

## BASIC DOCTRINE – THE FUNDAMENTALS

### PART 4: GOD

The prophet Jeremiah received many words from God to be proclaimed to all who would read them. One of the mightiest words of God revealed to Jeremiah were these:

*Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord.(Jer 9:23-24).*

God is the ultimate source of all knowledge and truth and the foundation of creation. He is the author of all that has been created whether we are talking about spiritual or material things. The entire universe with its underpinnings of energy, matter, space and time is God's handiwork. All of history is His Story. Since true knowledge of all other doctrines such as man, sin and revelation are based upon our understanding of God, it is important that we get this doctrine right.

The Bible never tries to prove the existence of God, but simply proceeds on the fact that His existence has been established by and through General Revelation. So Bruce Milne writes: "God has revealed himself to us. The Bible offers no

rational demonstration of God's existence, but rather points to his unquestionable reality: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gn 1:1); I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God' (Is. 45:5, cf. Rom 11:16). His existence and self-disclosure are the ultimate presuppositions of biblical revelation." (Know the Truth)

And Paul wrote that God has made Himself "*manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, (Rom 1:19-20).*

The basic human awareness of God is obvious even from the secular study of social anthropology, which has found a religious consciousness in virtually all peoples.

Throughout Christian history, various philosophical arguments have been offered as proof for God's existence. One such example is known as the Cosmological Argument, also known as the argument from cause and effect. The argument is simple and goes like this: There is no such thing as an effect without a cause. Every effect, that is everything that exists in the universe, had to have a cause to bring it into existence. In other words, nothing exists without some preexisting thing to bring it into reality. But if everything in the universe had a cause in order to exist, then how did the universe get started in the first place? What was the

first or original cause? It must have been something that has always existed, a self-existing thing that, in itself, needs nothing to exist and is dependent upon nothing to maintain its existence. And no other thing can fit that description than God.

While this and many other philosophical arguments can be made for God's existence, the success or failure of such arguments to convince or persuade does not invalidate our accountability to acknowledge and worship God. As argued in the chapter on General Revelation, God has given enough evidence through nature to hold us accountable.

There are different beliefs about the nature of God and who or what He is. The following are the four basic main categories of belief about God or gods held by mankind throughout history

Polytheism is the belief that there are many gods. This was the popular view of ancient cultures such as the Greeks (though not the view of certain famous philosophers such as Plato), Babylonians and Romans and still exists today in many parts of the world.

Pantheism is the belief that the spiritual world and the material world are one and the same. The ultimate divine being is not disassociated from universe but is identified with it. There is no god above creation or transcended from it.

Pantheism is fundamental to Hinduism and Buddhism and to much of the present occult religions or what we call New Age beliefs.

Materialist-Atheism is the belief that nothing exists outside the material world and that all of existence can be explained with natural scientific laws. There is no god, gods or supernatural world to impede or affect the universe.

Monotheism is the belief that God is a being who is one in nature, eternal, infinite, the creator who is transcendent above His creation and yet at the same time immanent with it. Christianity is a monotheistic belief system, which holds that God is a personal being and that He is perfectly holy and the ultimate standard for all that is morally right and wrong.

A correct understanding of God, of who He really is as revealed by Himself in Scripture, that He is a being who is righteous and that He has the right to command His creatures, is the only ground upon which a true understanding of salvation can stand. When God confronted Moses and spoke from the burning bush, He did not leave knowledge of Himself to Moses' guess-work or to how Moses might have understood who God is through the religious views of the Egyptians or any other pagan belief. This is important because there were many religions in Moses day with many gods to worship. So, without specific self-revelation from God, Moses would have been tempted to interpret God on the basis of his own knowledge and experience, a terrible temptation that still

plagues us today. God did not allow Moses to fall into that trap (nor us today because we have what Moses recorded for us in sacred Scripture) and identified Himself as: *the God of your father — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*" (Ex 3:6). Here God characterized Himself as a personal being who had come to Abraham to associate with him in a covenant relationship, to call him and bless him, and that through Abraham and his descendants God might reveal Himself to the rest of the world so that all His chosen ones would eventually come to Him and worship Him as the one true eternal God.

God also distinguished Himself as "I am." The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament says that God "designated Himself by this name as the absolute God of the fathers, acting with unfettered liberty and self-dependence" In other words, God established Himself to the Hebrew people as the eternal, infinite God who was independent of any thing other than Himself alone to fulfill what He had promised.

In the desert, in the midst of being surrounded by polytheistic cultures with their idol worship, Moses reminded the Israelites of their special relationship to this infinite personal God and their responsibility toward Him, saying: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength".* (Deut 6:4-5)

In Hebrew culture this passage of scripture was known as the "Shema" and was a reminder to the Jews of the importance of their relationship with God.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest of all of the commandments, He repeated the Shema, saying: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."* (Matt 22:37).

In spite of God's revelation in both the Old and New Testaments, many have questioned the idea that man is capable of knowing God. They believe that, since God must be infinite and unlimited, it is impossible for the finite and limited mind of man to grasp or understand anything about Him. They compare it to the idea of trying to fill a teacup with an endless ocean. There is a grain of truth in this criticism in one sense. For it is true that we can never know all that there is to know about God. Psalm 145:3 says: *Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; And His greatness is unsearchable.* But even though an exhaustive understanding of God is impossible, we can still know something of His nature because He has graciously revealed true things about Himself to us. The tea cup may not hold the entire ocean, but if you dip your cup in the ocean, you will have a tiny but real part of the ocean in your cup! God has condescended to man and spoken through Special Revelation in ways that man can comprehend. This comes primarily through the Bible's use of analogical language, which is just a way of saying that the Bible explains things about God's nature in ways that we can understand by the using words and examples that are familiar to us. For

example God said to the children of Israel after their deliverance from slavery: *“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself”.* (Ex 19:4-5). Here God does not mean that He literally used a gigantic eagle to rescue Israel, but He uses the imagery of an eagle with its majestic power to convey His ability to deliver and bring them into a special caring relationship with Him.

By Special Revelation, God has revealed His character or attributes in a way that we might truly know Him and worship Him. An attribute is a quality which is essential to the identity of who or what someone or something is. So, for example, an attribute of a carpenter is the ability to saw wood in a straight line. That is one of the things that distinguishes a carpenter. In the same way, God’s attributes are those characteristics that distinguish Him as God.

In theology it is common to separate God’s attributes into two categories. There are communicable attributes, or those qualities which God shares with man, and incommunicable attributes, which are those attributes that belong to God and God alone. Thus, for God’s communicable attributes, there is a kind of likeness between God and us. But there is no likeness between God and us when it comes to His incommunicable attributes.

While it is beyond this study to discuss all of the attributes of God (communicable and incommunicable) we would like briefly to touch on some of the most important.

Communicable attributes are such qualities as love, wisdom, holiness, and goodness. These are attributes that God shares with man and which are inherent within man's personality as being made in God's image and likeness

Love is defined by Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as "a strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties."

John said that: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16).*

Here we see that God's definition of love involves more than just an emotion but includes the behaviors of grace, self sacrifice and mercy toward others for their ultimate good and benefit.

As God's children we are expected to show the same attitude of self-giving toward others. Thus we find Christ commanding us: "*that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:34-35).

Holiness is best defined as God's sinless perfection and transcendent purity.

Peter writes: *He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15).*

Although our lives will never be perfect while we live on this earth, we are instructed to live a life that is separated from sin and devoted to God.

God's goodness is based on His mercy and grace which is given freely to all who are in need of it, for James tells us that: *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. (James 1:17).*

*Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. (Ps 106:1).*

Again we are instructed by Scripture to imitate God in His goodness. This is clear in Galatians where Paul writes: *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal 6:10)*

It is important to recognize that while a shared attribute may somewhat mirror God's nature, God's possession of that attribute is more perfect, so perfect, in

fact, that it is not always given to our understanding, which is why we must rely on Scripture to affirm what we might affirm about God what we might not be willing to affirm about Him apart from His own self-revelation. God is perfect in all of His qualities both communicable and incommunicable. But because we experience an attribute similar to God, we may at times fall into the error of trying to understand an attribute of God through the filter of our own limited understanding and experiences. This may lead us to place limits on God incompatible with the clear meaning of Scripture. How many times have we heard someone say something like this: “My God would never harm anyone because my God is a God of love.” This statement and many like, it are based on the understanding and experiences of the person making the statement.

Because they cannot conceive of a person being both a source of love and harm, they cannot conceive of God being both loving and harmful. This is a clear case of someone relying upon their own understanding and experiences and using them to discount the clear picture of God in Scripture—God’s own revelation about Himself; namely, that there are plenty of places in the Bible that reveal God is love but also can and does harm some people by visiting judgment upon them.

The incommunicable attributes of God are those qualities that belong to Him and are not shared with man. These would include such characteristics as His timelessness, self-existence, unchangeableness, independence, omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience.

Omnipresence means that God is present at all places at all times.

Omnipresence does not mean that God is one with the universe as taught in pantheism. Although God is present everywhere, He is transcendent and independent of His creation. God is not limited by space the way we are (we cannot be in the United States and India at the same time), and there is no part of the universe where His is not.

*As David confessed: Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. (Ps 139:7-8)*

*King Solomon confirmed as much when He prayed: "But will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! (2 Chron 6:18-19)*

While God's omnipresence may be a blessing to the believer, it can, at the same time, be a frightening thought to the sinner. In the book of Jeremiah God warned the wicked that there is no place they can go to escape punishment: *"Am I a God near at hand," says the Lord, "And not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him?" says the Lord; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the Lord. (Jer 23:23-24)*

Omnipotence means that God is all-powerful and there is nothing that God wills to do that He can not do or be prevented from doing.

*For with God nothing will be impossible."( Luke 1:37)*

Omnipotence does not mean that God will do anything that anyone wants or desires Him to do. It does mean that God does everything according to His good and holy will and within the expression of His holy character. All of creation is under His control and is being sovereignly worked out for His and our good purposes.

*As Paul tells us: having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth — in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. (Eph 1:9-12)*

Omniscience means that God is all-knowing. God is perfect in His knowledge of all past, present and future events and even all possibilities.

God proclaims through the prophet Isaiah saying: *For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning,*

*And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,' (Isa 46:9-10)*

The above incommunicable attributes are not just abstract ideas about God for theological study or philosophical discourse only. They are divine qualities of God which He has chosen to reveal to us that have personal and significant meaning to the life of every believer.

God's omnipresence assures us that God is with us at all times to care for us: ... *and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20)* His omnipotence gives us hope that all things are under His sovereign control and that no promise of His is beyond His ability to fulfill: *For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us (2 Cor 1:20-21).* His omniscience gives confidence the nothing escapes God's knowledge, for He understands our deepest needs and troubles and knows what is best for us: *O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. (Ps 139:1-3).*

In Ps 115:3-8 the writer mocks Israel's seemingly fascination with idols when he pens: *But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.*

In his scorn of idolatry the psalmist reminds the Israelites of God's greatness and the inability of idols to help them, for idols have no eyes to see their troubles or needs. Idols have no ears to hear their cries for help or comfort and no hands to help or deliver. Compared to the one true God, idols have no qualities of being that can assure the Israelites protection, blessings and promises.

Christianity teaches that, while there is but one God who is divine in nature, there are within this divine nature three persons that coexist as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The tri-unity of God is a great mystery. The term used to describe this mysterious and profound doctrine of God is the word "Trinity".

Classic orthodox theology stretching all the way back to the very beginning of the New Testament church, and finally formulated with theological precision in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.), has always held that God is three persons in one

substance. Although the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, the word captures the reality of a doctrine that is clearly taught in the Bible; namely that there is only one true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence.

That the Trinity is taught in Scripture can be gleaned from passages too numerous to print here, but we nevertheless offer a few foundational passages:

The person and divinity of the Father:

*To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 1:7)*

The person and divinity of the Son:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (John 1:1-2)*

The person and divinity of the Holy Spirit:

*But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it*

*not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."*

*(Acts 5:3-4)*

This Trinitarian belief was taught by Christ Himself when He taught His disciples to: *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (Matt 28:19)*

Although the doctrine of the Trinity is in part beyond our understanding, it is neither illogical nor a contradiction and has been held in traditional orthodox faith since the beginning. But it is not without controversy, and the early church struggled to explain and define the term while defending itself not only against the accusation of polytheism (to the untutored ear the teaching can sound like Christians worship three gods) but also many different heresies that remain even today, of which we will briefly mention only two.

### Sabellianism

This heresy taught that the tri-unity of God was simply various manifestations or expressions of the same God. There are no three persons in one God but merely different revelations or modes of one God (which is why it is also called "modalism"). This idea can be found in present day Oneness Pentecostalism.

## Arianism

A very pernicious heresy called Arianism, which rose up in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, taught that there was only one eternal God the Father who created the Son who then created the Holy Spirit. This heresy is a part of the teachings of the Jehovah Witnesses and their view of God.

We might well ask what difference these heresies make? What does it matter if we think of God in a non-Trinitarian way? The reason why this should matter to us is that such beliefs make mincemeat out of all those passages in the Bible that so clearly show the Trinitarian nature of God. If you are not worshipping the Three-in-One God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then you may be worshipping Allah like the Muslims but you will not be worshipping the God revealed to us in Christian Scripture. Moreover, Arian-like beliefs demean the persons of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, which means that they are not revered or worshipped as they ought to be.

When God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush on that fateful day, He gave to Moses the realization that there are no other gods but Him and Him alone, and He had now come to Hebrews as His chosen people to reveal Himself to them, and through them to reveal this special relationship to the rest of the world. Thus the all-knowing, all-powerful, present-everywhere-God is also a God of love who desires to bestow that love in a very special way with His chosen people. As the

prophet Isaiah reminded them, saying: *"But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend. You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its farthest regions, And said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away: (Isa 41:8-9).*

This passage from Isaiah shows us that knowledge of God is more than just doctrinal information, but it is also a way to know God as someone we can have a relationship with, so that we can, in the words of a famous Protestant confession of faith: "enjoy Him forever."

Jesus reminds us that when we worship God we must worship Him in truth (John 4: 22-24) and that truth includes a relationship, for He also said: *If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. (John 14:23).* God desires that we know Him and that we enjoy Him. This is to be expected, because when we love someone, we wish to know that person better and enjoy spending time with them. God wishes us to know Him better, and the better we know Him, the closer we will be to Him as He continually works and wills within us to draw us ever near to Him.

We can bring this study of God to a conclusion by pointing out that the doctrine of God is expressed best by Paul when he wrote to the church at Corinth: *...there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or*

*on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. (1Cor 8:4-6)*

*Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:17)*