ultimate good is unapparent to our limited perspective.*
- To illustrate, sometimes for our own good we need correctives, which are not always pleasant, in order to refocus our attention on what is right, just as our earthly parents had to do at times. The Israelites, whom God disciplined for their disobedience, recognized that reality and responded accordingly: they “worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, ‘He is good; his love endures forever.’” (2 Chronicles 7:3)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

- “[Jesus said] I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:44-45)
- “[Jesus said] So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” (Matthew 6:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God is good not only to those who trust and obey him, but even to those who disregard and disobey him. (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17) We should not fail to note that the Lord made this statement as a basis for his teaching that he commands us to do what is good to all people, specifically showing love (defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 as being patient, kind, etc.) to all, not just to those who love us. “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:46-48)
- He requires us, who have been called to be his witnesses, to live differently. We’ll only be effective on this mission if we act Godly and not as the world does.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

- “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. LORD Almighty, blessed are those who trust in you.” (Psalm 84:11-12 TNIV)
- “Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart!” (Psalm 73:1 NASB)
- “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. ⁹The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.” (Psalm 145:8-9)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God’s goodness is a blessing to us in itself. We have no fear of him doing any wrong to us. On the contrary, he is compassionate on us.
- Further, he blesses obedience. He gives what is good to those who obey him. (Psalm 84:11) “Blameless?” Have we not all sinned?
 - Of course, but God credits Christ’s righteousness to those who believe, who follow him, and who ask his forgiveness when they fail in obeying. (John 15:9-12, Romans 4, James 2:14-23) Talk about good news!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

“Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:16-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Indeed, all that is good has come from God. What immediately comes to your mind that you consider good?
 - Let us thank God for these gifts from his wonderful hand!
2. We can say, “If it's truly good it's from God.” However, the next question is: How do we know what we think is good is good in God's sight and, therefore, that it's from Him?” (Cf. Isaiah 5:20) The first answer: what makes something good is it's conformity and consistency with what God says in his Word (the Bible). See the discussion on God's will.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Good

“Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:16-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Let us always express our gratitude to God for himself, including for the many blessings we receive from the attributes of his character, in particular his perfection and goodness.
- Those two characteristics will be abundantly perceived on Thanksgiving Day, but we will not have to look hard to see them on every other day of the year.
- As we become ever more aware of these blessings, let us look for ways to help others perceive them as well.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.” (Psalm 86:5)
- “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The word used in Psalm 86:5, translated love is חֶסֶד (*chesedh*), a major Hebrew term in the Old Testament that denotes God’s love as an enduring commitment of his love, often translated as steadfast love.
- The word love in the Greek of 1 John 4:8 is $\alpha\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\eta$ (*agapē*), which Paul defines as being patient; kind; not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or delighting in evil; but instead rejoicing with the truth and always protecting, trusting, and persevering. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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- “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The word used in Psalm 86:5, translated love is חֶסֶד (*chesedh*), a major Hebrew term in the Old Testament that denotes God’s love as an enduring commitment of his love, often translated as steadfast love; God’s love is a loyal love especially to and for his covenant people.
- The word love in the Greek of 1 John 4:8 is ἀγάπη (*agapē*), which Paul defines as being patient; kind; not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or delighting in evil; but instead rejoicing with the truth and always protecting, trusting, and persevering. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God is love, but of course the converse is not true. We cannot say that love is God, which would be to improperly interpret the statement as a chiasmus, a popular grammatical and rhetorical verbal pattern, where the second half of an expression, when reversed, is also usually true or makes a point. An old example is the statement that in the prophetic part of ministry, “we need to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”
- Nowhere does the Bible teach, in this passage or anywhere else, that love is God; that would be to make a false god out of love.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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- “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- “God is love.” This verse means that the essence of God’s being is love; i.e., love characterizes who he is. Nevertheless, his love issues forth in other attributes as well.
- What God has revealed through John’s statement is that love describes the core of God’s character. God’s love is not just a part of him or something he does at certain times. Love depicts himself, his essential being. All else about him, including his acts, comes from his love, what the outstanding German theologian, Karl Barth, described as “an overflow of His essence.” We don’t agree with all that Barth taught, but he said this well!
- Everything God does, or allows, is for the good of all involved—even though we may not understand at the time. Which also makes sense, since we are limited; we are incapable of comprehending all of reality. So we trust in God’s goodness and love for all.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

“You are forgiving and good, O Lord,
abounding in love to all who call to you.”
(Psalm 86:5)

“Whoever does not love does not know
God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Biblical Christianity is unique among all other religions in referring to God as love. Throughout history other faiths around the world describe their gods as beings requiring specific human actions in order to be appeased and to grant salvation, but they are not characterized as love and most all are not viewed as loving.
- Arabic-speaking scholars say that the word love doesn't even occur in the Arabic version of Qur'an, which Muslims maintain is the only accurate version.
- And, while some Hindus see Brahman as a personal and loving god, usually he is described as an impersonal being above all creation and completely uninvolved with human life on earth. That concept is an oxymoron, for love denotes involvement with the one loved, expressed in feelings and actions, including help.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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“Whoever does not love does not know
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We see God’s love on every page of the Bible, even on those pages where for a period of time in the Old Testament we see God telling his people to kill all men, women, and children in the pagan tribes inhabiting the land he was giving to the Israelites.
- When we remember his being holy, holy, holy and his plan of redemption we can see why he did what he did: he had us and all future generations in mind.
- If God allowed the exceedingly evil pagans (to whom he patiently gave plenty of time before judging their evil [Genesis 15:16]) to corrupt all his people, our salvation would be in jeopardy. (As it was, only a remnant of his people remained faithful, and out of them came the Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ.) As we will see more, God’s justice comes from his love.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.” (Psalm 86:5)
- “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)
- “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” (Genesis 15:16)
- Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36)

Using a concept familiar to everyone—a covenant that kings made with their people—God executed a covenant with Abraham in which God revealed he would implement his just plan for salvation from the evil Adam and Eve’s sin brought on His perfect creation. The covenant thus establishes the basis for the Biblical concept of God’s kingship and the major motif of the kingdom of God, which pointed to and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God’s kingdom is his rule over his people, through whom he would bring salvation. His rule is most evident in the Old Testament in his first governing his chosen people, the Israelites, directly as their king and then indirectly through human kings God appointed through Samuel and then kings he allowed. In the New Testament he revealed that his kingdom is in his people’s minds and hearts. (John 18:36)

Meaning and Practical Benefits



This graphic depicts the evil worship of the Canaanite fertility god, Baal, showing the practice of child sacrifice, abhorrent to God and his people, and that God forbade. (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “And God spoke all these words: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.’” (Exodus 20:1-6)
- “This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” (Isaiah 44:6)

Here in this graphic is depicted the nature and fertility cult goddess, Diana (the Roman name) or Artemis (the Greek name). Unsurprisingly, unspeakable evil occurred during the worship of this false goddess, including ceremonial prostitution that was part of her worship in Ephesus. (Cf. Acts 19:23-41)

Meaning and Practical Benefits



A statue of Diana (Artemis) at Ephesus.

Another idol that can't even breathe or hold itself up, much less help anyone else!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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“A man...looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.” (Isaiah 40:20) “The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not...take up their names on my lips.” (Psalm 16:4) These worshipers of the false gods need to know that Jesus has performed the once-for-all sacrifice that alone is effective and that Buddhist teaching that one has to die many times is unnecessary and untrue. (Hebrews 9:26-27)

Meaning and Practical Application



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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- “This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” (Isaiah 44:6)

“the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God...” (1 Corinthians 10:20; Isaiah 44:6; John 8:44; 14:6) Contrary to Satan and the demons, the one true God, who is holy, holy, holy, loves people who bear his image in which he created them. So these people will not destroy themselves, he calls us to lead them to the one true God.

Meaning and Practical Application



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.” (Psalm 13:5)
- “For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (Psalm 100:5)
- “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 NASB)
- “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) reveal the same God. Some people wrongly say that the God of the OT is a God of wrath, and the God of the NT is a God of love. This error is not new; it is an ancient heresy promoted by a wealthy businessman influenced by Gnosticism that the church in Rome condemned when it excommunicated him in A.D. 144.
- As we’ve just seen, the one true God is love, and we can see his love on every page of both testaments of the Bible.
- As we will see in our study of what God has revealed about himself, he exhibits wrath against sin, one reason being that it harms people he loves and who bear his image, but that wrath does not characterize God; God is love.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Whenever we speak of God’s love we must clarify what we mean, because our society’s understanding of love has been shaped by Hollywood’s misunderstanding as well as other cultural influences contrary to the Bible.
- The Apostle Paul defined that special type of love, called *ἀγάπη* (*agapē*), which characterizes God, as we see in the New Testament, including in 1 John 4:8, and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as being patient; kind; not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or delighting in evil; but instead rejoicing with the truth; always protecting, trusting, and persevering. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)
- Significantly, that same word, *agapē*, which characterizes God’s love, is the very word in 1 John 4:8 that we are to demonstrate in order to show that we do know God.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

German theologian Emil Brunner explained that “The Love of God...*Agape*...does not seek value, but it creates value or gives value; it does not desire to get but to give; it is not ‘attracted’ by some lovable quality, but it is poured out on those who are worthless and degraded...Here the One who loves does not seek anything for Himself; all He desires is to benefit the one He loves. And the benefit He wants to impart is not ‘something’, but His very Self, for this Love is...self-giving to the other, to whom love is directed.” (*The Christian Doctrine of God*, 186-187)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Brunner makes that statement on the preceding slide in the context of his observation that God’s love must be seen in connection with his holiness, which he rightly refers to as an indissoluble connection, “the characteristic and decisive element” in the Christian understanding of God.
- To understand the love of God as fully as possible, we must keep in mind his holiness, his justice, and our sinfulness, three subjects we’ll explore more in upcoming sections.
- A woman said, “My earthly father was horrible and terribly abused me. If God is a Father, I don’t want anything to do with him.” We need to help such people know the truth about God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is perfect and all love. Think how the Biblical understanding of God could help her!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: His Love Includes Feelings.

In Exodus 3 God tells Moses that

- “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them....” (Exodus 3:7-8)
- “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Up to this point we’ve been considering the results of God’s love, the actions he takes that flow from his love, which as Paul indicates is at the core of what the highest form of love means. Love in the Bible is behavioral, expressed in action.
- Yet, it’s also important that we see God as having feelings; he has emotion as well as infinite intellect. God is not an impersonal force that is devoid of sensitivity, feeling, and emotion.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: His Love Includes Feelings.

In Exodus 3 God tells Moses that

- “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about יָדָה (*yādha*), their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them....” (Exodus 3:7-8)
- “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- An examination of the original Hebrew in which God is speaking to Moses, the English words, “I am concerned about their suffering” are in the Hebrew, “I know their pain.” The root word for “I know” is יָדָה (*yādha*), a covenantal word meaning to know in an intimate, personal, relational, experiential manner, a term that involves a thorough and complete knowing due to an intimate loving relationship.
- He cares deeply for his people and plans to relieve them of their pain, their suffering, through Moses’ leading them out of Egypt to the land God was giving them. Because God loves and cares, he acts accordingly.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: His Love Includes Feelings.

- In Exodus 3, God tells Moses that “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them....” (Exodus 3:7-8)
- “The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.” (Psalm 116:5)
- “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- One of the expressions of God’s emotion is his compassion. In Psalm 116:5, the Hebrew word translated “compassion” is רַחֵם (*rācham*), to love, to be merciful, showing compassion (love in action stemming from the core of God’s being), a deep affection for another.
- This word is only used once for a person having and showing such affection to God (Psalm 18:1); all other times it is used to describe God’s love for or on occasion his withholding such love for people.
- Notice this effect and great benefit of God’s being gracious, righteous, full of compassion, and his salvation: “Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.” (Psalm 116:7)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: His Love Includes Feelings.

- “In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” (Isaiah 54:8-10 NRSV)
- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness,…” (Romans 3:23-25 NASB)
- “...also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” (Romans 4:24–25)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We read in the Bible of God’s anger, even wrath. Yet that wrath is due to his love for people who are being unjustly victimized or who are acting in ways that are very counterproductive to their own spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being or counter to God’s will, i.e., counter to what he sees as ultimately best for everyone, all of which offends his holiness. God removes his wrath from those whose faith in Christ Jesus credits them/us with his justice, his righteousness. As we see in this section and especially in our study of Christology, soteriology, and eschatology, God will bring justice, even now when the time is right in his sight, and in the final judgment when Jesus Christ returns in his Second Coming.
- We are assured in God’s Word through Isaiah and others that God’s love will always remain with us.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: His Love Includes Feelings.

- “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:30-32)
- And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,” (Colossians 1:10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We sadden the Holy Spirit when we act in these and the other ways in chapters four and five that “are improper for God’s holy people.” (Ephesians 5:3)
- Instead we are to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10) and to act in those ways that please him. The original Greek word in this verse is εὐάρεστος (*euarestos*), well pleasing and acceptable. When we obey him, and act in accord with his will, he has a pleasant feeling about that; we give him pleasure. (See also 2 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 1:10.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.” (Psalm 13:5)
- “For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (Psalm 100:5)
- “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 NASB)
- “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God’s love for his people never fails; we can always count on his loving us.
- God’s love for us lasts forever. No day will come where we discover that he doesn’t love us anymore. We never have to worry about whether he still loves us.
- When we sin, we disappoint God (Ephesians 4:30), but he doesn’t withdraw his love from us.
- Even when he needs to discipline us, it is because he loves us. (Hebrews 12:5-11)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “We love, because [God] first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)
- Moreover, he loved us before we loved him, while we were alienated from him by our sin, as the Apostle Paul writes: “Vary rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:7-8)
- John adds, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Because God, who is most holy, righteous, and just, is essentially loving, he has chosen to not destroy us. Those credited with the righteousness of Christ by faith will be saved.
- Truly, God’s love for us cost him dearly!
- Reflect on the meaning for you personally, as well as corporately, of *this most wonderful demonstration of love ever! The next time you doubt your worth, question the value of your life, or wonder whether your existence has meaning to anyone, remember what God went through as he watched his Son be so cruelly crucified and abused in many other ways...for you.*
- Pass this Good News along to others as well!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

As contemporary theologian, J.I. Packer, observed (*Knowing God*, 111), “the statement ‘God is love’ means that His love finds expression in everything that He says and does. The knowledge that this is so [also] for him personally is the Christian’s supreme comfort. As a believer, he finds in the cross of Christ assurance that he, as an individual, is beloved of God; ‘the Son of God...loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.’ (Gal. 2:20) ...Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God’s dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. He knows that the true story of his life, when known, will prove to be, as the hymn says, ‘mercy from first to last’—and he is content.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

- “Then the LORD said to [Abram], ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions....In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here [the land of the Canaanites, et al.], for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’” (Genesis 15:13-16)
- “and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” (Jeremiah 18:8)
- “Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city...On the first day, Jonah...proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’ The Ninevites believed God...When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” (Jonah 3:1-10)
- “You are the salt of the earth...the light of the world...let your light shine before men....” (Matthew 5:13-16)
- “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago....” (Luke 10:13)

Meaning and Practical Benefits Also Corporately, for Nations

- God loves, cares for, and is involved in the world he has created (John 3:16), including the nations. The word for world in 3:16 is κόσμος (*kosmos*) and includes its evil. God loves the world, but not its evil, which he calls us, his children in Christ, to address, to shed light on and expose, as he leads and helps us to do.
- Being just, righteous, and patient, God allows the nations time to repent of their evil ways, but that time is limited. Evil harms people he loves.
- DISCUSS AND/OR REFLECT:
 1. How much time do you think God will yet give our country to repent and change our ways?
 2. Name one action you can take in addition to prayer to help our country to make the needed changes before God’s judgment comes. Include any of these not mentioned: Write to or call government representatives. Write letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Call talk radio programs. Talk to family, neighbors, friends, coworkers. How can we do so most effectively in our country? (E.g., Ephesians 4:15)
 3. How do we distinguish between witness and Christian action?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Love: Always Expressed in Action

⁶When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷Then the LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? ¹⁸Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.' ...

²²...Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham approached him and said: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?' ...

²⁶The LORD said, 'If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.'

²⁷Then Abraham spoke up again: 'Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?' 'If I find forty-five there,' he said, 'I will not destroy it.' ...

³²Then he said, 'May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?' He answered, 'For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.'

³³When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home." (Genesis 18:16-33)

Meaning and Practical Benefits Also Corporately, for Nations

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

4. We are called to extend and nurture God's kingdom throughout our country and the rest of the world. Extending God's kingdom (*op cit*), which Jesus says is not of this world (John 18:36; Luke 17:21), is done by evangelism and Christian witness. Nurturing God's kingdom is done through teaching God's Word. Both are necessary to rescue our country. Only when people's hearts are changed, will their behavior be closer to God's will. Politics cannot change the heart; the Holy Spirit does.
 - a. In the light of the Bible texts in this and the previous slide, how will our facilitating the extension and nurture of God's kingdom give our country more time before God's judgment upon the evil in it?
 - b. How do spiritual gifts (*op cit.*) help us to understand who should do what? For example, let us not put pressure on our brothers and sisters in Christ to evangelize if they don't have the gift of evangelism; guilt is not a motivator, nor is it fair, healthy, or effective, but we are all to witness for Christ (1 Peter 3:15). How will you do so?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

- King Solomon prayed, “you alone know the hearts of all men.” (1 Kings 8:39)
- “Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is perfect in knowledge?” (Job 37:16)
- “Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.” (Psalm 147:5)
- “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” (1 John 3:20)
- “Lord, you know all things.” (John 21:17)
- “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:13)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- From the beginning God, who is beyond space and time limits, knows all things, past, present, and future as well as all that even has possibility. From a human perspective what God sees in the future is foreknowledge, but his perspective permits him to view all things simultaneously.
- While he has decreed from before time that certain events will occur, his complete knowledge of everything does not preclude human freedom and responsibility. (Ephesians 3:9-11)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

- “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” (Isaiah 46:10)
- Our limited and finite knowledge and understanding should always acknowledge God’s unlimited and infinite knowledge and understanding. As Isaiah adds, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (55:8-9) That’s perfectly logical.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Compare Paul’s observation of the difference between God’s and human beings’ understanding:

- Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)
- Such awareness helps us remember who we are and avoid arrogance. “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.” (Job 38:2-4)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

God has a special relationship with his covenant people whom he knows in the most personal manner. He knows us so well that he is aware of what we will do before we do it, even before we think of it. David sings in Psalm 139,

- “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.” (Vss. 1-4)

The Hebrew word in verse one translated “know” is *יָדָע* (*yādha*), a deeply experiential knowing within a most intimate covenant relationship, the one God has with believers in Christ.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The thought that God is all knowing terrifies many people. They fear this aspect of God, being aware that he knows about all our sins, even those we’ve done in secret. Yet it need not be so for us who are in Christ.
- That God knows all our secrets and everything we’ve ever done, including all we’ve ever thought, is a spiritually healthy reality and good. What is a great fear for those outside of Christ is a great blessing, including comfort, for those in Christ whom he has forgiven and who walk with him daily. Remembering that God is all-knowing helps motivate us to know what is right and to do it.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Therefore, we never have to be concerned that there is some wickedness we’ve committed that he doesn’t know about that would threaten our salvation if it ever came to his attention. He already knows about it.
- In fact, he knew about it eons before we ever did it, and he forgives us in Christ! He still loves us, even though he knows all our sins. We don’t have to worry that he may someday find out something bad about us that he didn’t know and then won’t love us anymore.
- God’s omniscience thus gives great joy to our understanding of our forgiveness in Christ. He knows all about us and he still loves and forgives us!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God’s knowledge in macrocosm is unlimited; he is all-knowing. His being all-knowing is one of his incommunicable characteristics, but he gives us some knowledge. We can never be all-knowing, but we can have some knowledge, even much knowledge, yet nowhere near having knowledge of everything.
- He has communicated the capability for us to know things in microcosm, and even to know much, which gives us great joy and significance; but what we know, as important as it is, is infinitesimal contrasted with God’s knowledge. Our knowledge is considerable but not all encompassing, as is God’s.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

God has a special relationship with his covenant people whom he knows in the most personal manner. He knows us so well that he is aware of what we will do before we do it, even before we think of it. David sings in Psalm 139,

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The Hebrew word in verse one translated “know” is *יָדָע* (*yādha*), a deeply experiential knowing within a most intimate covenant relationship, the one God has with believers in Christ.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Since God is all knowing, we need never worry that he doesn’t understand. We’ll never have a problem he doesn’t know about. His intimate relationship with us and constant presence, as well as his personal experiences with humanity in and through his Son, Jesus the Christ, assure us that he knows what we are going through at every moment.
- He knows the injustices we experience that others don’t see.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

- “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.” (Romans 8:26-27)
- “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
²You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
³You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.
⁴Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.” (Psalm 139:1-4, 6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God knows all our needs, so even at times when we don't know how to pray, he understands; in fact the Holy Spirit even intercedes for us! (Romans 8:26-27)
- Furthermore, God knows what we mean even before we express it (Psalm 139:3) when we try to articulate our concerns to him in prayer.
- He anticipates our needs and acts to help us, even in ways of which we are unaware! Through countless means unknown to us he blesses us, for example providing a required resource through someone else, sometimes before the need arises in our consciousness.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God is omniscient, all knowing, an ever present and practical help!

My precious wife of 48 ½ years, Carol, died of a serious disease. To this day many years later, I have times of sadness each day; she is, and always will be, a vital part of me and of who I am. Indeed, I feel like I've, temporarily, lost the better half of me. Thanks be to our triune God, my loss is only temporary; I'll be with her again, next time forever! Yet, while my loss is limited to the time I have remaining here on earth, it is still very painful at times, especially when I think of all the "coulda, shoulda, woulda's," i.e., the times when I failed to do what I could have and should have done, which would have made her glad, even very glad, and which I would have done, if I knew then what I know now. I definitely would have done so.

At such times, including when the ache in my heart is exceedingly excruciating, God immediately brings to mind a comment Carol made during a tender moment one evening a couple of weeks before she died. She said, "You're a good husband." I cannot adequately and fully describe how comforting those words are to me during these times of sadness!! Further, when God brings this recollection of her words to my mind and heart, and so quickly, I right away thank God, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, (James 1:17) for this multidimensional blessing that instantly pulls me out of my sadness. It is clear that this monumental blessing comes from God's love and his being omniscient—knowing eons ago how I would be feeling at times, and so he lead Carol to speak those anticipatory words of comfort while she was still with me! Further, she said these same words to a friend who told me what Carol said. Thanks be to God! I'm forever grateful to God and also to Carol!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Omniscient, All-Knowing

When God forgives us it is permanent; his pardon will not be retracted in the future. When he revealed through Jeremiah his plans for the new covenant in Christ, he said, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

(31:34)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

The Hebrew concept of memory makes this statement striking. In the Hebrew mentality something existed as long as it was remembered. Here God graphically says our sins, all of them including the most despicable, no longer exist!

A Question for Reflection and Discussion:

When we in Christ repent of a sin, and God forgives us and forgets the sin, causing it to no longer exist, how can we avoid continuing to feel bad and berate ourselves for that wrongdoing?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Rational; He Reasons.

- “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)
- “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD.” (Isaiah 1:18)
- “For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” (Luke 7:47 NASB)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God is not only all-knowing; he uses his unlimited knowledge with an unfathomable capacity to reason. Throughout his Word we see many texts where God reasons with his people and where a matter is explained, “For this reason....”
- Employing the common Old Testament literary device of the lawsuit motif, Isaiah portrays God’s forensic case against Israel’s constant disobedience as a charge against his people, wherein God calls them to reason together as in a court of law; they are given a wake-up call to change before they receive a severe sentence.
- Jesus explained to Simon the Pharisee with an exceptionally insightful and wise rationale, why he forgave a sinful woman.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all...” (Psalm 104:24)
- “Tell them this: ‘These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.’”
¹² But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.” (Jeremiah 10:11-12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Because he is perfect and infinitely wise, we have confidence that his purposes are not only good but the most perfect of all possibilities. His wisdom involves his understanding, intelligence, ability, and skill with which he created the world.
- His wisdom also includes firmness and steadfastness, the root meaning of the Old Testament word referring to this characteristic.
- In his wisdom he places the parts in proper conjunction with the whole and develops the right means to accomplish the ends he has determined, including incorporating our requests.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all...” (Psalm 104:24)
- “Tell them this: ‘These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.’” But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.” (Jeremiah 10:11-12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God’s wisdom, German theologian Karl Barth wrote, “is that God not only wills but knows what He wills...and...why and wherefore He wills it...and wherefore is then his own meaning, plan and intention. To this extent there is in it light and no darkness.”
- Barth explains that God’s wisdom revealed in the Bible enables us to “hear the reason, meaning, purpose and intention of God. When we hear it, we are instructed, enlightened, knowing and wise.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:33-36)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The wisdom of God is infinitely superior to human wisdom. As such it includes an understandable element of mystery that is unfathomable to us. This reality is perfectly logical: that which is finite cannot comprehend that which is infinite, nor the limited the unlimited.
- Such awareness helps us maintain the respect God alone deserves; gives us a secure confidence and peace in knowing that God’s way is best; and motivates us to maintain our trust in and commitment to him, and obedience to his Word and his will.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:24)
- “My purpose is that they [the church in Colossae and Laodicea] may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.” (Colossians 2:2-4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Christ is the perfect expression of God’s great love and the only means of making us, who are unworthy, fit for fellowship with God who is holy, holy, holy. Through Christ’s obedience and sacrifice, God maintains his integrity and justice. He credits to believers the righteousness of Christ whereby we become worthy to draw near to him, to serve him, and have eternal joy in his presence.
- It does not surprise us that the world cannot understand the wisdom of this plan, indeed that they consider it foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23), for the new nature provided by the Holy Spirit is required for such understanding.
- Part of our calling, our mission, is to make known this wisdom of God. (Ephesians 3:10-12)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.” (Jeremiah 10:12)
- “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God’s wisdom is related to the other characteristics of his being as well. For example, he has the power to bring about what he wills in his wisdom, as Jeremiah proclaims in 10:12.
- Also, his wisdom is linked with his truthfulness: he and his will can always be trusted.
- True wisdom comes from God. Another dimension of God’s wisdom, which the world also cannot understand, as well as many Christians, is that human wisdom comes by a healthy fear of God, which we’ll discuss in a later section.
- Observe how many worldly people can be very knowledgeable but lack wisdom.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies...I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.” (119:97-99)
- “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We have assurance that when we turn to God for counsel and direction, he'll lead us to that which is true and most helpful. We know it is his leading because the answer we receive is in accord with his Word in the Bible; he does not contradict himself, nor is he a hypocrite who says something and later says or does the opposite.
- We always have access to God's wisdom. It won't disappear or be replaced by something more current, applicable, or useful.
- As Barth has also written, “The whole art of living and understanding life consists in heeding and accepting divine wisdom and in this way becoming wise...which distinguishes the wise [person] from the fool...”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Wise

- “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.” (1 John 5:14-15)
- “All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.” (Isaiah 28:29)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- I’ve often been faced with either not knowing how to do something or which of more than one option to select regarding a specific matter. When such times occur, I ask the Lord for help, praying a form of this prayer: “Gracious God, you know this question I have before me. I am uncertain what to do. Please grant me your wisdom that I may know what to do and the guidance to do so in the way that will most please you.”
- Many times I have the answer before I have finished the prayer! An idea comes to mind that I had not thought of prior to that time. On other occasions the answer has come later. Sometimes it comes through other people through whom God works.
- Yet, it always comes, is always practical, and is always the most helpful approach to take.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just

- “...but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24 NRSV)
- “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The NIV and TNIV translate the original Hebrew word, חֶסֶד (*chesedh*), as kindness, but while kindness is a meaning of *chesedh*, since God’s essence is love (1 John 4:8), I prefer the translation of *chesedh* as steadfast love, also a primary meaning of *chesedh*, as in the RSV, the NRSV, and the GW. See also the NASB and the KJV, lovingkindness.
- Thus, God’s being just is rooted in and stems from his essential love.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just

- “but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24 NRSV)
- “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Justice is an integral part of love. In the best relationships both qualities are present, for justice without love is harsh, and love without justice is mere sentimentality.
- Since God’s love is completely true and genuine, it is not surprising therefore to expect that his love will include justice.
- God’s righteousness or justice is never separated from his love; they are two sides of the same coin. Since God is just, he will not simply look at sin and smile at it, which would be to deny and compromise his integrity, his basic character, and hurt people he loves.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just

- “but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24 NRSV)
- “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)
- “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:20 NRSV)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament the words translated justice in the English also mean righteousness and involve being correct, equitable, fair.
- According to what standard? As owner and ruler of the universe, God defines the standard of what constitutes the justice that characterizes his most holy being and which he requires for us in order to be in his presence and acceptable to him. (Leviticus 19:2, Deuteronomy 16:20; Micah 6:8) His just acts are rooted in his essential righteousness. (Deuteronomy 32:4) Injustices are sins against people whom God loves and therefore ultimately against himself (Psalm 51:4); they are violations of his holiness.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just

- “but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24 NRSV)
- “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Nothing is more practical than Biblical theology. Because God is righteous, just we have a standard for what is right, and it is good. This is a needed message in our postmodern age where many hold that there is no universal truth and thus no standard.
- On the contrary, we can distinguish between right and wrong. Objective and universal truth is possible only because of God’s character. When one looks solely to any other standard he or she makes truth relative. The belief system of no one person or culture is authoritative for all.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: His Rectal Justice

- “For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.” (Psalm 99:4)
- “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.” (Romans 13:1-7)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Because God loves and cares about people, and to maintain his integrity and holiness, he exercises justice. Theologians discern three aspects of God's justice.

1. Rectal Justice: The love of God as revealed in the rectitude (righteousness) of his rulership over all human affairs wherein he has established government with levels of authority, laws, and rewards for the obedient as well as punishments for the disobedient.
 - + Recall that Paul wrote these words in Romans 13 during the harsh rule of the Roman government.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: His Remunerative Justice

- “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of our land—your new grain, new wine and oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land that he swore to your forefathers to give you.” (Deuteronomy 9:9,12, 13; cf. Psalm 58:11)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Because God loves and cares about people, and to maintain his integrity and holiness, he exercises justice. Theologians discern three aspects of God’s justice.

2. Remunerative Justice: His *remunerative justice* is a manifestation of his love expressed in the distribution of rewards.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: His Retributive Justice

- “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’” (Hebrews 12:5-6)
- “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 5:1-5)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Because God loves and cares about people, and to maintain his integrity and holiness, he exercises justice. Theologians discern three aspects of God's justice.

3. Retributive Justice: His *retributive justice* expresses God's love for those who are and will become his people in his wrath against sin; this justice manifests itself in the penalties the wicked bring on themselves. While the Bible emphasizes God's rewarding the righteous for their faithfulness and obedience, the punishment of those who do evil is sure and certain.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: His Retributive Justice

- “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’” (Hebrews 12:5-6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God models true love and righteousness in his discipline of his people as we've seen in the texts above and in many others in the Bible, e.g., Proverbs 3:11, 12, and that discipline is life saving.
- Parents do well to follow his model. “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” (Proverbs 13:24) “Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.” (Proverbs 19:18) (See also Hebrews 12:5-11.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: His Retributive Justice

- “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.²⁰ On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:17-21, esp. 19)
- “ ‘And forgive us our debts [ὀφειλήματα (*opheilēmata*), in the sense of transgressions, trespasses, sins], as we also have forgiven our debtors.’ [Matthew 6:12] ...for if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” (Matthew 6:14)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- This comfort is immediate. When I have been treated unfairly and my stomach churned with anger, I have recalled Romans 12:17-21, especially verse 19. It is important that I am not involved in this process. God alone will be just. The person who treated me unfairly must be treated fairly. Sinner that I am, and biased in this case, I would not likely be just in my judgment of him or her. When I remember that verse I feel my stomach relax. “It’s OK, I remind myself. God knows; he saw it; he’ll make it right when the time is best in his sight.” Here we see how *realistic and comforting* God’s plan of salvation is. ***What peace! Thanks be to God!***
- This awareness enables me to take one more necessary step: to forgive that person. A big help to do that forgiving is when I remember that I, too, need God’s forgiveness, and to receive that forgiveness I also must forgive. And doing so also results in relief of anguish over the offense.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- ““You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:20)
- “Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong;
²for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.
⁷Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.
⁸Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.
⁹For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.
¹⁰A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.” (Psalm 37:1-2, 7-10, 14-20, 32, 39-40)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

At times of personal and national crisis or tragedy, one of the first questions people ask is, “How can a just God allow such things to occur?” This question, one I’ve been asked a lot in over half a century as an ordained minister, is called the theodicy question (< Greek θεός, *theos*, God + δικαιοσύνη [*dikaioṣunē*] justice, uprightness, righteousness): i.e., is God just when he allows evil to occur? His Word offers a clear answer to this question.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- ““You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”” (Genesis 50:20)
- “The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright.
¹⁵But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.
¹⁶Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked;
¹⁷for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous.
¹⁸The days of the blameless are known to the LORD, and their inheritance will endure forever.
¹⁹In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
²⁰But the wicked will perish: The LORD's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish--vanish like smoke.” (Psalm 37:14-20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God uses circumstances in this fallen world to accomplish his purposes, bring good out of evil. (Cf. Romans 8:28)
- Thus, to understand, we need to lift our viewpoint beyond the pain of the particular circumstance to take into account the broad, including the eternal, perspective.
Remember: always think eschatologically!
- We see God’s justice and righteousness even and in spite of the suffering experienced by people that they did little, and sometimes nothing, to cause.
- While easier to understand, we also need to see his justice in other human suffering, e.g., the suffering that people bring on themselves, which is an outcome of God’s justice.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- ““You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”” (Genesis 50:20)
- “The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives;
³⁹The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
⁴⁰The LORD helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.” (Psalm 37:32, 39-40)
- “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” (2 Timothy 3:12-13)
- “Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you.” (Jeremiah 17:4b)
- “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” (James 4:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God respects his creation of us in his image, which includes genuine, albeit limited, freedom that we have allowed sin to misuse. In his monumental classic book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William L. Shirer documents well over 100 times where people could easily have stopped Adolph Hitler just by speaking up when he was beginning his rise in Germany.
- God’s people must exercise our responsibility to oppose evil wherever and whenever we can.
- We need to remember: though we cannot see God, that does not mean he is not present and working in our midst.
- In this evil age, we must prepare our minds and hearts that we will be persecuted by those motivated by Satan and his demonic forces. But with God’s help we will overcome evil and the evil forces. (Cf. John 16:25, 33; Romans 12:21; Ephesians 6:13; 1 John 2:13-14; 4:4; 5:4; Revelation 3:12, 21; 5:5; 11:13; 17:14)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”
(Genesis 2:16-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- It’s important to recall that God created everything good; Adam and Eve at first lived in bliss without evil. It was only after they disobeyed and corrupted mankind’s nature that human suffering began, an occurrence God had warned them would take place if they misused their freedom, that if they disobeyed the only prohibition he gave them (which actually enhanced their freedom), it would be tragic: they would experience evil and death.
- They ignored that rule, and the result is that we live for a time in an age where evil (which in the Bible includes all disobedience to God) is a stark reality for which God cannot be blamed.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”
(Genesis 2:16-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- People refine the question in this or a similar form: “Why doesn’t God eliminate evil and prevent these and other human sufferings?”
- We could begin our response by observing that God created people in his image, one aspect of which is freedom to choose.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

Meaning and Practical Benefits

“And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”
(Genesis 2:16-17)

- When this freedom is misused by motives stemming from the corruption in someone’s nature, by mistake, or by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time in a world flawed by sin and evil, suffering often occurs.
- God could take away the freedom people have which could reduce if not eliminate evil deeds, but the result would be to turn us into puppet-like beings with little movement or speech capability, a different kind of suffering, for we would lose an important part of the essence of what makes us human, image bearers who reflect in microcosm some of the wonderful characteristics of the Creator.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

Meaning and Practical Benefits

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

Nevertheless, God is working out a plan that he implemented as soon as Adam and Eve sinned. (Genesis 3:15)

- He will one day eliminate all evil and suffering from the context in which we live. You may then wonder, “Why doesn’t he complete his plan now?”
- Well, let’s think about some of the implications if he did so.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

Meaning and Practical Benefits

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

- What if, during one of the horrific wars in centuries past, believers prayed, “Come, Lord Jesus!” and he did! What would be some of the implications of the Lord doing so then?
- One: We would not exist.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

Meaning and Practical Benefits

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

- Possibly one reason God is delaying the end of this age is so more people can have the opportunity to experience life and the joy it brings, especially in his kingdom.
- We’ve previously seen that his essence is love, and he may want more people to receive that love as some human parents want more children.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

Meaning and Practical Benefits

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

- A young dying soldier in the American Civil War in the mid-19th century showed how he personally answered the theodicy question by keeping his focus on the broad, including eternal, perspective as he suffered but did not blame God.
- On his death bed, John Moseley wrote to his mother, “I had hoped to have been spared; but a righteous God has ordered it otherwise, and I feel prepared to trust my case in his hands.” (*Gettysburg*, Historical Times, Inc.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:8-9)
- ““And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”” (Luke 18:7-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In his second letter, the Apostle Peter adds another reason for God’s delay: to give people more of an opportunity to repent and be saved.
- We must broaden our worldview. Our time in this age is a small part of our eternal existence. Life in the presence of God now, in heaven, and in the new heaven and new earth is far more to be valued than life in the age of sin here on earth.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

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- “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13 TNIV)
- “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” (1 John 4:14. See also John 4:42.)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Christians in other cultures as well weep when a loved one dies, but they also rejoice if their loved one is with the Lord, with no more suffering. I testify that I do too!
- Living with that perspective prepares us for when someone close to us dies; helps us cope with our (temporary) loss; and enables us to serve the Lord well for as long as we have until we can rejoin our loved one in and with our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- “A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.” (Psalm 37:10)
- “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:8-9)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The Sovereign LORD is righteous and his purposes will prevail. He *will* bring those who do evil to justice *when the time is right in his sight*. The unrepentant wicked who will not change will be destroyed. (Psalm 37:10) “A little while” is one of the Bible’s time-related terms that indicates the shortness of this age from the broader perspective of God’s timing.
- Evil and the suffering it produces is a result of the human condition brought on by Adam and Eve’s disobedience which corrupted human nature. Simply by living in this age people will be harmed by evil deeds and conditions not of their own doing or deserving (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-5), but God will provide all-sufficient help to overcome the adversities of life, small and huge, between now and the time Jesus returns to complete God’s plan of redemption.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- “The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives;
³⁹The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
⁴⁰The LORD helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.” (Psalm 37:32, 39-40)
- ““As I [the LORD] was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.”” (Joshua 1:5b,c)
- ““And surely I [Jesus] am with you always, to the very end of the age.”” (Matthew 28:20b)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The LORD will not forsake his people; he will help us. (Psalm 37:28-40)
- He makes us righteous in his sight (Romans 4, Galatians 3),
- gives us all we have that is good so we can give generously (37:21, Genesis 12:1-3, James 1:17),
- and prepares future and more extensive blessings for us and our children, including peace, wisdom, and salvation (37:9-40).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

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- “And surely I [Jesus] am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20b)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- How does the LORD want his people to react to the evil in this age?
- He tells us we should trust him, avoid evil ourselves, and do what is good, confident that he will eliminate all evil at the right time. (37:3, 27)
- He wants us to be still and wait patiently for him to carry out his plan. We are to “refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.” (37:7-8) In times of trouble we’ll find that God is a very present help (Psalm 46:1), and we’ll experience that blessing by taking refuge in him. (37:40)
- Rather than unjustly criticizing God, we should thank him for his unspeakably wonderful provision for our redemption, at great cost to himself, and for not “washing his hands of us.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- “The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip.
³⁹The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
⁴⁰The LORD helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.” (Psalm 37:31, 39-40)
- ““Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” (Joshua 1:7-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- How do we reach the point in our lives where we can function with that degree of maturity (trusting God, waiting patiently for and taking refuge in him)?
- The Bible clearly specifies how:
 - + through daily reading, reflecting on, and obeying God’s Word (Psalm 37:31; Joshua 1:7-8),
 - + prayer (Philippians 4:4-13),
 - + desiring to be led by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26),
 - + and participating in the worship and work of the church, relating to fellow members to whom the Lord has given special gifts to help us “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:7-13)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

- “This is what the wicked are like— always carefree, they increase in wealth.
¹⁶When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me
¹⁷till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” (Psalm 73:12, 16-17)
- “[Jesus said] So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” (Matthew 6:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God works in our lives directly with us as individuals, but he also blesses us through other people, his church.
- It is often hard, even for believers, to observe the apparent prosperity of the wicked. The Psalmist, Asaph, confessed that such observations became very difficult for him, until he did something. “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” (Psalm 73:16, 17) Jesus added that unrepentant sinners “have received their reward in full.” (Cf., e.g., Matthew 6:2) The theodicy question is answered!
- Regular participation in the corporate worship of God, hearing his Word truthfully proclaimed, explained, and applied, meets their deepest longings and needs, including helping God’s believers understand and mature in Christ.
- Churches that do this grow; those that do not decline. (> Rev. John Stott and many others)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:21-26)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In the sanctuary, as the church throughout all ages has gathered in corporate worship, we have heard proclaimed by faithful teachers the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the culmination of God’s plan of redemption.
- The apostle Paul summarizes and explains God’s plan of redemption in Romans 3:21-26, where we see how he has demonstrated his justice and his love so perfectly in his redemption of us who believe at such a huge cost to himself in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever!
- We will examine further this aspect of God’s answer to the theodicy question in the section below on the doctrines of Christ, Christology, and salvation, Soteriology.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—

³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;” (Isaiah 11:1-3
(Prophecy of Jesus’ First Coming))

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- At Advent and Christmas, we celebrate the focal point of God’s just resolution of our human plight in the life and work of the Messiah.
- Passages such as Isaiah 11:1-10, actually refer to both his first and his second advent (coming), the latter being the time where he will judge with righteousness and with justice and bring forth a new heaven and a new earth.
- This is an example of a style of writing the prophets often (and Jesus also) employed, which is called the principle of the prophetic perspective or “prophetic foreshortening.” It is also commonly called the principle of near and far fulfillment.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—

³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;” (Isaiah 11:1-3 **(Prophecy of Jesus’ First Coming)**)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The principle of the prophetic perspective, or “prophetic foreshortening,” refers to the prophets’ often including in the same passage their predictions of the future events that will occur relatively soon and those that will occur far into the future, even in Jesus’ Second Coming, without distinguishing which is which.
- God only gave his people what they needed to know at any particular point in time. Thus, it was not revealed until Jesus’ first advent (coming) that the Messiah’s coming that was predicted in the Old Testament, would be accomplished in two stages, two advents.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

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³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;” (Isaiah 11:1-3
(Prophecy of Jesus’ First Coming))

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Another example of prophetic foreshortening, employed by Jesus, is seen in Matthew 24:3-51 (also Mark 13:3-37 and Luke 21:5-36), where the Lord refers to events soon to come (e.g., the destruction of Jerusalem) and those that will not occur until his Second Coming without distinguishing which is which.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

⁵Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

⁶The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

⁷The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

⁸The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

⁹They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:4-10 (Prophecy of Jesus' Second Coming))

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

Passages such as Isaiah 11:1-10, actually refer to both Jesus' first and his second advent, the second (seen in 11:4-10) being the time when he will judge with righteousness and with justice and bring a new heaven and a new earth, where “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together...[and where he] will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.” (v. 6, Revelation 21:4)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Righteous, Just: Even in Times of Trouble

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” (Revelation 21:1-4)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- In the meantime, between Jesus’ first and second comings, “God is an ever-present help in trouble...” (Psalm 46:1; 2 Timothy 3:16-17) directly in the lives of those involved and through his church, the body of Christ. What good news!
- Christ’s First Coming is the greatest demonstration of God’s goodness and his true love which is just and righteous,
- and his Second Coming will eternally eliminate evil from the lives of his people.
- The theodicy question is not only answered; it is resolved. Thanks be to God!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

- “O Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your words are trustworthy,…” (2 Samuel 7: 28)
- “As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless.” (2 Samuel 22:31)
- “Just and true (< *alēthinos*) are your ways, King of the nations!” (Revelation 15:3 NRSV)
- “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.” (Revelation 16:7)
- “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” (1 John 5:20)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- In 2 Samuel 7:28, the Hebrew word אֱמֶת (*’ēmet*), trustworthy, means faithfulness, firmness, valid, reliability, therefore true comes from the verb, אָמַן (*’āman*), meaning support or confirm.
- The Greek word ἀληθινός (*alēthinos*) translated true also means dependable, genuine, real.
- Note in the Revelation 16:7 text that these speaking are the martyrs, those killed in God’s service. They’re not angry at him, and they’re not accusing him of any fault; they praised him!
- Truthfulness characterizes all aspects of God’s very being. There is no deceit in him at all. Thus, his revelation is true, both in his Word and in its expression through his only begotten Son. The triune God is also trustworthy in his relationships with people. We can believe what he says!
- We should prepare to explain this truth.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Compare and Contrast God's Truth with Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism

- Began in Enlightenment period after the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648); roots in Renaissance. Assumes that knowledge is accessible to the human mind, and is certain, objective, and good; truth limited to rational apprehension.
- Searches for method of demonstrating the essential correctness of philosophic, scientific, religious, moral, and political doctrines.
- Absolute faith in human rational capabilities: reason the criterion for assessing reality.
- Progress inevitable; science and education will free mankind from vulnerability to nature and social bondage.
- Suspicion of all beliefs which seem to curtail autonomy or are based on some external authority other than reason.

Postmodernism

- Began in 1970s; roots in latter 19th Century (Friedrich Nietzsche). Postmodernism marks end of a single and universal worldview: the one point of agreement of all scholars on what the term postmodern means.
- Truth not limited to rational apprehension. Reject assumption of autonomous and dispassionate, purely objective knower & intrinsic goodness of knowledge.
- Knowledge cannot be objective because universe not mechanistic; rejection of emphasis on rational discovery through scientific method and of modernist certainty in science.
- Structure inhibits meaning and freedom. Deconstructionist approach yields meaning: other valid paths to attaining truth exist including emotions and intuition; meaning emerges through interaction, thus many meanings possible.
- Postmodern ethos resists unified and universally valid explanations; no absolute truth possible. Truth relative to the community in which we participate.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

“To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’

“³³ They answered him, ‘We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’

“Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’” (John 8:31-36)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- Jesus taught and demonstrated that truth is knowable, absolute, and universal; he embodies it and proved his divinity and the rest of the truth by his resurrection from the dead as predicted.
- He chose to focus on the main point he was teaching in this discussion with the Jews (who believed him [8:31]), and he did not correct their error in 8:33. Not only were they themselves subject to Rome as they were speaking, but historically they were slaves under Egyptian pharaohs and Middle Eastern despots.
- Contrary to the modern and postmodern theorists, who have an unrealistic concept of human nature, not taking sin into account, Jesus is the only one who can provide true freedom, by freeing people from their sinfulness and sins and the implications of that bondage.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

- Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John 14:6)
- Further, Jesus added that “for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (John 18:37)
- Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, “is the image of the invisible God...all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15-17)
- "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." (Matthew 7:15, see also 16-23.)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- Jesus did not say he was a truth, part of the truth, knew the truth, or pointed to the truth. He simply and profoundly revealed that he is the truth.
- Christ is the basis of all truth. He is the standard, the benchmark, to determine the truth. Whenever we wonder what is true or right about a certain matter, we can and should look to Jesus' life and teachings. We see truth embodied in Jesus Christ.
- The standard of Jesus Christ is also the way we tell who and what is true. Many false prophets exist in the world today, and some are in churches. Jesus told us this phenomenon would occur.
- In order to discern who is a true believer in and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, ask the person to tell you what he or she thinks about Jesus. “Tell me about Jesus; who do you think he is?” Then compare and/or contrast what the person says by what God's Word says Jesus is, and you'll have your answer.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” (John 16:13)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- Since God is true, we can have a relationship with him, and it can be profound and lasting. Careful research in the field of psychology demonstrates that basic trust (which is grounded in truth and trustworthiness) is the essential basis for a relationship.
- Joy emerges in our hearts as we consider and act on the ever-present help of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, whom the Father and the Son have sent to be with us. (John 14:16; 15:26) One of the functions of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called “the Spirit of truth,” is to guide us into all truth. (John 16:13)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

- “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.” (Deuteronomy 7:9)
- “...the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.” (Jeremiah 10:10)
- “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)
- “[T]he Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.” (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- In the Bible, God’s truthfulness and faithfulness are linked. The word translated faithful in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, e.g., Deuteronomy 7:9, is again אָמָן (*’āman*) and means to endure, to be steadfast, dependable, true and trustworthy. It is the basis of the word Amen.
- The Old Testament reveals God as being truthful and faithful not just for a period of time but forever. (Jeremiah 10:10; cf. Psalm 146:6)
- In the New Testament Greek, the word faithfulness is derived from the verb πείθω (*peithō*) meaning to believe and its noun form πίστις (*pistis*) meaning faith, trust, faithfulness, reliability, solemn promise, oath, proof, pledge.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

- “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them-- the LORD, who remains faithful forever.” (Psalm 146:5-6)
- “For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (Psalm 100:5)
- “...the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. (2 Thessalonians 3:3)
- “and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,” (Revelation 1:5)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- As an attribute of God’s being, his faithfulness is also eternal. (Psalm 146:6) He won’t demonstrate faithfulness one day and then sometime in the future forget his covenantal commitment. We read in Psalm 100:5 that God’s faithfulness continues throughout all generations.
- God’s faithfulness is what led theologian Louis Berkhof to observe is “the ground of His people’s confidence, the foundation of their hope, and the cause of their rejoicing.” (*Manual of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 69-70)
- As we trust and obey God, Satan is powerless to harm us, and because God is true and faithful, he strengthens and protects us from Satan.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

- “...the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.” (Psalm 33:4)
- “For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off; the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.” (Psalm 37:28-29)
- “To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless,” (Psalm 18:25)
- “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.” (Psalm 25:10)
- “No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,” (1 Timothy 5:9; cf., Proverbs 31:10-31, esp. v. 26)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- When we walk daily with the Lord, in obedience to his Word, maturing in Christ-likeness, and remain faithful to the Lord, we will see his faithfulness to us. (Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Samuel 2:9; 2 Samuel 22:26; Psalm 18:25; 25:10)
- God’s communicable attribute of faithfulness enables us to be faithful to him and to others, e.g., being faithful to our spouse and being faithful in our commitments to others. (Cf., Luke 12:42; 2 Chronicles 31:18-21; John 1:5)
- He has not promised to bless those who depart from him, are unfaithful, and unrighteous, but they do receive good from him, even if they neither recognize or thank him. (Matthew 5:45; 6:2,5)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is True and Faithful

When Jesus returns, he will conduct the final judgment that will bring to completion God's plan of salvation and right all wrongs.

- “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’” (Matthew 25:31-34)

Meaning and More Practical Benefits

- Does that sound good? Can we count on that promise taking place? We're so used to sinful human beings making promises all the time, and then too many if not most times failing to keep those promises, that when people promise us something, we tend to not always believe them.
- BUT NOT SO WITH GOD. Because God is true and faithful we can have absolute assurance that God will fulfill all his promises which are still coming, e.g., his constant presence and help for any need we have; the Second Coming of Jesus; the righting of all wrongs; and the elimination of all evil, death, crying and pain in the new heaven and the new earth. (Revelation 21:3,4) We can count on Jesus' returning to bring to fulfillment his kingdom which he inaugurated at his First Coming (Luke 17:21).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is Sovereign

a. God's Sovereign Will

“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2)

“When I act, who can reverse it?”
(Isaiah 43:13)

b. God's Sovereign Power

+ “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” (Matthew 19:26)

+ “Christ...far above all rule and authority, power and dominion...And God placed all things under his feet...” (Ephesians 1:17-22a)

+ “[Jesus said] I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God's sovereignty involves two dimensions: his sovereign will and his sovereign power. The former is the exercise of God's authority to accomplish what pleases him, what he sees is best for all, and achieve his purposes. His sovereign power is his total and complete ability to produce what he wills without being thwarted by any being or circumstance in all creation, including artificial intelligence (AI). (Job 42:2) How very comforting! What God purposes and promises he provides. What God says, he can deliver. Talk about Biblical theology being practical!
- God is not dependent on anything; on the contrary, all God's creation is dependent on him. God can and does take care of us, including helping us overcome adversity, especially those who remain faithful to him. We don't have to worry. Believe that reality and sleep well!
- Due to the sovereignty of God, his believers do not need alcoholic beverages, opioid drugs, or other substance abuse to calm nerves and "get through" worrisome thoughts and experiences such as AI or a plane trip and times on the trip, e.g., excessive turbulence.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- As a communicable characteristic, God has given humans a smaller and limited amount of sovereignty as part of creating us in his image, e.g., in his command that we subdue the earth and rule over the living creatures as stewards of God's creation. (Genesis 1:28-29)
- An important part of our stewardship includes being responsible. With any privilege comes responsibility; therefore, when we use our God-given ability to make something, such as in gain-of-function research, artificial intelligence, or anything else, God will hold us accountable for controlling what we have made so that it contributes positively to his creation and serves his purposes. What we produce must not in and of itself negatively affect God's creation.
- Compounding the challenge is the sinfulness of human nature, whereby something good is used for evil, which we'll examine in our study of Biblical anthropology.
- Yet, thanks be to God, he has revealed that he loves us, is sovereign, and everything is under his control.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits



Contrast the gods of other religions that are made in man's image and are not sovereign. For example, one of the ways the theology of Taoism impacts the culture of China is in architecture: Taoism asserts that architects should add an opening on the top of the buildings to help the gods get over the building and not become angry when hindered by the tall buildings. In China such construction is very common. The gods of the false religions are not sovereign, and thus not helpful or loving and gracious and must be appeased, unlike the One true God.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- We see here an illustration of Isaiah's prophecy that there are "those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." (5:20)
- "David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying,
'Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.
¹¹Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.¹² Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.¹³ Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.'" (1 Chronicles 29:10-13)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Why is it wrong to commit adultery? To engage in other types of sex outside of marriage? To steal? To lie?
- One answer offered is "Because all these acts hurt people, and that's bad." Yet, some object, "Why is that bad?" Who says so?!
- These and similar questions are being asked in our postmodern age which is inclined more than ever to challenge previously held values and redefine terms. Today many acts condemned in the Bible are being presented as not only tolerable but acceptable and even good. Their promoters try to justify and validate them by referring to them as "the new normal."
- Unless we can appeal to a higher authority, we have no way to effectively answer these questions or ultimately resolve the disputes.
- We have that higher authority: God, who is the creator and owner of everything in heaven and earth. Therefore, he decides what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and not acceptable.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- The Bible begins with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)
 - + The Hebrew verb translated create has only one subject in the Bible: God. Further, the word create means to make out of nothing; God made it all. It’s all his; he neither borrowed from nor owes anybody.
 - + Man is never the subject of the verb create.
- God tells Job, “Everything under heaven and earth belongs to me.” (41:11b)
- With the Holy Spirit’s guidance David sings, “The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.” (Psalm 24:1-2)
- “In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.” (Hebrews 1:10) They thus belong to him.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Obviously we need to appeal to a higher authority, since most people in the United States believe that all truth is relative, i.e., that there is no universal standard for judging right and wrong, except that one, which contradicts their thesis. Even more disappointing is the finding that only 32% of adults who call themselves born-again Christians believe in moral absolutes, according to Barna Research; the figure is even lower for born again teenagers (nine percent).
- Good News! We do have a Higher Authority: God! Without an appeal to God anything we say can be dismissed by someone else who claims to have an opinion equal to or better than ours, a very common claim that often comes in the frequently quoted but errantly applied assertion in the U. S. Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.” They deceptively imply that *ipso facto* all these people’s values are equal; they are not. The only way we can show the error of such flawed casuistry, is to appeal to a higher authority, and we have the best in God’s Word.

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- “In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.” (Hebrews 1:10) They thus belong to him.
- “Jesus..., “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In his Word we see ample documentation that God is the owner of the universe, of all that is, ever was, and ever will be.
- On the human level, we see the same principle. If you make something it is yours; you own it.
- *With ownership comes privilege.* If you own a car, you can decide who will drive it and who won’t and whether or not you’ll allow smoking in your vehicle. In the house you own you have the right to decide who you allow to enter and what constitutes acceptable behavior under your roof.
- If you own a business, you have the right to vet applicants and decide whom you will hire.
- Since God is the owner of the cosmos he can do whatever he wants with his creation. That’s perfectly logical. It follows and makes sense that God has the right to establish the standard for judging what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. It is his definition of good and evil that counts. He also has the right to vet whom he allows into his presence and under what conditions. (John 14:6)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- God told Moses to write, “If you enter your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket.” (Deuteronomy 23:24)
+ **How could God say that? Because he owns all the grapes. And everything else!** *This is one way he cares for his people’s daily needs.*
- In response to God’s graciousness, his people have always given back to him from their bounty. David declared why. “[W]ho am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.” (1 Chronicles 29:14. See also 16.)
- “‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things,” Paul declared. “To him be the glory forever!” (Romans 11:35-36)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- At this point it is important to inform people about God’s character, who he is and what he is like, for out of his character comes the standard to which we are being held. This is one of the reasons why this series, which is based on historic Christian systematic theology, and that theology itself, begins with the study of God’s revelation as to who God is and what he is like.
- We can be eternally grateful that, as we’ve seen in this series, God’s essence is love. Since his love is perfect, it includes holiness, righteousness, and justice, and he does not change, thus neither do his definitions. We do not have to live in anxiety that he will treat us unfairly, as do the followers of the demonic gods of other religions. (1 Corinthians 10:20-21; Isaiah 44:6; John 8:44; 14:6)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.” (Exodus 6:7-8)
- “I prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O Sovereign LORD, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’” (Deuteronomy 9:26)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

God’s love is always evident in his ownership, especially in his provision to redeem (Hebrew *ga’al*, Greek *lutroō*), a major motif or theme throughout the Bible, that is rooted in the understanding of purchase, to free by paying a ransom and buying back a person or thing and thus laying claim to the person or thing purchased. (Exodus 6:7-8; Deuteronomy 9:26) God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt as part of his plan to redeem all his people everywhere and throughout all time from slavery to sin and evil, which he did in and through Jesus Christ, “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:14)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- “...the Lord has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands.” (Deuteronomy 26:18)
- “You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” (Leviticus 20:26)
- “...you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (Deuteronomy 7:6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- As we’ve just seen, God takes care of his creation that belongs to him, including his people whom he loves. In so doing, he perfectly models what we should do.
- Further, in that responsibility we see our *raison d’être*, our purpose for being, and our mission. When he established his covenant with Abram, God explained that his people would be blessed to be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-3)
- As we saw earlier in this series, holy means set apart, uncommon, pure. Since God’s character is holy, he has thus chosen to **not** consider sex outside of marriage, stealing, and lying as good and acceptable behavior, as acts characteristic of his holy people.
- Instead, he views such acts as offensive, evil, harmful, and counterproductive to the well being of his people whom he loves and the accomplishment of his plan of redemption. (Ephesians 4:17-5:20)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

We must remember our identity: to Whom we belong (who we are and Whose we are), and our calling from God to be holy to him.

- “They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” (Isaiah 61:3)
- “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light...to abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:9, 11-12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- As always, God is right! Just talk with someone who will honestly tell you what he or she has experienced as a victim of adultery by a spouse, the loss of a family heirloom or other valued item that has been stolen, or the devastating results of a lie.
- Here we have more work to do as a church; fewer acorns are maturing into oaks of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:3) In 2006 Barna research found that “[t]he notion of personal holiness has slipped out of the consciousness of the vast majority of Christians. While just 21% of adults consider themselves to be holy, by their own admission large numbers have no idea what ‘holiness’ means and only one out of every three (35%) believe that God expects people to become holy.”

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We can do this! God does not call us to an impossible task, and he is always present to help us! (Joshua 1:5; Matthew 28:20 and many other passages!)
- We cannot influence people for Christ if we live our lives in the gutter. No one seeking to be saved is attracted to such a lifestyle. Neither are many others.
- Such behavior is indistinguishable from the world. Contrary to being separate, uncommon, and pure, such behavior fits in with the world, is all too common, and is very impure. **Do not be afraid to be different!** Let us make pleasing God our greatest desire, objective, and accomplishment. (Romans 12:1-2; Luke 6:22, 26)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- Because God made them he owns the cattle on a thousand hills; “...the world is mine, and all that is in it,” the Psalmist sang of God. (Psalm 50:10-12)
- Because God made us, “we are his” as he reveals in Psalm 100:3.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We belong to him, as does everything else. What great comfort this gives us! Social science research confirms what we intuitively sense, that belonging is one of the most important of human needs. No greater blessing exists than to know we belong to the Owner of the universe, and that he loves us.
- The next time you feel overwhelmed by a problem, meditate on these words from the catechism and most of all the Scripture texts upon which they are based. Resist the temptation to view your difficulty with tunnel vision. Put the situation in the fullest perspective: you are not in it alone.
- Remember that you belong to the One who has redeemed and lays claim to you.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God Is the Owner

- “for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.” (Psalm 22:28)
- “which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Ephesians 1:20-23)
- “and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,” (Revelation 1:5)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Recall, as we’ve seen earlier in this series that you do not have a small God; he is immense, filling more than the universe; he is sovereign and almighty; and he loves you.
- He not only owns everything, but he rules what he owns. (Psalms 22:28, 66:1-9, 67:4; Ephesians 1:20-23; Revelation 1:5)
- Then begin to sense in a renewed way God’s all-sufficient help and with it the surpassing peace and joy **he alone provides!**

Theology: The Doctrine of God

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)

Who is God; what is he like; what
has he done; and what is he doing?

Key Aspects of God's Other Work

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

- “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.
¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,” (Ephesians 1:3-13)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- *Predestination* refers to God's purposes pertaining to his rational, moral, creatures, including all humans, individually and in groups. His predestination concerning the angels is somewhat different. The focus here is on humans. Predestination consists of two aspects: election and reprobation.
 - *Election* may be defined as “the eternal act of God by which from eternity out of pure grace for Christ's sake He has decreed to bestow those blessings on the Christians which through His call they now enjoy—conversion, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith.” (Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3)
- Election is one of what Biblical scholars refer to as a major motif or theme that occurs in many places throughout the whole Bible.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

⁷The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.

¹⁰But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him.

¹¹Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today.

¹²If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. ¹³He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb....”

(Deuteronomy 7:6-14)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

“In the OT the verb ‘elect’ (Heb. בָּחַר [*baḥar*]) refers only rarely to the election of a single individual to eternal salvation but usually to God’s historical covenant action concerning the people of Israel. God chose this nation in order to establish his covenant with it, he elected it from among all the nations as his own peculiar property (Deut. 14:2). The prophets emphasize that this is an election of grace: It is in no way based on any human excellences of Israel (Amos 9:7; cf. Deut. 7:3-8), but at the same time it obligates the people to offer obedience to God inasmuch as it brings them within the sphere of God’s holiness.” (W. Joest [trans.], “Predestination” in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

- “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.
‘I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’” (Genesis 12:1-3)
- “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” (John 15:16)
- “...God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- To understand the subject of predestination and its key component of election, as much as possible, one has to keep in mind the Old Testament basis of election, which shapes the content of the concept. We are elected to a function, not to a position of prestige, which point the Israelites failed to maintain.
- Their election became a status in their minds, not a function; they lost sight of their election being a calling to holiness to God to serve him in his redemptive purposes. (Genesis 12:1-3; cf. John 15:16.) *This distortion is still a danger for Christians today.*
- In the view herein presented, in every age a people whom God has elected is present so the church will always exist and continue its witness to reach out to those who are not in the elect and are not saved and also serve God in other ways. That plan, however, has as its focus the whole of humankind, (1 Timothy 2:4) not that all people will be saved, but so that the message will reach all people and provide the opportunity for them to be saved, to join the elect in God's covenant community, and join in the mission of the elect.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

The most difficult Biblical passages to interpret, on which the traditional Reformed doctrine of reprobation is based, include the following verses and Romans 11:7-10; 1 Peter 2:8.

- “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.
¹⁹One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ ²⁰But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’ ²¹Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?
²²What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?” (Romans 9:18-22)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Reprobation in Reformed theology typically refers to a decision by God to not elect some people as a punishment for their sinfulness. The fact that he has elected some implies that he has not elected others. In traditional Reformed theology this reprobation has usually been understood as one of the decrees of God whereby some sinners are not saved. The elect will sooner or later come to Christ and experience salvation, but the reprobate will never accept Christ and therefore are condemned.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The ways Christians have interpreted the preceding and additional Bible texts pertaining to predestination can be seen as on a continuum of views positing an unnecessary dichotomy between God's sovereignty and human freedom, both of which are true but neither of which negate the other.

Views of God's Will and Human Freedom

Hyper-Calvinist

Calvinist

Some Lutheran
Modified Calvinist

Arminian

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

- “Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. [1 Timothy 1:18-20] I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)
- “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- One of the greatest textual difficulties with the hyper-Calvinist and Calvinist views of predestination are the Biblical passages which state that God wants all people to be saved. Calvin and others interpret the context of 1 Timothy 2:4 as applying to classes of people, such as kings and magistrates, meaning that God wants people from all segments of society to be saved, not all persons. Calvin concludes, “By this Paul surely means only that God has not closed the way unto salvation to any order of men; rather, he has so poured out his mercy that he would have none without it.” (*Institutes*, p. 984)
- Yet, that view seems forced when the context of the whole passage is carefully considered. Observe that the last sentences of the preceding chapter have been addressing individuals, specifically Timothy, but then also Hymenaeus and Alexander.
- The Greek where Paul and Peter address the doctrine election is even more compelling.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

“Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

¹⁹One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ ²⁰But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’ ²¹Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

²²What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? ²³What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—

²⁴even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:18-24)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Speaking in verse 23 of “vessels of mercy, which [God] prepared beforehand for glory,” (9:23 NASB) the Greek verb for “he prepared beforehand” (προητοίμασεν [*proētoimasesen*]) is in the **active** voice clearly indicating that God is engaged in the selecting of these people for his purposes.
- In a very significant contrast, when we look at the Greek pertaining to the vessels of wrath having been prepared for destruction, (9:22 NASB) the verb Paul uses for “having been prepared” is (κατηρτισμένα [*katērtismena*]), and we see it is in the **passive** voice. Further, as Pieper clarifies, “there is no mention whatever of any ‘doing’ by God...Here, then, the Apostle clearly says that God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath, but does not say that He made them vessels of wrath.” (Pieper, pp. 497-498.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

“What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? ²³What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:22-23)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

We must also observe in the Romans 9:23 text, in the Greek word translated [in the NASB] “prepared beforehand” (*proētoimasen*) regarding the “vessels of mercy,” that the prefix *pro*, meaning before, indicates that God’s fitting the vessels of mercy for his purposes was done by him eons ago, “before the foundations of the world.” (Ephesians 1:4) Pieper observes that “the *pro* is missing [in the Greek for “those fitted to destruction”]...Here, then, is taught an eternal preparation for glory or for salvation, but no eternal preparation for destruction.” (Pieper, p. 498)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

- God told Abram, ““In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”” (Genesis 15:16)
- “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” (Romans 9:18)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- God in his love for those whom he has created is long-suffering, i.e., very patient. But his patience is limited. (Genesis 15:16)
- Youngblood and Kaiser observe, “Nine times in Exodus the hardening of the pharaoh’s heart is ascribed to God...another nine times the pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart.... The pharaoh alone was the agent of the hardening in each of the first five plagues. Not until the sixth plague did God confirm the pharaoh’s willful action (see 9:12), as he had told Moses he would do (see similarly Romans 1:24-28).” (p. 92)
- God allows those who refuse to believe to persist in their obstinate disobedience until his purposes have been accomplished, and they have had their fair opportunity to respond in faith and obedience. Their hearts have become hardened. Why did God harden the heart of Pharaoh? In our limited and finite ability to understand, we cannot press beyond what we have been given, but we have been given enough to satisfy us. God has the right to do what he wills; God is good and perfect, as are all his ways; God is just and fair to all, e.g., he gave Pharaoh Moses, Aaron, and all the time he needed to do what was right in God’s perfect sight; God in his love for all human beings always keeps in mind his ultimate purpose, to redeem his creation, and he will not allow the sin and evil of anyone to destroy the lives of those whom he loves and is saving.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

- “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so they could not hear, to this very day.’” [Deuteronomy 29:4] (Romans 11:7-8)
- “Again, I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.” (Romans 11:11)
- “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again...I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’” (Romans 11:22-23, 25-26)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

When the Bible speaks of God hardening the hearts of people we need to keep in mind the above observations, including that the hardening has been done after sufficient time for repentance and obedience, and that the hardening is done to accomplish God's redemptive purposes for all people. Recall what Paul says in Romans 11.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

Compare 1 Peter 2:7-8:

“Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,’ [Psalm 118:22] and, ‘A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ [Isaiah 8:14] They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.”

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Again the English verb in 1 Peter 2:8 does not disclose what the Greek verb reveals. The words “were destined for” translate the Greek word ἐτέθησαν, which is transliterated *etethēsan*. This Greek verb is in the **passive** voice, indicating together with the context that those who fall do so because they disobey the Word of God, specifically the Gospel of Christ Jesus, not that God actively predestined them to destruction.
- The outstanding Bible commentator, Lenski, further explains, “It is startling to read: ‘for which they also were placed (set, appointed).’ Calvinists explain this as an eternal decree of reprobation, all Scripture to the contrary notwithstanding. They place the action of the verb in the *voluntas antecedens* whereas it belongs in the *voluntas consequens*. The former does not take into account man's reaction to Christ and to the Word....” (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 98.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

“Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,’⁸ and, ‘A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.” (1 Peter 2:7-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Again, a very important part of verse eight that must be kept in mind is the statement, “They stumble because they disobey the message.” Their disobedience is their own fault. To help us accurately interpret the text we need to remember the Greek term, *etethēsan* (“destined for”), is in the **passive** voice. Thus, as we found in our study of Romans 9:22, we cannot use this text as a proof that God has from eternity actively decreed that these people have been destined for reprobation.
- Thus, as some interpret this passage, Peter is likely saying that unbelief is destined to result in eternal destruction. (Donald W. Burdick and John Skilton, commentary on 1 Peter in *The NIV Study Bible*, p. 1890.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Election and Predestination

- “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.
‘I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’” (Genesis 12:1-3)
- “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” (John 15:16)
- “...God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

It is helpful to keep in mind the purpose of election, which is functional: to maintain the witness to God's plan of salvation in every age so that the church will always exist and according to its calling proclaim Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Especially in the light of the passages we've just studied, that some in every period of history will have been elected from before the world began does not imply that those who have not been elected “before the creation of the world” have been predestined to be doomed; it is not, therefore, necessary to interpret the Bible as teaching a double predestination. The elect are to reach out to the non-elect that those of the latter who respond in faith in Christ will be saved, as is God's desire. (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

1. It takes little thought to be deeply moved when we consider that God has chosen us to be in his elect people, which election commissions us with his high and holy calling to partner with, serve, him in his plan of redemption of his creation! We, as were his original covenant people, the Old Testament Israelite church, are elected for a function: to reach out to the world to introduce people to God and his love, to tell them who he is and what he is like and of his plans and purposes, including what he expects of people who would come into his presence. We have a great mission that gives our lives, and the lives of those we reach for Christ, great meaning and eternal significance!
2. We clearly sense the value we have in God's sight. His great love for us is supremely exhibited in his only-begotten Son's coming to sacrifice his life for us that we could have access to the presence of God and serve him forever!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

3. Being made in the image of God, and having a degree of freedom, enables us to place great value on our lives but also gives us a great responsibility to exercise that freedom in accord with God's will. Recognizing that we are elect in a relationship with God who is sovereign gives us security. Human free will and God's sovereignty go perfectly together; they fit hand in glove.
4. Reflecting on the meaning of our election and the work to which God has called and is equipping us, our perspective is lifted from a focus on the here and now to include also the eternal perspective. How magnificently wonderful is our joy in knowing that this which we see all around us is not all there is to life!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

5. The Biblical doctrine of election, assures us of our salvation, since our salvation is clearly all in God's grace and none of it in our merit. Our belief in Christ assures us we are in the elect and that we are so solely by God's unmerited love of us; i.e., we have done nothing to earn our salvation, for God does not require us to do works to be saved. We are totally unable to earn our salvation; in fact, we daily increase our debt to God. Pieper has well explained the situation with respect to how this reality comforts us: "Man does not see the absolute necessity of *universal* grace [not to be confused with the unbiblical concept of universal salvation] so long as the terrors of conscience have not yet seized his heart. But when his conscience is truly terrified (feels the *terrors conscientiae*), he will find nothing consoling but the grace that avails without any limitation for all sinners...." (Pieper, p. 482)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

6. We do not have to worry about whether we are in the elect or are saved. We can have confidence that we are in the elect and are saved because of our faith in Jesus Christ. As Pieper has written, “With this Scriptural view of the mode of election, we look to Christ and the Gospel to determine whether we are elected, and we are happy to find that all our distress has vanished.... If a person asks: “Am I chosen to salvation?” he should in turn be asked: “Do you sincerely believe in the Gospel?” If the person says “Yes” we can say that he or she is in the elect. For we can say, regarding what the Bible teaches concerning the elect, “from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” (2 Thessalonians 2:13) (Pieper, p. 476) We are in the elect either because God chose us “from the beginning” or because God worked through the original elect to reach and save us, thus bringing us into the elect and sharing the mission with them. It does not matter how or when we came into the elect.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

7. Pieper in a solid gold footnote (always read footnotes!) quotes an author who, quoting another author, noticed a hugely comforting reality expressed in the Greek of Romans 8:28-30, especially in verses 29-30. “Paul shows *ex professo* [by profession] in Rom. 8:28-30, for the consolation of the Christians, that all elect are assured of eternal glory. The glorification (*edoxasen*, aorist [past tense]) is just as inseparably linked to eternal election as the call (*ekalesen*), and the justification (*edikaiōsen*). Stoekhardt quotes Weiss: ‘To place the glorification on the same level of reliability with the *proegnō* [foreknew], *proōrise* [foreordained, predestined], *ekalese* [called], and *edikaiōsen* [justified], Paul chose the proleptic (anticipative) aorist.’” (Pieper, p. 479)

What this means is that here we have in the Greek of the New Testament, God’s Word declaring that the glorification of God’s elect (which is yet to come for those of us still on earth in the first phase of our life) which will come in heaven, is as certain as those aspects of the life in Christ that his believers in him now already experience in their call and justification, which have already occurred! *Further, our glorification (expressed in the Greek as a future event that has already occurred) is put in the same terms as God’s foreknowledge and foreordination that not only has already occurred but that occurred before the foundation of the world! Wow! How’s that for assurance?!*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

8. Pieper quotes Luther's commentary on 1 Peter 1:2, "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God," in which the great Reformation leader offers Biblical evidence of the supreme comfort that believers can have in Christ.

"Therefore, **when your sins and unworthiness trouble you** and the thought comes to you that you might not be elected of God, also that the number of the elect is small and the company of the godless large, and you are terrified by the awful examples of divine wrath and judgment, then do not dispute long why God does this or that so, and not differently, when He could easily do so. Do not presume to explore the depths of divine foreknowledge with your reason, else you will certainly go astray and either sink into gloomy fatalism or turn epicurean. But **hold firmly to the promises of the Gospel which teach you that Christ, the Son of God, became incarnate to bless all people on earth, that is, to redeem them from sin and death, justify and save them; and that He did this according to the command and gracious will of God our heavenly Father, who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life,** John 3:16. If you follow this counsel, namely, first of all acknowledge that you are by nature a child of wrath, worthy of eternal death and damnation, from which no creature, human or angelic, can save you, and **then grasp the promise of God** and believe that He is the merciful, truthful God, who from pure grace, without our work and merit, faithfully keeps what He has promised, and has sent Christ, His only Son, in order that He make satisfaction for your sins and give you His innocence and righteousness, finally to redeem you from all evil and from death; **then do not doubt that you belong to the company of the elect. If we consider election in this manner, even as Paul does, it is comforting beyond measure.**"
(Pieper, p. 484; emphasis in bold added by EDS)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

9. Jesus added these comforting words: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:27-30)

The church is the key means through which God is accomplishing his redemptive purposes. Jesus revealed how the church also is able to comfort his believers and to give them assurance. He asked his first disciples, “what about you?...Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock [of Peter’s testimony that Jesus is the Messiah] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:15-18)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Election

10. For many further assurances that you are saved in Christ, read the first letter of John. For just one example, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.” (1 John 2:1-3)

Is there anything more practical than having such assurance that you are in God’s grip in Christ with the most important job in the world to do?! That you are intimately known by and on speaking terms with the Owner and Sovereign ruler of all creation?! That he has revealed that you are called to proclaim that this phase of life is very brief but an eternity of joy is just ahead for all who will come to the Lord on his terms?! Thanks be to the triune God: Father, only begotten Son Christ Jesus, and Holy Spirit, three in one!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

“Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, ‘I will set up my camp in such and such a place.’

⁹The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: ‘Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there.’ ¹⁰So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

¹¹This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, ‘Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?’

¹²‘None of us, my lord the king,’ said one of his officers, ‘but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.’

¹³‘Go, find out where he is,’ the king ordered, ‘so I can send men and capture him.’ The report came back: ‘He is in Dothan.’

¹⁴Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.

¹⁵When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh, my lord, what shall we do?’ the servant asked.

¹⁶‘Don't be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’

¹⁷And Elisha prayed, ‘O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

¹⁸As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, ‘Strike these people with blindness.’ So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.

¹⁹Elisha told them, ‘This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for.’ And he led them to Samaria.

²⁰After they entered the city, Elisha said, ‘LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see.’ Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria.

²¹When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, ‘Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?’

²²‘Do not kill them,’ he answered. ‘Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.’ ²³So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.” (2 Kings 6:8-23)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

A missionary home in Michigan on furlough told one of his supporting churches that every two weeks in his work at an African field hospital he had to take a two-day trip by bicycle to a city for money and medical supplies. On one occasion he came upon a young man who had been seriously injured in a fight. While treating him for his injuries the missionary told the man the good news about Jesus Christ. Afterward he continued home without incident.

Two weeks later the man he had treated sought him out in the city. He told him that on his previous trip he and some friends had followed him into the jungle and planned to kill him and take his money and drugs. As they began to move into where he was camped for the night they saw that he was surrounded by 26 armed guards. The missionary laughed and said that he was all alone, but the young man insisted, "No sir, I was not the only person to see the guards. My five friends also saw them, and we all counted them. It was because of those armed guards that we were afraid and left you alone."

In the telling of this experience the missionary discovered that on the very evening of the plot to kill him, members of his church were praying for his safety. This and other similar accounts of God's care for his people parallel the awesome experience of Elisha in 2 Kings 6:8-23.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14)
- “To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’?” (Hebrews 1:13)
- “He [Christ Jesus, vss. 13-14] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Contrary to what many believe, angels do exist. In Hebrews 1:14 we see that angels are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.”
- The word angel in both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek means messenger. Angels are not on the same level as God or any of the three persons of the Godhead; they’re not divine. (Cf. Hebrews 1:13) They’re beings God created who bring to humankind special messages from him and accomplish purposes he has for us. (Colossians 1:15-17, Hebrews 1 and 2)
- Thrones, powers, rulers, authorities are angels. Part of the Colossian heresy Paul is addressing is an unbiblical view of angels.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.” (Colossians 2:18)
- “Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”’ And he added, ‘These are the true words of God.’¹⁰At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, ‘Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.’” (Revelation 19:9-10)
- “Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.” (Psalm 103:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We should believe the existence of, take seriously, respect, appreciate, and value, but not worship, angels. (Colossians 2:18-19; Revelation 19:9-10; cf. 22:8-9)
- We should not attribute to angels the glory that is due only to God, whom they are continually praising. (Psalm 103:20)
- To deny the existence and function of angels is to deny the providence of God.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” (1 Timothy 2:5)
- “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” (Hebrews 9:15)
- “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying [λεγόντων (legōnton), saying not singing], ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’” (Luke 2:13-14 TNIV)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Angels are NOT mediators between humans and God. We have only one mediator, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God and Second Person of the Trinity, and Christ is all-sufficient. (1 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 8:6, 9:15)
- We only read of angels speaking. Nevertheless, while the Bible nowhere states that angels sing, neither does it say they don’t sing, but they didn’t sing on this (Luke 2:13-14) and other occasions.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice.” (Daniel 9:21)
- “Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” (Revelation 14:6)
- “Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.” (Psalm 103:20)
- “It was revealed to them [the prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.” (1 Peter 1:12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Angels are limited with regard to space; they’re not everywhere present. (Genesis 28:12, Daniel 9:21, Revelation 14:6)
- They’re not all powerful. (Psalm 103:20)
- They’re limited with regard to their knowledge. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover.” (Exodus 25:20)
- “The cherubim had their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim faced each other, looking toward the cover.” (Exodus 37:9)
- “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.” (Isaiah 6:1-2)
- “After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Some but not all angels are portrayed as having wings. Cherubim are seen with two wings. Seraphim, mentioned only in Isaiah 6:2, have six wings.
- Both cherubim and seraphim serve as attendants to God on his throne. “I looked, and I saw the likeness of a throne of sapphire above the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim.” (Ezekiel 10:1ff.; cf. 1:4ff.)
- Representations of the cherubim also appear in the most holy place in the tabernacle and temple. (Exodus 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 8:7; 2 Chronicles 5:9)
- Cherubim also serve as guards. (Genesis 3:24)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.” (Mark 16:5)
- “There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.
“The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” Now I have told you.’” (Matthew 28:2-7)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Angels normally lack bodily form and are usually invisible, except when taking on human appearance at times when bringing a communication from God or in accomplishing a task as those who protected the Michigan missionary. (Hebrews 1:14, Genesis 18:1-2, Mark 16:5, Matthew 28:2-7)
- Accordingly, angels are not humans or former humans. People do not become angels when they die, as many muse. Humans in heaven are, and when resurrected and living in the new heaven and the new earth will be, the same persons they were here on earth, only now perfected in Christ. (John 20:19—21:15; 1 Corinthians 15)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.
²Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.
¹³Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.” (Psalm 148:1-2,5,13; Revelation 4 and 5)
- “The two men said to Lot, “Do you have anyone else here--sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here,
¹³because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.” (Genesis 19:12-13)
- “That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning--there were all the dead bodies!” (2 Kings 19:35)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Angels do not appear regularly throughout the Biblical account of the history of salvation. Rather they arrive at strategic points and as ambassadors of God, speaking and acting in his name, not on their own, and the good angels never oppose or contradict his will.

- Angels praise the Lord. (Psalm 148:1-6, 13 [reasons for praising God]; Revelation 4 and 5)
- They administer justice for God in this world. (Genesis 19:12-25, 2 Kings 19:35, Acts 12:23, Revelation 12:7-12)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

- “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.” (Exodus 23:20)
- “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.” (Psalm 34:7)
- “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:10)
- “Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, ‘Peter is at the door!’
‘You're out of your mind,’ they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, ‘It must be his angel.’” (Acts 12:13-15)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Angels function as guardians of believers. (Exodus 23:20, 2 Kings 6:8-23, Psalm 34:7, 91:11-12, Matthew 18:10) However, here as always in our interpretation of God's Word, we must be careful to not read into a text more than is there. We must also constantly guard against the thoroughly permeating individualism pervading U. S. culture that impacts our understanding.

- In Acts 12 the believers who were at Mary's house think Peter is in jail, so they don't believe Rhoda, the servant girl who says he is knocking at the door. In verse 15 they say, “It must be his angel.” This passage does not necessarily teach that everyone has his or her own special guardian angel. Such a concept is possible but must be left an open question.
- As NT professor Bandstra has written, “remember that it is really *God's* care through the angel that gives us security.” (69) Angels do not act on their own (Psalm 91:11-12); they aren't independent agents. They function under God's authority and command. (66) The angels are one of the means God uses to accomplish his purposes, including caring for his people. Andrew Bandstra, *In the Company of Angels: What the Bible Teaches What You Need to Know*.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

Angels will also accompany the Lord when he returns.

- Jesus said, “the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” (Matthew 16:27)
- The apostle Paul wrote, “the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- When the time is right in God’s sight, Jesus will come again to earth; he will right all wrongs; and it will be a profoundly awesome event to experience!
- When we see figures of angels at the top of Christmas trees and elsewhere, let’s remember these Biblical teachings about the real and marvelous beings they symbolize. Let’s enjoy and be encouraged with experiences believers have with these wonderful agents of God’s providential care for us and countless others.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and the Good Angels

Let's express gratitude to God for the blessings he provides for us through his angels. Angels still function in the above and other ways we've considered, except for the first, as messengers. The Word and the Holy Spirit who dwells within believers in Christ are now God's primary forms of communication to us in addition to his general revelation through his creation. (E.g., Romans 1:16-20) Recall, e.g., that the angels who protected the missionary from Michigan did not bring a verbal message to him, but they surely demonstrated and powerfully pointed to God's providential care of his servant in Africa!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Theophanies

- “Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by.... (Genesis 18:1-3 NASB)
- “Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ ‘Neither,’ he replied, ‘but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.’ Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, ‘What message does my Lord have for his servant?’” (Joshua 5:13-14)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Angels are different from theophanies. A theophany, a visible manifestation of God himself,

- is identified as God (Genesis 18),
- receives worship (Joshua 5:14), and
- speaks with underived divine authority. While sometimes called “the angel of the LORD,” (Judges 2:1-5) he speaks for God in the first person. (Cf. Genesis 16:10; Exodus 3:2,4; Judges 6:11-12).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

- “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.” (Jude 1:6)
- “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment;” (2 Peter 2:4)
- “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:11-12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

In addition to the angels who obey God and accomplish his will for and through them, the Bible teaches that there are those who do evil. Holy and unholy angels are distinguished in Scripture. Satan and his demonic followers, also called the devil and devils, are fallen angels. (Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4; Revelation 12:1-12) They include “the rulers, authorities, and powers” about which Paul writes in Ephesians 6:10-18, a vital text to read, examine, reflect on, pray about, and identify where each part links with our lives.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

In his excellent commentary on the Book of Revelation, *More than Conquerors*, William Hendriksen points out the significance of the second major division of the Bible's final book.

- He states that the theme of the first major division (chapters 1-11) is the victory of Christ and his church over the dragon and his followers and that this theme is continued in the second main division (chapters 12-22).
- He then explains that while the first part “pictures the outward struggle between the Church and the world, the second part of the book reveals the deeper background. We now see more clearly than in the preceding division that the conflict between the Church and the world is but the outward manifestation of the war between the Christ and Satan (the dragon).” (134) The first half of Revelation describes the evils God's people confront, which we see every day, and the second half reveals the essential invisible cause of those evils that truly exists but escapes the evening news.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!’ ‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.”
(Mark 1:24-26)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Satan and the demons are real. They are personalities, not personifications of an impersonal evil force as even many theologians believe. When Jesus confronted the man who was possessed by an evil spirit, another Biblical term for a demon, in the synagogue of Capernaum, the spirit acted in certain ways and spoke to Jesus; Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man; and the spirit under Jesus’ authority and power obeyed.
- This text, written in the literary genre of historical narrative, records Jesus talking to living beings. Satan has an intellect (2 Corinthians 11:3), emotions (Revelation 12:17), and a will (2 Timothy 2:26), as does his demonic cohort.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

- “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8)
- “And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” (2 Corinthians 11:14)
- Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him (John 8:31), “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Satan and the evil angels do exist, and they are not cute, as when some say of a child, “Isn’t he a cute little devil!” That expression is a contradiction in terms; the devil and the demons are not at all cute. They are engaged in a cosmic battle against God and his people, seeking to undermine, destroy, and kill what, including those whom, he has created.
- That activity does not fit any standard definition of cuteness. The Holy Spirit also alerts us through Paul’s writing that Satan sometimes disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), and Jesus exposed him as actually being the father of lies and a murderer (John 8:44).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

“Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, ‘In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.’ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?’ Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

¹⁷When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” (Acts 19:13-20)

Meaning and Practical Results

- Reflect on this event in the light of the unwise and superficial secular thinking today. How many of the sons of Sceva would say that the demonic is only a personification of evil or that this evil spirit was a “cute little devil”?!
- One drachma was a silver coin, and in first century A.D. Ephesus it constituted about one day’s wage. Fifty thousand drachmas likely would equal about 10,000 USD today, a huge amount of money in Asia at that time...and now at least for most people!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

“To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.” (1 Corinthians 12:8-10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The Bible also teaches that believers in Christ have been given gifts to use in his service. (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4)
- Some, though not all of Christ’s followers, have been given the gift called discernment, the ability to identify the presence of evil spirits and to distinguish between them and spirits from God. (1 Corinthians 12:10)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

- ““What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!’ ‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” (Mark 1:24-26)
- “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:13)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Demons still enter and possess some human beings. Demonic possession is distinguished from demonic influence. The former involves evil spirits actually entering and controlling human beings. True Christians, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells (*op cit.*), including those in the process of growing from acorns to oaks of righteousness, are protected by the Holy Spirit from demon possession; demons cannot be in the presence of the Holy Spirit. However, we must “Put on the full armor of God so that [we] can take [our] stand against the devil’s schemes.” (Ephesians 6:11)
- Be alert to the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged, so as we are tempted and enticed to be drawn away from the things of God we will not do so; we will stand firm.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

- ““What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” (Mark 1:24-26)
- “After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn't we drive it out?’
“He replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer.’” (Mark 9:29)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Demon possession is often seen in other cultures. Missionaries have had many experiences with this activity, and when I was teaching pastors’ seminars on worship in Africa, I heard about it from those in attendance.
- Our conversation included what to do for demon possessed people at public worship services when a demon would act out, e.g., with uncontrolled shrieking, during worship. We discussed involving the congregation praying for the individual and, in the name of Jesus Christ, commanding the demon to come out of him or her. If that result doesn’t occur immediately (cf. Mark 9:29), the possessed person is led to a room in the church building where some can help him or her while the rest of the congregation continues in worship.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

We haven't seen as much open demonic activity in this country until recent times, though it is occurring, as public school officials, police officers, and those with the gift of discernment (1 Corinthians 12:10c) testify. Research in the field of psychology reveals that in virtually all cases of multiple personalities, the afflicted person has been involved to some extent with the occult.

A minister with whom I served at another church encountered a young woman, who he perceived was possessed by an evil spirit. Praying over her in Jesus' name and commanding the spirit to leave her, he saw the same result as in the New Testament where such exorcisms occurred through the power of Christ: after causing her to writhe violently and shriek, it left her. See also Acts 8:7 ("With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many,"). For more on the demonic and Satanism, use the Search bar on [this Website](#) and on my [academic Website](#).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

“Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.’

She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ At that moment the spirit left her.

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.” (Acts 16:16-19)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Though demons are created beings and are not divine but are fallen angels who have become committed to evil, demons do have some abilities that humans do not have. At least one, and likely others, can predict the future, and one was so employed in Philippi in Macedonia, in what is northern Greece today.
- Evil spirits are still involved in fortune telling. Unless someone is certain he or she has the gift of exorcism, stay away!
- Yet, if a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ ever finds himself or herself in the presence of a demon, all he or she has to do is to say what Paul said, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you...” and Jesus’ power will overcome the demon.
- Trust in and obey Jesus, and do not be afraid!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

“You...are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”
(1 John 4:4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- While demon possession and demonic influence are serious matters, we need to keep a healthy balance in our perspective. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic work, *The Screwtape Letters*, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors....” (P. 3)
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ brings us good news. (1 John 4:4) We, who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, need not fear Satan and his followers; they are totally in Christ’s control. And Christ loves us!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God and Satan are **not** peers; God is infinitely greater. Christianity is not a dualistic religion as many seem to think as they talk about God and Satan. Such people appear to believe that when things are going badly Satan has the upper hand but when things are going well God has the devil in a hammerlock. This concept is wrong; it is counter to what the Bible teaches. Satan and the demons are limited beings created by God; they are evil angels who have chosen to oppose him. God is peerless. Satan is a little peanut in contrast with God. If you wonder who a peer of Satan would be, think of another angel. Remember, God is sovereign and all powerful. We who are in Christ need not worry, but neither should we take the demonic lightly.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

The failure of many Christians to understand and keep in mind the cosmic and spiritual warfare in which we are engaged has led not a few well meaning but misinformed persons to eliminate from the church's singing such important hymns as "Onward Christian soldiers," thinking they glorify war on the human plane. Far to the contrary, these hymns edify and encourage believers in our growth in Christ-likeness, our maturity in the faith, so we can be aware of the spiritual dangers and victorious over Satan and the demons and serve the Lord ever more effectively in the high and holy calling he has given and is equipping us to do. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Consider just the first two verses of this classic Christian hymn. Sing it!

Classic Christian Hymn: Onward Christian Soldiers

Lyrics (1865): Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould; Music (1871): Arthur Sullivan

First Verse and Chorus

- Onward Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.
Christ, the royal Master,
Leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
See, His banners go!
- Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus,
Going on before.

Second Verse

- At the name of Jesus
Satan's host doth flee;
On then, Christian soldiers,
On to victory!
Hell's foundations quiver
At the shout of praise:
Brothers, lift your voices,
Loud your anthems raise!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

We should not have a cavalier and lackadaisical attitude about the devil and his demon followers; we should never play in their territory, e.g., consulting mediums or psychics, necromancy, false religions, Yoga (a part of Hinduism), horoscopes, Ouija boards and the like. (Leviticus 19:31; 2 Kings 21:6; 1 Chronicles 10:13-14) As C. S. Lewis also said, the devil is like a dog on a leash. Christ has conquered him in his obedience on the cross and in his Resurrection. However, within the radius of that leash unnecessary harm can come by disobeying God's will. Theologian G. W. Bromiley has rightly written, "These angels and their leader [Satan] were defeated at the cross (Colossians 2:15) and will finally be brought to condemnation (Matthew 25:41)" when the time is right in God's sight.

Pertaining to Yoga, people will say to you, "Oh, we don't get into the Hinduism part, we just do the exercises." Say to them, "Then why do you call it Yoga, which informed people know is Hindu." Furthermore, they are actually being taught dangerous Hindu thought without realizing it. For example, when they are instructed to clear and empty their minds and repeatedly recite "Ohm," this is the exact opposite of what God's Word tells us to do. We are to "be filled with the Spirit." (Ephesians 5:18) Further, remember what Jesus said about an empty mind. (Matthew 12:43-45) God's will is that we study his Word and obey it. As he says through James, "the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:25) See also Ezra 7:10 and Nehemiah 8:13. There are many other methods of physical exercise that are more spiritually healthy.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God versus the Evil Angels

- “They sacrificed to demons, which are not God—gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear.” (Deuteronomy 32:17)
- “They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons.” (Psalm 106:37)
- “The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk.” (Revelation 9:20)
- “...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:20-21; cf. Isaiah 44:6; John 8:44; 14:6)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Satan and the demons are behind all other religions. We must never let political correctness trump Biblical correctness. As all enemies do, Satan and his ilk are trying to undermine their Opponent; they are trying to draw people away from God, destroy people he loves, and detract from his glory. We must never fail to perceive the demonic influence that is always portrayed in the Bible as influencing people away from God and obedience to him, including worshiping any other being than the triune God who has revealed himself in Holy Scripture.
- Missionaries report that Hindus and Buddhists also sacrifice buffaloes, chickens, and goats in order to please their gods and goddesses, not realizing that they are offering these sacrifices to demons.
- Furthermore, pagans have the burden of trying to save themselves, from which burden Christ has blessedly relieved his followers. Thanks be to our triune God! It is no wonder that I hear people in other countries express such joy and gratitude to God and to the missionaries he has sent to give them this Good News in Christ!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- At Halloween our children have some useful opportunities to learn about and highlight their holiness to God, as they engage the surrounding culture. The Bible teaches that God’s people are holy to him, i.e., set apart and distinguished from the world, to serve him. In October they can demonstrate those differences in their choices regarding what to do and not do in school and community Halloween events.
- Many stores offer costumes of Satan, demons, witches, and other evil characters opposed to God, his Word, and his will. As the children consider costumes, a teachable moment occurs to talk and help them think about these important subjects. **Questions are always effective learning tools.**
 - + You might ask children considering costumes from the dark side, “Why would you want to dress like an enemy of God?” Then explain why.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3)
- “The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’
³ But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.
⁴ Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.” (Jonah 1:1-4)
- “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require [*including what is his will*] of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)
- “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4)
- “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.” (Romans 1:24)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Intelligent, reasonable, and wise employees try to please the owner of the company where they work. They know it will go better for them if they obey the owner's rules and try hard to determine and do the owner's will in all matters.
- The same is true for us. It goes better for us when we discern God's will and do it.
- The Bible reveals three main aspects of God's will:
 1. His directive will. (See, e.g., Genesis 1:3 and Jonah.)
 2. His transactional will. (Cf., e.g., Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 37:4)
 3. His permissive will. (Cf., e.g., Romans 1:24)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

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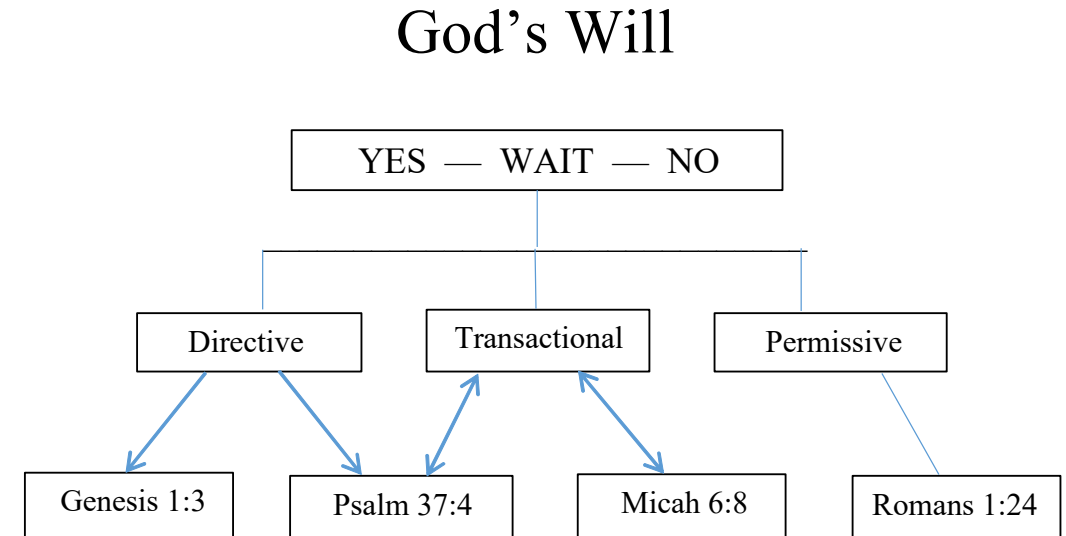
1. His directive will: God reveals his will by making a declarative statement, whereby he directs that something occur or that someone does something or refrains from doing something.
2. His transactional will: God interacts with someone indicating how the person can find God's will in a matter.
3. His permissive will: God allows people to function in certain ways, even ways in opposition to his laws, but then the disobedient people will have to endure the results of their disobedience.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

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Meaning and Practical Benefits



Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)
- “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin’?” (Proverbs 20:9)
- “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” (Proverbs 14:12 TNIV)
- “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require [*including what is his will*] of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)
- “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Contrary to the preponderance of “advice” coming from the media and many other sources urging people to “follow their hearts,” the Bible’s much more realistic description of human nature to its core and the hope God’s Word offers is infinitely more helpful.
- Does all this mean that we should never consider our hearts, specifically our feelings, about what we would like to do?
- Of course not, but feelings follow and are subjected to other entities, including God’s Word, the Holy Spirit’s guidance, admonition from carefully selected church members, and cognitively guided self-control. (Micah 6:8, Galatians 5:22-23)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

³It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Volumes have been written on the subject of God's will; we can only here highlight helpful and key aspects.
- Much more can be said regarding Biblical guidelines for discerning God's will in a particular matter, but in summary, when we want to know if doing something is in accord with his will, or is pleasing to God (1 Thessalonians 4:1-3), we **start with whether the Bible deals with this subject.**
- **If so, obey the text.** For example, if one is struggling with the temptation to have an affair, he or she doesn't have to read any farther than the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14), to know God's will; it is clear and unmistakable. That person has his or her answer.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Thoroughgoing postmodernists will argue for the validity of “nuances” and accuse us of being too simplistic and outdated. They are only trying to rationalize their way out of obedience to God's Word and will.
- Do not follow them; oppose them, speaking the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15)
- With prayer communicate God's Word as much as they will listen.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require [*including what is his will*] of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)
- “Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:20)
- “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Now, what about those questions that come before us where the Bible does not speak specifically? When we start by asking for God's help directly in prayer, his Spirit guides us, including by illuminating applicable Scriptural principles. We begin our search for God's will with a cognitive process.
- Start with prayer and Micah 6:8. For example, let's say you're considering four new job possibilities (A, B, C, & D). Subject each to these three aspects of God's will. Would it be just? For example, would doing any of them harm someone else, such as negatively affecting your relationship with your spouse, or require you to function unjustly, contrary to what the Bible teaches, including acting with insufficient mercy or kindness (RSV) toward others? Would the job you're considering co-opt your ability to function in humility before the Lord in all you do?
- Does your spouse agree? If not, and if you've done enough communicating about it, it is most likely not God's will for you, at least not now; God is not in the business of destroying marriages. To the contrary, his will is for you to have a strong marriage.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require [*including what is his will*] of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)
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- “Take delight [Hebrew: pleasure] in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4 NRSV)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In this manner one or two of these four job possibilities may not pass muster on the Micah 6:8 test and can be eliminated, e.g., B and C. You can then consider that any of the ones remaining, i.e., A or D in this case, are within God's will for you.
- Does his Word offer guidance as to his will regarding the remaining options? Yes. Here is where the regenerated heart comes in. Now we can allow our feelings to influence our decision-making. Consider Psalm 37:4. Therefore, of the remaining options that pass the Micah 6:8 test, which of them would you most like to do; which would you enjoy most? That is God's will for you.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require [*including what is his will*] of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)
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- “Take delight [Hebrew: pleasure] in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4 NRSV)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4), but in doing so, the Lord will never contradict what he has said in his Word. I’ve known people to pray for something God clearly condemns in the Bible, as if they’re hoping he’ll say, “Well, all right, but just this one time!” It doesn’t work that way. As we’ve seen, God is holy, holy, holy. He is not only displeased by sin, he is offended by it; it is contrary to his character and his will.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’

¹⁷Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’ ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!’ ¹⁹Then God said, ‘Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.’” (Genesis 17:15-21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When We Are to WAIT?

- When God does not right away say YES to what we ask of him, and we honestly sense that what we’re asking of him is not contrary to his Word, and thus apparently not contrary to his will, we find that we’re thereby in the WAIT mode; what do we do? Many in the Bible had this experience. Let’s look at one such instance with Abraham and Sarah.
- Here we see that we need to confidently believe God can do what we’re asking him to do. Have real faith. Of course, we need to keep in mind that for reasons he may know in his omniscience that surpasses our understanding (Isaiah 55:8-9), what we are asking may turn out to not be good for us, ultimately putting us in the NO category of God’s will. Nevertheless, we must always believe God can do whatever is in his will to do.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

“Then the LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’ Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

¹¹Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.

¹²So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’

¹³Then the LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Will I really have a child, now that I am old?”’

¹⁴**Is anything too hard for the LORD?** I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.’

¹⁵Sarah was afraid, **so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh.’ But he said, ‘Yes, you did laugh.’**” (Genesis 18:10-15)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When We Are to WAIT?

- We must always remember that God can do whatever we ask him that is in his will to do; **nothing is too hard for him**. He is never trying to figure out how to do something.
- As Sarah discovered, and as we found in our study of God's Word in the section on **God's attribute of being omniscient, all knowing, he knows what we are thinking**. (Cf. Psalm 51:6; 139:1-18) It does no good and much harm to lie.
- We must also understand that while God has his reasons for causing us to wait, his delay in giving us what we are asking is not to give us time to talk him into something. He knows all the rationale, including the best rationale.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ²Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.
⁶Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’ ⁷And she added, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’” (Genesis 21:1-7)
- “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When We Are to WAIT?

- While God does not always give his reasons for causing us to wait, we can think of some values for waiting.
- He may be delaying in order to help us see how much we really want what we are asking him to do.
- The delay may be more for our good and for what we need, for he already knows everything.
- We need to keep praying, asking God to grant our request; don't just pray a short while and then give up. I remember praying fervently every day for over two years for the girl I loved to say yes to my request that she marry me. God did not pressure her, and she did.
- On another matter I prayed every day for many years, before God gave me what I requested.
- The delay may be also to give others involved the time they need to mature or make other changes.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” (Acts 16:6–10)
- “They arrived at Ephesus.... He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. ²¹But as he left, he promised, ‘I will come back if it is God’s will.’ Then he set sail from Ephesus.” (Acts 18:19–21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When We Are to WAIT?

- When a door leading to what we want to do is now closed, that doesn’t mean God won’t open it later, as he did with Paul and his companions.
- While we’re waiting for God to open a door, he may have other plans for how we can best serve him, e.g., by helping someone else who has a more pressing need at that time, such as the people in Macedonia, whose needs were more urgent and whom the Lord led Paul and the others to help at that time. Thus, though Paul wasn’t able to go to Asia at this point in his second missionary journey, he was able to do so later (Acts 18:19) and on his next, his third, missionary journey (Acts 19), where he was able to establish a strong church in Ephesus, the leading commercial city of Asia Minor and capital of the Roman province of Asia.
- As you pray and wait for God to answer, ask him, “What would you have me do while I wait?” If needed, ask him also for patience until you know his will.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When God’s Answer is NO?

- When we have done all we can and we still have a problem that occurs and won’t go away, it helps to view the situation as God’s gentle reminder that we need him; that he is the source of our greatest help and hope!
- When a prayer request is delayed or negated, resulting in an answer of NO, let us remember how the apostle Paul dealt with such a matter. He began his reasoning with the correct assumption, that God is perfect, including all his ways, and he makes no mistakes. He then looked for the good that is in God’s answer, and he found it. We can too, because God only does what is good and best for us and for all others involved. Sometimes it takes a while to see the ultimate good in our answer of No. We can even thank him!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When God's Answer is NO?

- We see in God's Word that he does not always give an answer for what he does or doesn't do. We, like Paul, are OK with that, for we know that we likely wouldn't understand even if he told us (again, Isaiah 55:8-9; cf. Job 38-42), much like children don't understand their parents' reasoning.
- Whatever God's reason, we know it is good, so we just trust him to either give to us what we request when the time is right in his sight, or if developments do not result in what is needed for this request to turn out well for all involved, including ourselves, we accept his NO answer and thank God for doing perfectly. (Ephesians 5:20, James 1:17)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When God's Answer is NO?

- The preceding approach to discerning God's will gives us much comfort.
- My dear colleague and friend at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Dr. Arthur DeKruyter, testified to that experience. One afternoon, I asked him if he were all set for the international trip on which he was scheduled to leave the next day. He said yes but that he still hadn't received his visa, so the possibility existed that he might not be going. I asked him if he were feeling concerned about that situation. “Not at all,” he replied. “If it is God's will that I go,” he continued, “the visa will be here on time.” Later that afternoon, the visa arrived.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

What about When God's Answer is NO?

- This approach to discerning God's will, relieves us of stress, anxiety, depression, the top problems research reveals people struggle with, and gives us much comfort.
- It also gives others much comfort when we do so, for walking according to God's will keeps us from being manipulative and controlling; functioning in accord with this principle makes us nicer people to be around.
- People growing in Christ-likeness, maturing in the sanctification process that we'll study in the section on Soteriology, should be nice people. They are also the ones to look for when seeking a marriage partner.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

“Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

³It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

(1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- It's not difficult to comprehend how unbelievers without the new nature from, and internal guidance of, the Holy Spirit can err in their understanding of God, in particular regarding his holiness and pleasing him.
- However, many who claim to be Christians are ignorant of, and even rebellious against, God's holiness and its implications for discerning and obeying his will.
- Sometime ago I heard of a man and a woman, both married to someone else, who were engaging in an affair. They would meet in a motel room for their trysts, and before they would disobey God's commandment to not commit adultery, they would sit on the bed and have devotions! Such defiant disobedience is disgusting, detestable, and highly offensive to God! It is **rebellion against** his will!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” (Isaiah 59:2)
- Peter, quoting Psalm 34:15 and 16, writes, “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (1 Peter 3:12)
- Jesus said, “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” (John 15:16)
- “The prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much.” (James 5:16, Greek, EDS translation; cf. KJV)
- “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- There is no place in the Bible that gives this couple any assurance those prayers were well received.
- It is true that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God (1 Kings 8:46; Proverbs 20:9; Romans 3:23), and yet God hears our prayers in Christ (James 5:16).
- The issue here is conscious, intentional, and habitual disobedience—clearly displeasing to God and not in his will. He has not promised to hear those prayers of disobedience and rebellion; furthermore, he will not honor them. (Isaiah 59:2)
- This is not to say the couple cannot be forgiven or saved (the former if they are immature Christians mired in an elementary stage of sanctification; the latter if they’re pagans, wolves in sheep’s clothing, [Matthew 7:15-23]); but the Bible is clear that God expects a change of heart, true repentance, and a commitment to obey with concomitant actions before he considers us truly repentant and doing his will. (Hebrews 5:7-9)
- *Repentance involves not only sincere regret for the sin but also discontinuing that sinful behavior and committing to obedience to God’s will that shows forth in a track record over time.*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” (Hebrews 13:4)
- “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” (John 14:21)
- “The prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much.” (James 5:16, Greek, EDS translation; cf. KJV)
- “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)
- “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6)
- “⁵⁰And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.
⁵¹And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.” (Matthew 27:50-51)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Also, when someone says, “I’ve tried prayer, and it doesn’t work,” ask him or her, “To whom were you praying? Were you praying to the triune God in Christ Jesus’ name, and do you believe that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead? (Romans 10:9; John 14:6) To a limited extent, we have similar experiences in our human relationships here on earth: If someone calls you John and your name is Jim, you are likely not to answer. When you pray to some other entity who is not God, why would God answer you, especially since you are not addressing him and thereby not doing so in a righteous relationship with him according to his will? See James 5:16.” Here again is why we start our reasoning with theology, understanding who God is.
- To be heard by God who is holy, holy, holy, as well as being all love, we must come to him in and through Christ Jesus, who is the only way to the Father. (John 14:6) This reality was powerfully demonstrated when Jesus died for us: at that very instant, the veil of the temple that separated people from where God dwelled here on earth, was torn asunder, permitting access to God through Christ Jesus. (Matthew 27:50-51) For more: [Biblical Significance of Easter...PPT](#).

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- Jehoshaphat, standing before the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple said, "O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?" (2 Chronicles 20:7)
- "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend." (James 2:23)
- "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." (John 14:21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Many years ago, we saw an excessive overemphasis on God's justice, focusing on his judgment. Likely due in part to a pendulum swing away from that distortion of grace, we now see an overemphasis on a partial understanding of his love. Many view God as their "best friend," but not their Lord, who has a will for them and to whom they are accountable for adhering to his will. Such an out of balance perspective issues forth in much behavior that, most euphemistically expressed, is not pleasing to God and could never be ed consistent with, much less expressive of, his will.
- Truly God is our friend. (2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23) He is even our best friend. But when we so focus on that aspect of our relationship with him to the exclusion of the rest of what his Word teaches about who God is, what he is like, what he is doing, and our relationship with him and his will for us, as we've been examining in this series, our ship goes off keel and runs aground. This loss of perspective is counterproductive to helping us discern his will for our lives, including in specific matters.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.” (Leviticus 19:17)
- “And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend.” (James 2:23)
- “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” (John 14:21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We need to also keep in mind another crucial reality concerning friendship and its implications. That reality pertains to the validity of what our friends have to say about what we should do in certain situations, and especially when it involves God’s will for us: *Our friends too often don’t oppose us when they sense we really want to do something, and especially when we need correction.*
- ***True friends, who love the Lord, care for our well-being, and are not worried about whether we’ll continue to like them, need to speak up when they see their friend about to head into sin or already sinning.*** (Cf. Leviticus 19:17)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.” (Leviticus 19:17)
- “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” (Proverbs 27:6)
- “He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue.” (Proverbs 28:23)
- “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. ²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:1-2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- When we have a question as to what is God's will in a particular matter, which the Bible has not addressed specifically, we should seek out at least one mature, wise, believer with whom we can discuss this question—***one who has the strength to tell us the truth, even if we don't want to hear it***. Remaining doubts can be resolved by checking with two or three such people. These individuals are truly our best friends. (Proverbs 27:6; 28:23; Leviticus 19:17b; Galatians 6:1-2)
- *We all know those who will tell us what we want to hear on any occasion, but that is not helpful for truly trying to discern and do God's will.* Remember the disaster that befell King Rehoboam when he consulted the wrong people and followed their unwise advice instead of the wisdom of the elders he also consulted. (1 Kings 12)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

Listen to your spouse!

- Here is another way your wife or husband can be especially helpful to you in discerning and doing God's will. Our spouse is our most helpful human resource for receiving corrective feedback, because marriage, love, and commitment assure us that we personally are not being rejected, just a sinful idea we are considering, or already, doing.
- Here's another reason for marrying only a fellow Christian. He or she also has the Lord's best interests in his or her mind and heart, which of course are, or should be, ours as well.
- If you think God is calling you to ministry of any kind, it is especially important your spouse agrees. God is not in the business of breaking up marriages—just the opposite (Malachi 2:16); he will not tell you one thing and your spouse the opposite. For more on calling and calling to ministry, see the Soteriology and Ecclesiology sections.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.” (Leviticus 19:17)
- “He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue.” (Proverbs 28:23)
- “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:1-2)
- “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. ²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:1-2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Today some church elder boards are reluctant to discipline members, some of whom are their friends, which reluctance is disastrous for those who need such admonition and which negatively affects them, their families, the Lord himself, his church, and society (which is also his as is the whole world which he loves and for which he cares [John 3:16, cf. Jeremiah 29:1-7]).
- Truly, we are forgiven by and live in God's grace. But grace is not a license to cavalierly and habitually disobey God's commands; such actions are clearly contrary to God's pleasure, yet because he is sovereign, he will still accomplish his purposes. (Cf. Romans 6:1-2)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Discerning God's Will

- “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.” (Leviticus 19:17)
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- “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.
²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:1-2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Many times our forbearers offered insights that we do well to heed. In 1919 John Glover Monsma in his book, *What Calvinism Has Done for America*, wrote, “The more man knows concerning God and His works, the better he will understand the divine will, and the better able he will be to live a life that glorifies his Maker.” (6) We need to keep learning from his Word, and from historic Christian theology that is based on and congruent with his Word, more and more who God is and what he is like, including what he has done, what he is doing, what his plans are for us, and what his calling of us involves.
- The church is the primary means through whom God is working to accomplish his redemptive purposes and is especially helpful in discerning the will of God. He not only helps us directly through the Holy Spirit and his Word but also indirectly through others. Involving others, he primarily uses fellow believers whom the Bible calls the body of Christ (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:27) to guide us.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “remember the LORD your God, for it is he who *gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.*” (Deuteronomy 8:18 [*italics mine*])
- “...Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. ¹⁵We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. ¹⁶O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.” (1 Chronicles 29:14-16)
- “[e]very good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We thus see in God's Word that it is he who is perfectly caring for us. All the good we have is from God our Father; it has not come by chance or any other form of “luck.”
- Though they don't see it, due to being blinded by the devil (2 Corinthians 4:4) and having a veil over their minds and hearts that is only taken away by Christ (2 Corinthians 3:14-15), nonbelievers in Christ also receive their well-being from the Father.
- Jesus said, “He [the Father] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45) In Christian theology this benevolence is called common grace, the unmerited favor that the Father gives to all people, often through the Holy Spirit, contrasted with special grace, the unmerited favor that the Father gives in and through Christ.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- ““If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”” (Matthew 6:30-34)
- “He [the Son] is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:17)
- “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In historic Christian theology these and other teachings of the Bible are part of what is referred to as God's providence, his active and continuous caring and providing for his people and all else he has created. His providence involves at least two distinct features.
- First, he preserves his creation, continually upholding it to maintain it. (Matthew 6:30-34; Colossians 1:17; 1 Peter 5:7)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.” (Psalm 22:28)
- “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” (Psalm 103:19)
- “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9)
- “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29-31)
- “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:13)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Second, he governs his creation, directing and controlling it so that the freedom he has given the beings he has made must function within his predetermined limits. Nothing takes place apart from his will, either his permitting or directing certain phenomena or events to take place, but he will not allow the evil propelled by sin to destroy his plans. (Psalm 22:28; 103:19; Proverbs 16:9; Matthew 10:29-31; Philippians 2:13)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.” (Deuteronomy 8:18)
- “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9)
- “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.” (Proverbs 21:1)
- “Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” (Proverbs 14:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- He guides his creation through the natural laws he has established and in other ways to bless and to ensure the accomplishment of his purposes.
- Sometimes he intervenes through miracles which he makes occur directly or by using natural phenomena at the needed time. (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 104:20-31; Proverbs 16:9, 21:1; Acts 14:17; Exodus 14:21-22; Matthew 28:5-7; Acts 3:1-10; Romans 8:28)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing? His Providence

Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. **And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."**

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. (Deuteronomy 14:13-14; 21-31)

QUESTION: What can you say to the highly educated people in our time, who lack knowledge and especially wisdom, how the ancient Egyptians could perceive the LORD and his help for his people, but that they can't see him today?! What are some implications for us and our witness to them?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing? His Providence

- “You bring darkness, it becomes night, and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
21The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.
22The sun rises, and they steal away; they return and lie down in their dens.
23Then man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening.
24How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
25There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number-- living things both large and small.
26There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
27These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time.
28When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.
29When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.
30When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.
31May the glory of the LORD endure forever; **may the LORD rejoice in his works**—
32he who looks at the earth, and it trembles, who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
33I will sing to the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
34May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD.
35But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.” (Psalm 104:20-35)

QUESTIONS: Though God cannot be thwarted (Isaiah 14:27; Job 42:2), since he is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), won't thanking the Father contribute to his **rejoicing in his works** more than referring to them as coming from “luck” or “being lucky?” Does attributing something good to “luck,” not detract from the LORD's praise? Is not taking away from God's praise precisely what the Devil is constantly trying to do?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” Now I have told you.’” (Matthew 28:5-7)
- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- He guides his creation through the natural laws he has established and in other ways to bless and to ensure the accomplishment of his purposes.
- Sometimes he intervenes through miracles which he makes occur directly or by using natural phenomena at the needed time. (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 104:20-31; Proverbs 16:9, 21:1; Acts 14:17; Exodus 14:21-22; Matthew 28:5-7; Acts 3:1-10; Romans 8:28)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, ‘Look at us!’ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.
- “Then Peter said, ‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.” (Acts 3:6-10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- He guides his creation through the natural laws he has established and in other ways to bless and to ensure the accomplishment of his purposes.
- Sometimes he intervenes through miracles which he makes occur directly or by using natural phenomena at the needed time. (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 104:20-31; Proverbs 16:9, 21:1; Acts 14:17; Exodus 14:21-22; Matthew 28:5-7; Acts 3:1-10; Romans 8:28)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- David sang, "I was young and now am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed." (Psalm 37:25)
- In Psalm 84:11 we also read, "the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless."
- See also such texts as Psalm 104:14-15, 27 (TNIV); 107:9; 111:5; 136:25; and 145:15. God also feeds the animals; see e.g., Psalm 146:7.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Throughout the Bible believers remember God feeding his people manna and quail on the Exodus.
- When God's people are hungry he feeds them. He has done this miraculously as on the Exodus but usually since Bible times by notifying the church of such needs. Individual churches, such as with World Renew, formerly the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, and Lutheran World Relief, and many Christian parachurch organizations, such as Samaritan's Purse, World Vision, Luke Society, MAP International (Medical Assistance Programs), AMFA (Affordable Medicines for Africa) Foundation, and International Aid provide food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and other life-sustaining supplies as part of God's provision for all people in need.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

“This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.” (Romans 13:1-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- While not overtly being done in God's name, governments supply food and other necessities when people encounter disaster. Government is part of God's provision for stability and order in this age where sin has caused such a negative effect on his creation. (Romans 13:1-7) While not nearly as effective as church organizations due to secular systemic evil, governmental agencies are still helpful. The Holy Spirit restrains the extent of evil, and God works through government organizations as part of his means of caring for his world while he is completing his redemptive process in his work in and through Jesus Christ to renew his creation.
- “The law” in 13:8 refers to the Mosaic law God gave his people, not governmental law. Verse 8 continues the reference to and application of God's providential care for his world (“fellowman” < ἕτερον [*heteron*], other, not just fellow Christians), referring here to God's providence through his people, not the government.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”
(Romans 8:28)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Many years ago a work-related challenging period occurred for my family and me, and yet not unlike many have experienced and much more so. Nevertheless, we gladly testify that God's help is all-sufficient and enough, sometimes experienced immediately and sometimes after a while. Right from the beginning of the challenge God's involvement was so evident I opened up a document on my computer's desktop that I entitled, “Evidences of God's Providence.”
- It was a working document on which I recorded specific related developments and their timing as they unceasingly occurred, to the degree that no reasonable person could conclude that they were due to coincidence or chance. In rapid succession over several weeks I listed more than 50! I then stopped counting but not marveling. This list is a striking illustration of Romans 8:28.
- Needless to say, as you've already been expecting to read, God brought that challenging period to a close in a way that our whole family saw was good, even very good.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
- “[e]very good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

God cares and provides for us in countless ways every day, most of which we are not even aware of! Consider just a few.

- He has directed drunk drivers to select an alternate route from the one we and our family were using, thus sparing us a tragic automobile crash.
- He has caused an airline mechanic to notice a vital repair that was required in order for our plane to fly safely.
- He led us to a home that was built by a contractor who did his work well and didn't “cut corners,” failing to include necessary lumber and other materials in order to pocket the saved money or materials for himself.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

By keeping James 1:17 daily in mind most times throughout the day when something good occurs I find myself saying in thought or somewhat audibly, “Thank you, most holy and most gracious Father!” and many times just “Thank you dear Father!”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Keeping aware of God's providence gives us a viewpoint that protects us from a pall of pessimism counterproductive to our well-being which would negatively affect others and their service for God.
- Think about it! A worldview of being affected by luck and chance first reveals an inaccurate view of God and his involvement in our lives, which results in many people we influence developing a worldview that fosters a feeling of being caught up in fate, a negative perspective that feeds a victim mentality and with no way out! Such a view, if taken seriously, followed to its logical though unsound (due to being based on faulty assumptions) conclusion, and acted on, leads to fatalistic discouragement, depression, and despair...and worse!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

In the light of these realities how can any Christian use the word luck?

- Again, think about it. *Words are loaded with meaning and powerfully impact our communication.* God's calling to us who follow Christ is to be his witnesses; what kind of a witness for our triune God is that?
- Is not referring to something as luck actually attributing what is good to chance rather than being a “good and perfect gift...from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows?” Indeed, this quote from James 1:17 indicates that each good and perfect gift is from God, either *directly* or *indirectly*.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

When God gives us a gift ***directly***, he alone gives us these gifts, e.g., a good idea, without using any other means through whom or through which to transmit them.

- Not infrequently I pray for God's wisdom and direction to help me answer a question for which I do not have an answer. Often the answer comes to me even before I've finished articulating the question in my prayer! I know the answer has come from God, because (1) I asked him for it; (2) the answer is good, in accord with James 1:17; (3) it's consistent with his Word, the Bible; and (4) it typically involves thoughts I've either not had previously or of which I've not been recently thinking.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
- “[e]very good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Indirectly, God gives us good gifts through others and through instrumentalities, such as

- medications that either heal or help us cope with illness;
- knowledge, skills, health, strength, and additional blessings he has given us that enable us to do something we and others value;
- the help we receive from fellow believers and other humans, whose motivation to do so is from God;
- **NONE OF THIS IS FROM LUCK!**

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
- “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Consider another dimension of this issue.

- Eliminating the word luck from our perspective and speech enables us to see more of God's blessings. The mentality shaped by the idea that good things come from happenstance (note the derivation of the root hap, chance) is on a collision course with Scripture, as we've observed above. *By freeing ourselves from the premise that chance occurrences, e.g., “lucky breaks,” account for the benefits we receive, we can much more easily see the many good things each day that come from God's loving hand.*
- The word “happy” does not occur in the original languages of the Old and New Testaments. It only occurs in the inadequate translation of some original words in some English versions.
- Give careful thought to the implications of not saying, “Happy Birthday.” By using other words, e.g., “I wish you a blessed birthday, knowing that you are a special and intentional gift from God (and not an accident that occurred by ‘chance’),” can you see what a birthday blessing and gift you are giving to this person, how you've enriched his or her identify? Consider also the implications for the tragedies of the abortion issue.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
- “[e]very good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Singing “Blessed (or Joyful or Joy filled) birthday” instead of “Happy Birthday” (both having the same number of syllables) is especially significant. People ask you, “Why?” Then you can tell them important, helpful, and vital information about God! Also, happy is temporary; joy is forever! Reasonable people will view you as especially thoughtful with much wisdom.
- Satan opposes God at every point, and the devil’s objective is to try to remove as much glory from God as he can and to turn as many people’s perspective away from God and God’s work as possible.
 - Can you think of any more effective way to accomplish this objective than to instill in human minds, even the minds of God’s redeemed, the concept of luck with its unbiblical denotation and connotation of something good occurring apart from God?
 - God has called us to be his witnesses. How do we witness effectively to the triune God, who is the giver of “every good and perfect gift,” if we fail to mention the key dimensions of his very character? **To whom then are we witnessing?**

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

The concept of luck is a demonically designed attempt to take away credit where credit is due.

- Not only is it for the purpose of trying to take away from God, detracting from his glory,
- but it takes away from human beings' share in the blessings God gives to people, such as the ability (e.g., skills, knowledge, gifts, wisdom) to accomplish objectives, tasks, and work. *How can one take pleasure in what he or she has achieved, and even consider it an accomplishment, if it is referred to as just “luck” or the result of “luck?”*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

The concept of luck thus mitigates people's motivation, and it also misleads them concerning a sense of responsibility.

- If what we produce is just “luck,” our motivation to set goals and reach them reduces accordingly.
- Furthermore, in a luck-saturated mentality, if people set goals and don't reach them, does not the idea of “luck” tempt them to avoid assuming responsibility for their lack of success? Have you not heard such excuses as “I guess I wasn't as lucky as he [or she] was?” How many fess up and admit to improper preparation? Not a few take the next step and conclude there are things they just aren't responsible for, because they aren't “lucky” enough. No room exists for such thinking in a Christian's sense of calling from God to serve him.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Many others say, “I don’t see how God has helped *me*; he hasn’t done anything for me that I can see. I’ve achieved all this through hard work and good luck, being at the right place at the right time, and having an extensive network; I know a lot of people.” It doesn’t take much thought to perceive that those who constantly talk about being lucky fail to see God’s hand in all their well-being. Such talk shapes their worldview, limits the light that provides understanding, and eclipses their perspective. Indeed, God the Father, the giver of every good and perfect gift, has been invisibly working in their lives to bless them and they’ve missed him!
- How sad, especially when His own covenant people use the language and thought forms of the culture which is heavily influenced by the “prince of this world,” as Jesus called Satan. (John 12:31; 16:11)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- As for me I do not want to play into the devil's hand; I don't want to participate in his scheme to take glory from God. Rather, I want to glorify God in all that I do and facilitate the accomplishment of his purposes. Therefore, I refuse to use the word luck.
- I've found it very easy to not use the word luck or its derivatives; will you join me and help others to do so, especially those in the body of Christ, the church? Let us make pleasing, honoring, and glorifying God our greatest desire, objective, and accomplishment.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

“To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!’”
(John 8:31, 44-45)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- We see Satan's involvement in human affairs and his influential part in the human condition already early in the Old Testament beginning in Genesis 3.
- Yet it's Jesus who most clearly exposes the devil as “the father of lies.” (John 8:44-45) As such he deceives people, and one of his greatest deceptions is to depict himself as having the power to oppose God effectively, when in fact he can only do what God allows him to do.
- As we've discussed earlier in this series, the Bible, God's revealed and holy Word, discloses that Satan is no equal to God, who is peerless, and that Satan is only an angel who has fallen. (Luke 10:18) Satan is like a peanut contrasted with God. If you are looking for a peer of Satan, consider the other fallen angels, the demons, he leads. Contrast them with the righteous angels, including Michael and Gabriel, who point to and work for the triune God who has revealed all these realities in his Word, the holy Bible. Moreover, in and through Jesus Christ God, who is sovereign, has defeated the devil and his followers. (Revelation 20)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Thus, we see that the words we use communicate significantly. We, especially those of us called to be holy to God in Christ Jesus, must exercise care in the choice of the words we use.

- We are called to be the people through whom the Holy Spirit will work to accomplish the redemptive purposes of the triune God. Let us be ever more conscious of this essential dimension of our identity, of who we are, and of Whose we are in our language and in all else we do.
- Good News: We are not bound by our culture. Moreover, our mission is to transform our culture, to be models to whom others look, not to be followers of those in our culture, most of whom do not know Christ.
- The tense of the Greek verb translated be transformed clearly indicates a command that is to have an ongoing application in the lifestyle of those who believe in and follow Christ. *One very significant way to model a Christ-like manner in our terminology in our witness to him is to exercise more conscious care in the choice of our words, i.e., in what we say and don't say.*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)
- “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

How can we help people to avoid this term, “luck,” and in so doing possibly segue into a good witness for Christ?

- When someone wishes us “Good luck!” we can also say “Thanks, I know what you mean, and I appreciate your well wishes very much, but I don’t believe in luck—everything good comes from God.” Whenever I say that I don’t believe in luck, invariably the other person says, “I don’t either.”
- When someone says, “Luckily, I (found this great deal, etc.)” How about asking, “Would you like a better term than luck, which doesn’t exist? How about “Providentially, I found this great deal, etc.).
- We can proactively, and with a glad grin, teach this point, e.g., when at a “potluck” dinner we can say, “In the light of the Biblical teaching on God’s Providence (e.g., James 1:17), that everything good comes from God the Father, I prefer to call this ‘Pot-Providence’).”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)
- “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.
“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:9-12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

How can we help people to avoid this term and in so doing segue into a good witness for Christ?

- Of course, your relationship with the other person, how well you know him or her, and for how long you've known him or her, are indicators as to what you can say that will be most useful.
- As in all effective communication, strive for the healthy balance between sounding so strange, i.e., weird, that the other person writes you off on the one hand and ignoring God's call to be his witness in Christ on the other hand. Nevertheless, it is clear that morally and as Christ's witnesses we are to be “aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Peter 2:11), meaning our behavior and our words must glorify God and contrast with evil. God didn't place us where we are at this point in time to just talk about work, weather, and fun; he's given us a high and holy calling, and we are to respond by shaping our lives faithfully and accordingly. See 1 Peter 2:9-12 and 3:15.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- As we proceed through each day with the growing awareness that everything we value, enjoy, cherish, and count as good has come from our loving Father in heaven, who is himself our greatest blessing and does not change, we'll recognize more and more of his work in our lives. We'll marvel and rejoice in his constant love for us, including its breadth and depth.
- Does all this surprise you? Of course not. God takes care of, provides for, his people. Thus, you'll find yourself thanking him throughout the day for the good things as they occur and that you now more clearly perceive as coming from him, directly, or indirectly via others through whom he is working to bless us.
- That understanding and thanksgiving is transformative.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

- “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)
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“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:9-12)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Consciously connecting what you see as good with God's providential blessings for you will cast a new light on your disappointments, discouragements, discomforts, and difficulties. Some will actually disappear and others diminish due to seeing them now in their proper perspective, i.e., within the control of God who is sovereign, good, and all-capable, who loves you, and who is working out all matters for your good and for the accomplishment of his purposes.
- Those that do not disappear, you'll see as manageable and not destructive. Gratitude, joy, encouragement, and hope will replace anxiety, worry, dread, pessimism, fear, and the sense of being overwhelmed by life as you more and more observe God's constant presence and countless expressions of his Providential love for you every day.
- What great peace and joy we have not having to hope for “luck!”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

God's Providence

One way God has provided to help us keep him in view is to remember what James wrote,

- “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.¹⁵ Instead, *you ought* to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’” (James 4:13–15 NASB)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

When significant problems occur in our lives, tunnel vision typically forms, and we only see the problem.

- It helps greatly to keep a whole-life perspective and view the problem in its proper context, whereby we also see God's willingness to help. We need to keep the broad view, including the present moment in an eternal perspective.
- One day I was mentioning this reality to one of my wife's brothers, and I said, “We have to keep God in the picture.” He replied, “Yes, and he's not only in the picture, **but he's holding the picture!**”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

John Newton, one of England's extraordinary pastors, wrote to and of his deep love for his wife, Mary. While on an extended voyage at sea, when he was captain of a ship before becoming a minister, he penned, "You will not be displeased with me for saying, that though you are dearer to me than the aggregate of all earthly comforts, I wish to limit my passion within those bounds which God has appointed. Our love to each other ought to lead us to love him supremely, who is the author and source of all the good we possess or hope for. It is to him we owe that happiness in a marriage state which so many seek in vain, some of whom set out with such hopes and prospects, that their disappointments can be deduced for no other cause, than having placed that high regard on a creature which is only due to the Creator. He therefore withholds his blessing (without which no union can subsist) and their expectations, of course, end in indifference...." He clearly perceived the need to keep the gift in proper perspective, thereby honoring the Giver and more fully appreciating the gift. Having such a perspective on life and the Biblical view of who God is and what he is like, and who humans are and what human nature is like, reduces the likelihood of and protects us from devastating disappointments.

When Mary died, John Newton said in his sermon at her funeral: "I considered her as a loan, which He who lent her to me, had a right to resume whenever He pleased; and that as I had deserved to forfeit her every day, from the first; it became me, rather to be thankful that she was spared to me so long...." Perceiving all of life in the light of God's providential care of his creation, and of himself and his wife in particular, Newton was well positioned and prepared for the struggles of life he encountered, including the loss of his dear wife. We, too, live within this Providence. Thanks be to God!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

When my precious wife of 48 1/2 years died, I, who throughout our marriage always had that same Biblical and theological perspective as John Newton articulated, have been thereby greatly comforted, strengthened, and enabled to come through this most difficult experience for me as well as I could have hoped. God blessed me, the rest of our family, and a multitude of others in countless ways through her. I can clearly see limitless evidences of God's Providential care just in preparing her and me for her death; upholding her and me, and the rest of our family, through it; and caring for me and for the rest of our family as well as Carol's other loved ones while we are apart from her presence.

Oh what a wonderful wife God gave me; luck had nothing to do with my finding her and her becoming my wife. I couldn't have asked God for a more magnificent wife than Carol, whom he gave to me in gracious response to my numerous and fervent prayers. Even now, many years since she died, I still have times of sadness each day. When those times come, I obey God's Word and thank God in and for everything: for my cherished Carol; for the 53 years we knew, had a special relationship with, and enjoyed each other, especially for the almost five decades as husband and wife; and even for taking her to be with him where she no longer has the struggle with the debilitating disease that afflicted her. She belongs to him, as do I, the rest of our family, and all others in Christ. He has the right to bless her as she needs in his all-surpassing love...for her and for me. Shortly before she died, she told me, and a friend who was visiting with her, that she wanted to go home to be with the Lord; two weeks later God granted her request. Even in sad times, I can thank God for these realities, for all the treasured moments we had together, and for the supreme joy that she is having in God's eternal presence and service and that in and through Christ Jesus we will be together again—next time forever—and my spirit soars! Thanks be *to God!*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing? His Providence

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Though God cannot be thwarted (Isaiah 14:27; Job 42:2), since he is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), won't thanking the Father add to his rejoicing in his works much more than referring to them as coming from "luck" or "being lucky?"
2. Does attributing something good to "luck" or "being lucky" not detract from the Father's glory?
3. Is not taking away from God's glory precisely what the Devil is constantly trying to do?
4. Is there a disconnect between praising God and then later attributing anything good to "luck?" Can we add to our praise of God by thanking him for the good in our lives and avoiding use of the word "luck" and its derivatives?
5. Referring to Deuteronomy 14:25, what can you say to the highly educated people in our time, who lack knowledge and especially wisdom, how the ancient Egyptians could perceive the LORD and his help for his people, but that they can't see him today?! What are some implications for us and our witness to them?

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name—the LORD your God...” (Deuteronomy 28:58)
- “We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.” (Psalm 90:7-8; cf. 11-17)
- “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:31)
- “You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.’ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.
“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.” (Romans 11:19-23)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Some say, “But the biblical concept of fearing God simply means to have awe for and to revere God.” They should check even the English dictionary for the meaning of both of those words, the root of which primarily involves fear. In the Bible’s original Hebrew and Greek, the words translated fear with respect to God literally mean fear. (Hebrew: יָרָא [yāra’] and Greek: φόβος [*phobos*]) See the passages in the left column and related passages throughout the Bible that confirm this understanding.
- In Hebrews 10:31, “dreadful” is the NIV translation of φοβερός (*phoberos*), a derivative of *phobos*, meaning also fearful, terrible (NASB, “terrifying”), frightful. The context clearly indicates this dread is due to deliberately keeping on sinning. (10:26)
- How do we understand this aspect of our relationship with God, who in his Word is revealed as love to the core of his being? (1 John 4:8)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Consider also the source of respect. Is there not typically at least a tinge of fear (of consequences), whether admitted or not, if someone disregards, and especially disobeys, one who is in a superior position? How long is the tenure in an organization of an employee who does not respect the one(s) to whom he or she is accountable, including having a healthy sense of fear of consequences for disobedience or even failing to meet agreed upon standards and conditions of employment (e.g., production deadlines)?
- Who are you more inclined to obey? An authority who has a reputation as being “a soft touch” or one who though nice will exact justice swiftly?
- Compare the covenant stipulations in God’s covenant with his people (e.g., Deuteronomy 28). Notice that the Hebrew word for “revere” and “awesome” in verse 58 is אָרָא (yāra’], be afraid, i.e., as the context reveals, of disobeying God. God is no one to “mess around with,” and he does not take disobedience lightly, which as we’ve seen in earlier essays, is referred to as no less than rebellion.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD.” (Exodus 14:10)
- “And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” (Exodus 14:31)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- In Moses’ account of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt in Exodus 14, he says the Israelites looked up as Pharaoh and his army approached, and they were in great fear (v. 10 RSV; terrified, NIV). **This was not just a reverent respect!**
- After they were safely across the Red Sea and saw the Egyptians lying dead, which they recognized as due to the mighty power of the LORD, “the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him.” (v. 31) Significantly, Moses uses the most common Hebrew word for fear, יָרֵא (yārē) be afraid, both in verse 10 to describe their visceral, abject, terror as they sensed they were about to be vanquished and in verse 31 to indicate the fear they felt toward the LORD.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.
‘For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end.’” (Daniel 6:26)
- “Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’” (Mark 5:33-34)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Many Bible passages link fear and trembling, thus indicating a real fear, not just a respectful awe. The link is explicit with respect to God and our salvation in several texts. (Cf. e.g., Daniel 6:26 NASB)
- Mark records the incident where the woman with a 12-year hemorrhage reaches out in faith that just touching Jesus’ garment will make her well. Jesus, perceiving that power had gone out from him looked for the person who touched him. The woman, knowing what had occurred, approached him and fell at his feet; Mark records (in the original Greek) that she was “fearing (φοβηθεῖσα [*phobetheisa*]) and trembling (τρέμουσα [*tremousa*]).” (5:33) Jesus then said to her “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” (v. 34) Counterintuitively in much human thinking, yet her faithful fear resulted in peace.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- Paul writes to the Philippians, “my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear (φόβου [*phobou*]) and trembling (τρόμου [*tromou*]) [2:12] for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life....” (vss. 12-16a) Cf. 2 Corinthians 7:15.
- “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.” (Ephesians 6:5-8)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The apostle goes on to explain that such a mentality and spiritual orientation will help keep them on the same page with God’s will, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life....” (vss. 13-16a)
- One more indication that these Greek words are to be interpreted literally in these passages is seen by comparing them with the effect accompanying slaves’ obedience of their earthly masters, which Paul said should be done with “fear (φόβου [*phobou*]) and trembling (τρόμου [*tromou*]).” (Ephesians 6:5) The apostle said that they should treat their masters this way “not only to win their favor when their eye is on [them], but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from [their] heart.” (6:6) He then explained that in so doing they would present a fine witness for Christ. (6:7-8)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- Some say that those who fear God do so because of his almighty power. However, if they understand God as being love to the core of his being, as he truly is, why would they have any fear? Wouldn't they conclude he will always use his power for their protection and other benevolent acts? No.
- There is more to it than that. I submit it is not primarily his almighty power that is the key reason people fear God, but that they, especially his covenant people, know he is holy, and they are not—indeed that he is holy, holy, holy—and that he will not accept sin, a fatal flaw in human nature since the fall of Adam and Eve. Everyone has guilt, and knows it, whether he or she admits it or not. Accordingly, in the Bible the word fear is **not** used to describe a human being's affect toward God **until after** that fall as described in Genesis 3. Yet fear is the first emotion Scripture records Adam feeling after he and Eve had sinned against God. (v 10) The healthy fear of God in his Word guides us to remember our accountability to him who knows best and always does perfectly, to obey his Word, to repent and ask forgiveness when we fail him, and to recommit to obeying him and doing rightly in his sight, as we head into the future.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What does it mean to fear God?

- God is never a cosmic curmudgeon or a killjoy; neither is he ever arbitrary. He hates and judges sin, because it always harms people he loves. Sin offends God's holiness, indeed because he is holy, holy, holy, but also because he loves the people he has created, and he knows sin is never good; he loves those victimized by sin, their own and others'.
- In our time and culture, we encounter a milieu of political, social, and theological correctness fraught with spiritual danger. It is not politically correct to fear anything or anyone, and if someone speaks out against a politically sacrosanct ideology, person, or group, for example, the unbiblical practices of homosexuality, Islam, or illegal immigrants who have committed crimes, he or she is accused of being homophobic, Islamophobic, or xenophobic. We should keep in mind that these accusations are examples of the logical fallacy called *argumentum ad hominem* (literally, argument directed toward the man), where the attempt is to discredit the person instead of addressing the validity of his or her argument and its rationale. Further, the accusations are not only illogical but part of the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. (Ephesians 6:10-18; Revelation 12-20) The goal of these opponents pertaining to Christians, is to shut us up and hinder our witness for Christ and the truth of the Gospel. With the knowledge of what they are doing, and with God's help, we are equipped to withstand their attacks and "speak the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

“Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.” (Psalm 96:9)

*Unbelievers, and immature believers, try to relieve this pain by many forms of denial and escape, e.g., abusing alcohol, opioids, sex, overworking, sports, but when the temporary euphoria wears off, the problem returns and remains.

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- “Worship the LORD...tremble...” Both verbs are imperatives, commands, and we’re to do so “in the splendor of his holiness [and] tremble before him.” The Hebrew word translated tremble also means to writhe and to be in pain (typically referring to labor pains, analogizing the seriousness of sin). In the light of God’s holiness, sin regularly causes much pain, for believers and unbelievers, * **but God’s forgiveness in worship with the church relieves that pain for those who repent, believe in, and follow Jesus Christ.**
- What a stark contrast to the politically correct and seeker constrained expressions that omit any reference to this Biblical teaching, with the result that many enter the sanctuary of God who is holy, holy, holy with the cavalier idea that they’re paying respects to their Divine Buddy, getting another good mark in the ledger of life, and that he should be glad they showed up! The first worshipers long for the opportunity to hear God’s assurance of pardon following the prayer of confession; the latter are mystified by such a practice and often turned off. No wonder many worship services today omit the prayer of confession and the accompanying and blessed words of assurance. Be careful: We must not take God for granted!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy....” (1 Corinthians 1:2)
- “Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:19-21)
- “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world....” (Romans 12:2)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Another aspect of political correctness—which is distracting leaders and others from God’s Word, and motivating decisions that are contrary to his Word and will in too many churches today—is especially dangerous: the aversion to offending anyone.
- Yet the cross is offensive and even foolish to the world that is perishing (Galatians 5:11 and 1 Corinthians 1:23), but Christ is the power and wisdom of God. *We are called to speak up for Christ and proclaim him as the only way, truth, and life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. (John 14:6) Our calling and our desire is to please the triune God, not the world, and to proclaim Christ, crucified, risen, reigning, and ruling.*
- If we truly love and care for people, as Christ has commanded, we must courageously preach and teach Christ as the only way to salvation. To be sure we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), but we must speak the truth: *Contrary to deceptive political correctness, all other religions are wrong **and dangerous**, especially but not only, spiritually; they lead to death. There are no other gods in the presence of the one true God. (Exodus 20:3)*
- We are called to be holy to God. Remember holy means uncommon, pure, and separated to God. We are not to conform to the world. (Romans 12:2) **Conforming to God brings life; conforming to the world brings death.**

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what is he doing; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.” (Psalm 96:9)
- “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’
“Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (1 Peter 1:13-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Those who do not have the new nature, provided by the Holy Spirit (see Soteriology), try to psychologize away or ignore their fear and guilt. *Those who have the new birth and the faith in Jesus Christ it provides thank God for their fear, the periodic reemergence of which reminds them of who they are, of their sin, and of his grace, which informs their understanding as well as their choices to obey and leads them into uncommon joy.*
- Of course such a concept of fearing God, or fearing anyone, is repugnant to most people today. Commenting on those who try to mitigate the onerous connotation of fear by explaining that fear simply means respect, Ellen Davis of Yale Divinity School has written in her book, *Getting Involved with God*, “in avoiding the word ‘fear,’ translators are taking the edge off the point that the biblical writers are making. The writers are speaking first of all of our proper gut response to God.” (102)
- However, while respect is an aspect of the major word for fear in the Old and the New Testaments, both the Hebrew of the OT and the Greek of the NT have other words that mean respect. *Fear of God issues forth in respect that obeys his Word and his will.*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.”
(Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Though speaking on the human level, the concept of fear connected with consequences is clearly evident in the commandment pertaining to a rebellious son in Deuteronomy 21:18-21. The law addresses a painful situation where a stubborn and rebellious son refuses to obey his father and mother and even to listen to them when they discipline him.
- All the Israelites will hear of this stark punishment and be afraid. Afraid of what? Certainly the children will fear the same consequences will occur to them if they engage in similar rebellion. With that healthy fear in the back of their minds, do you think their decision-making and behavior was affected...in the right direction?
- My behavior as a child was definitely influenced in the direction of choosing to do what was good rather than what was evil with the knowledge of what my dad would do if I did the latter.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NASB)
- “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” (Proverbs 3:11-12)
- “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” (Hebrews 12:10)
- Fearing God helps us obey; as Moses told the Israelites, “the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” (Exodus 20:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- I never doubted the love of my outstanding earthly father; his cherishing of me was beyond question and reinforced in countless ways throughout our life together. Nevertheless, when as a child I transgressed my limits, his discipline was swift, fair, and sometimes painful: emotionally and, on a few occasions, physically as his belt crossed my bottom. That administration of corporal punishment occurred very few times, but just enough times and with sufficient strength for me to fear a recurrence should I disobey, a healthy fear that guided me in deciding whether I should or should not do something and kept me from making extremely regrettable choices. Having experienced that reaction to my transgression, I lived in constant awareness of his love that included a real fear of what would occur should I step out of line. That genuine fear of fair consequences kept me out of much trouble, for which I am eternally grateful to my dad and to our Father in heaven who provided the model he followed. (Proverbs 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13, 29:15; Hebrews 12:5-11)
- Another example of the filial fear of God (filial > father-child relationship) is fear of disappointing our heavenly Father and our earthly father out of love.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:11-12)
- “the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” (Psalm 147:11)
- “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” (Psalm 130:3-4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

God’s Word links a healthy fear of him, and of other authority figures (cf. Romans 13:1-7) including parents, to obedience, which God requires of his people, not to earn salvation, as other religions teach, but as our *grateful and loving response* to him for saving us and which gives evidence of the genuineness of our faith. The fear of the Lord is thus seen in actions. “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.” (Proverbs 3:7-8; See also 8:13.) As one writer has said, “In my discovery of the Savior who is also my Judge, I discover several reasons to obey him. Fear is one of these.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.
⁸This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.” (Proverbs 3:7-8)
- “To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.” (Proverbs 8:13)
- [Jesus said] “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:10-11)
- “[t]hey who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (John 14:21 NRSV)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The healthy fear of God involves the consequences of sin, what God will do in his just and righteous judgment of sin that offends him so greatly. Sin is a grievous offense to God who is not only holy, but holy, holy, holy and all love. How could God be just and righteous, overlook sin that harms people he loves who bear his image, and do nothing about it?
- The fear of the Lord is thus seen in actions, God’s and ours. (Proverbs 3:7-8; 8:13.)
- Fear not only involves God’s love, but also the joy he gives in obedience to his will, as our Lord Jesus said in John 15:10-11.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

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Meaning and Practical Benefits

We’ve been reflecting on a healthy fear of God. Such a fear keeps us from the careless attitude of many today who glibly speak God’s name in vain and ignore him and his will. This holy fear merges with other motivators to guide us to obedience which honors God who is most holy and enables us to accomplish the purposes to which he has called us and that give meaning and significance to our lives.

- An analogy psychologist Dr. James Dobson used to illustrate another concept helps here as well. Compare the fear one experiences when being stopped by a police officer after exceeding the speed limit. In response to a very polite question, “May I see your driver’s license please?” trembling fingers extract the plastic card from his or her wallet. The fear is not of the officer him or herself (he or she hasn’t harmed or even threatened the driver), but of what that officer can do that is very painful (give a ticket which results in a significant fine and possibly other painful punishments [e.g., loss of license]), which possibilities cause fear. This fear, as all other fears, doesn’t remain at this height, but its underlying existence in our day-to-day driving motivates us to keep within the prescribed limits, much more so than would be the case if the police officer had no authority to *do* anything if we disobey the law.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)
- “The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said:
¹²Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.
¹³The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread,
¹⁴and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.
¹⁵Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured.”
¹⁶Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my disciples.
¹⁷I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him. (Isaiah 8:11-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The thought of what God, who is holy, holy, holy, will do to those who disregard his will, as those against whom Isaiah was prophesying (8:13), causes in the wise person a fear which is healthy.
- We, however, do not live in morbid terror or dread of God, especially because of our security in Christ, but our fear of his actions, were we to disregard and disobey his will, leads to wisdom, better behavior, well-being, and thanksgiving, not only in the USA in November but everywhere. (Proverbs 9:10)
- I shudder to think of the result of God’s righteous judgment on what I deserve were it not for Christ, but that thought of Christ and being credited with his righteousness brings me instant calm and eternal gratitude to God whose true love is also just. (See also Isaiah 8:11-17, esp. v. 13.)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’” (Exodus 20:20)
- “To fear the LORD is to hate evil. I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.” (Proverbs 8:13)
- “Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word.” (Psalm 119:161)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

Fearing God helps us obey. As Moses told the Israelites, “the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” (Exodus 20:20) Notice that the Hebrew word fear in the term fear of God is the same Hebrew word as being afraid, both aspects of which appear in this same verse. “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, [יָרֵא (yārē')] God has come to test you, so that the fear [יִרְאָה? yir'āh < יָרֵא (yārē')] of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’” Again, we see here not a morbid dread but a healthy fear of the consequences of disobeying, i.e., rebelling against God—a very dangerous decision and unwise act. Fearing God involves hating evil, which brings blessing! (Ecclesiastes 8:13)

In his interpretation of Psalm 119:161, John Calvin comments that the Psalmist, confronted with the unjust persecution of government officials [שָׂרִימִים (śārîm)], the fear [פָּחַד (pāchadh), verb, to tremble, to be afraid] of God’s Word, constrains one’s self to attempt nothing which is unlawful and not to “attempt to rival their wicked practices, by repelling craft with craft and violence with violence.” (*Commentary on Psalms*, Volume 5)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.” (Psalm 96:9)
- “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’
“Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (1 Peter 1:13-17)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The response of a sinful human being to God’s holiness is true fear, a genuine concern for well being, recognizing his or her guilt and unworthiness to be in the presence of God.
- When I think about it, if it were not for being in Christ, the least one of my many sins would be enough to cast me far from the presence of God, who is most holy, forever...a fearsome thought!
- Again, the original Greek word translated fear is φόβος (*phobos*). The NIV, as the NRSV, includes the concept of reverence, but they wisely translate *phobos* to include the very real aspect of fear, but not dread (because of our redemption in Christ as the verses that follow remind us), as a guiding principle for remembering to live as people called to be holy to God who is holy, holy, holy (most holy).
- A key part of his holiness is his wrath toward sin. Sin and evil offend God who is holy, holy, holy. People today are worried about offending someone or being offended; we should be most concerned about offending God! Another reason he hates sin and evil is because of his great love for his people who are hurt by sin and evil.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” (Psalm 130:4)
- “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NASB)
- “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world.” (1 John 2:2 NASB)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- “The consistent Bible view is that the sin of man has incurred the wrath of God. That wrath is averted only by Christ’s atoning offering. From this standpoint his saving work is properly called propitiation.” (Leon Morris)
- We should never lose sight of the Biblical teaching that the core of God’s being is his great love. (1 John 4:8) Nevertheless, that great love is most meaningful when we also keep in mind his divine wrath against the sin and evil that spurns and ignores his holiness. The realization of God’s forgiveness in the light of a true fear of God’s wrath against sin, motivates the fear אָרַעַ (yārē’, verb, be afraid) in the sense of awe and respect, as seen, e.g., in Psalm 130:4. Morris’ observation that “God himself provides the means of removing his own wrath” is true, *but, we must promptly proclaim, it is only efficacious and effective for those who confess Christ.* And that is a fearsome thought for those outside of Christ, *which also strongly motivates us to reach out to them in love with the unmitigated Gospel of our Lord and Savior.*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation in His blood** through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-26 NASB)
- “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the **propitiation** for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NASB)
- “and He Himself is the **propitiation** for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world.” (1 John 2:2 NASB)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, in an article on “Propitiation” observed that the Greek word, **ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*)**, most accurately translated **propitiation, the means of removing divine wrath**. Dr. Morris writes that the wrath of God is referred to 585 times throughout the Old Testament. He then says,

- While God’s wrath is not mentioned as frequently in the NT as the Old, it is there. Man’s sin receives its due reward, not because of some impersonal retribution, but because God’s wrath is directed against it (Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28). The whole of the argument of the opening part of Romans is that all men, Gentiles and Jews alike, are sinners, and that they come under the wrath and the condemnation of God. When Paul turns to salvation, he thinks of Christ’s death as *hilasterion* (Rom. 3:25), the means of removing the divine wrath. The paradox of the OT is repeated in the New that **God himself provides the means of removing his own wrath. The love of the Father is shown in that he “sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”** (1 John 4:10). The purpose of Christ’s becoming “a merciful and faithful high priest” was “to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). His propitiation is adequate for all (1 John 2:2) but is efficacious for those who believe in and follow him.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?’ that is, ‘MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?’” (Matthew 27:46, Greek, NASB, KJV, ESV)
- “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34)
- “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NASB)
- “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world.” (1 John 2:2 NASB)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

When Jesus took on our sinfulness and sins, as he died for us, God’s wrath was propitiated, which we painfully sense in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. Propitiation is a better translation than atonement, which doesn’t as well convey God’s wrath against sin. As R.C.H. Lenski comments, “All that we are able to say is that only thus, by actually forsaking Jesus, could the full price of our redemption be paid.

“To be forsaken of God is undoubtedly to taste his wrath. Jesus endured the full penalty for our sins when God turned from him for three hours while Jesus hung on the cross. During those hours the penalty was paid to the uttermost farthing; and after that had been done, God again turned to Jesus. The forsaking is often combined with the death, yet the two are quite distinct. The forsaking had been completed before the death set in. When Jesus died he placed his soul into the hands of his Father and thus was certainly not forsaken. But while they are distinct, the forsaking and the death are closely connected. The death was the penalty for the sins of the world, and thus in connection with it this forsaking of the dying Savior was necessary. After this had been endured, Jesus could cry, ‘It is finished!’ and then yield his soul into his Father's hands.” (*Lenski New Testament Commentary - The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 1121)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-26 NASB)
- “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NASB)
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Meaning and Practical Benefits

- *Think about what that propitiation in love meant to God.*
What great and unfathomable love he and his only begotten Son demonstrated, as the Father and the Holy Spirit had to watch the ugly and extremely painful agony inflicted on the Son, our Lord Jesus!
- However, does not the Bible teach that “God is love,” as we saw in an earlier part in this series, and that “perfect love drives out fear?” (1 John 4:8, 18) True.
- Nevertheless, as we also noted, true love is just and righteous. *Since* God loves us, to preserve his integrity and his love for the oppressed, and as part of his caring, he will discipline those he loves and judge everyone. “My son, do not despise the LORD’S discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” (Proverbs 3:11-12) The writer of Hebrews adds that “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” (12:10)

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:11-12)
- “the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” (Psalm 147:11)
- “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” (Psalm 130:3-4)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- The link of the fear of God with his love is seen throughout the Bible. Another of the texts which makes this connection is Psalm 103:11-12. Consider also Psalm 147:11.
- The Bible also links the fear of God with his forgiveness, an aspect of his love, as we see in Psalm 130:3-4. Our consciousness of being forgiven motivates our fear of, and love for, God, which fear John Stek in his commentary in the *NIV Study Bible* interprets as meaning “[h]onored, worshiped, trusted and served as the one true God. If God were not forgiving, people could only flee from him in terror.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:17-18)
- “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,” (Colossians 1:10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Christians who are maturing in their development from acorn to oak keep in mind who they are and Whose they are. They also clearly distinguish between the perfect character of God, who is most holy, and their own character which is unfit for his fellowship. When that distinction is made in the growing awareness of the magnitude of God’s love to them, an eternal gratitude motivates a desire to obey, to do his will.
- Such a perspective should guide our decision-making. When we reflect on what to do in a matter, and we think of what others will say, that’s important to an extent (e.g., Romans 12:17-18), but infinitely more important, and the question we should ask above all others, is “What does God think? What is his opinion?” God’s opinion overrides all others...by far! Infinitely so!!

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “²⁶If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ ³¹It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:26-31)
- “⁹Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- As mentioned in the beginning of this section, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews uses a very strong word in 10:26-31 that refers to a very real fear that will come upon those who deliberately continue to disobey God. In 10:31, “dreadful” is the NIV translation of φοβερός (*phoberos*), a derivative of *phobos*, meaning also fearful, terrible (NASB, “terrifying”), frightful. That’s more than just respect or reverent awe.
- In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, the original Greek word translated “wicked” means “unrighteous,” that is, those who have not been credited with the merits of Christ’s righteousness. The following behaviors are habitual, as part of a lifestyle of continuous disobedience; they display evidence that the person has not had the new birth, the new nature, and identified with Christ. Thus, they are not children of God and will not inherit the kingdom of God, unless they repent, seek forgiveness in Christ, stop doing these sins, and obey the Lord, sincerely seeking to do his will and following him.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

What Does It Mean to Fear God?

- “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10)
- Fearing God helps us obey; as Moses told the Israelites, “the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” (Exodus 20:20)

Meaning and Practical Benefits

- Maybe the reality revealed in Proverbs 9:10 explains the widespread lack of both fear and wisdom in our time.
- It is difficult to maintain balance in all aspects of life. We tend toward one side and then the other, underemphasizing the side not accentuated at the time. Many decades ago the pendulum swung toward focusing on God’s judgment. Then people saw the need to emphasize his grace, especially his love, where we are now but losing sight of God’s judgment on sin and his refusal to allow it in his presence much less to coexist with it; such people lose a healthy sense of fear that leads them to the obedience God requires. To be sure God’s essence is love (1 John 4:8), but *precisely because he is loving from the core of his being, he is also just and will judge the sin which offends him due to his holiness and the hurt sin does to the people he loves. His justice is an aspect of and flows from his love.*

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

We need to be careful in teaching the Biblical concept of fearing God, whether we are teaching a class or teaching a neighbor. Many people have a distorted view of God; we need to help them bring their understanding of God closer to that which he has revealed in his Word and not add to their confusion. Consider the context in which you are teaching. Specifically, what is the background of your class, or the person with whom you are speaking, concerning their/his/or her understanding of who God is, what he is like, and what he is doing?

- Are they people, usually older and/or from a conservative church background, who remember being taught in childhood that God is a strict judge who easily sends people to hell?
- Or, are they people who have grown up with the idea, a reaction to the older teaching, that God is their best friend and that he just sits back in his rocker, smiles at everything and “wouldn’t hurt a flea?” This perspective is the more prevalent view today and the reason for the approach taken in this part of our study.
- Or, are they somewhere in between these two views?

If you have people in the first group in your class, be sensitive that their background and the previous learning they’ve developed from it may mentally shape what you are saying to understand something you are not intending to say. Take time to explain and discuss this important Biblical theme of fearing God. Help people to mentally process this concept correctly. Taking time for discussion will help you discern where people are in their thinking, so you can correct misunderstanding and help them rightly understand what God’s Word is truly saying.

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

Presbyterian Pastor and Fuller Theological Seminary Adjunct Professor, William Eisenhower, has well written, “We have to conclude that while an unfiltered experience is terrifying, it also brings an unshakable reassurance. We are unsettled from our false securities, but then resettled in the true security of God’s love. Perfect love does indeed cast out fear. Yet the implication is that those who have never trembled from head to toe will never know God’s perfect love.”

Theology: Who is God; what is he like; what has he done; and what is he doing?

For Further Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you answer the question before us: “What does it mean to fear God?”
2. Explain how a healthy fear of God is consistent with, and draws us closer to, his love.
3. How does a healthy fear of God help us live in holiness to him?
4. What is the difference between fearing God and dreading him?
5. As parents and grandparents, how can we teach our children what it means to fear God?
6. Who would you rather have for a next-door neighbor? One who believes that while the core of God’s being is love, that love issues forth in a holy and just wrath against sin that hurts people he loves and is grievously offensive to him or one who sees God as being the great grandfather in the sky who sits back on his rocker watching what is going on, just loving everybody and never holding anyone accountable for what they do? Why did you make the choice you did? Which neighbor would be more inclined to care about what is important to you?

Resources

In order to facilitate course preparation, the slides in this overview of Biblical Theology have been selected from the Theology section in the original and unabridged version of the PowerPoint program (PPT), [*Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including God’s Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity.*](#)

This abbreviated PPT is still larger than can be covered in an average one-class session, particularly in the West. Therefore, an accompanying further abridged PPT for a one-session class is available with highlighting of especially essential parts to help when time is very limited.

For further information about the subjects on the Theology slides in both this abbreviated PPT overview and the further abridged PPT, see the additional slides in the Theology section that are on the original and unabridged PPT, which is located on the [Christian Theology](#) page of the author’s free and secure [general Website](#). See also other informative articles on the Christian Theology page.

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