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WEEK 3

# IDENTITY

**THE TRIUNE GOD**



# LESSON 3 - THE TRIUNE GOD

*The Trinity and the Attributes of God* I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. - A.W. Tozer<sup>1</sup>

Spring 2023

## What is God Like?

There is no greater subject than the subject of God. Theology is properly about God and all other sections and lessons we discuss naturally follow, and are subordinate to this one.

### SCRIPTURE

Read and reflect on the following passages: Ex. 33:12-34:10; Eph. 1:3-14

### REFLECTIONS

- What do these passages say about who God is and what he is like?
- What are aspects of God you really cherish?
- What aspects of God that are described in the Bible do you really struggle with (i.e. Father, foreknowledge, judge, wrath, sovereignty, etc.)?
- Describe to the best of your present knowledge, what the Trinity is and why it is important.
- What do these passages say about God? God the Father? God the Son? God the Holy Spirit?

## PRAYER

Theologian Fred Sanders says, "To contemplate the Trinity is to lift up your heart and to 'set your mind on the things above.' (Col. 3:2)."<sup>1</sup> Spend time in prayer asking for wisdom and guidance in who God is and how he relates to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pray through Eph. 1:3-14. Reflect upon the unity of God and diverse actions of the persons of God.

## PRACTICE

The spiritual discipline to practice and reflect on this week is simply to *worship* God. Praise him for his majesty, his holiness, for any of his marvelous attributes.

It is common today for people to not understand the importance of participating in a corporate worship service. On the one hand, Christian worship is supposed to involve the whole of our lives as Christ is Lord over everything. But on the other hand, the sacraments of the church: preaching the word, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, are the means God has ordained for our spiritual nourishment through the institution of the church. Regular church attendance is a spiritual discipline that ensures Christians continue to be admonished and encouraged by fellow believers, comforted and convicted by the gospel of Christ through the word of God. In a nut shell, go to church so you can witness through *worship!*

Remember your goals through this course as you go practice these disciplines. Pay attention to how your heart responds and what the Spirit is speaking to you.

## Trinity

Perhaps one of the most common theological claims people express confusion about is the doctrine of the Trinity. This is intensified by the suspicion the early church councils were attempts to squash diverse opinions about God or were motivated by political aspirations. This could not be further from the truth. The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith because without it, the gospel is not possible. The claim that God is love and has saved us from our sins depends on the fact that God, in his very nature for all eternity is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Trinity is not a word that appears in scripture. This has caused some to deny it and consider it a corruption of the church (e.g. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam). Rather Theologian Stanley Grenz is right in saying that the word Trinity is used to summarize the clear teaching of Scripture of one God in three persons who we know through the personal experience

rience of salvation.<sup>2</sup> Complete comprehension of the Trinity is not essential for saving faith

## WILLOW GLEN BIBLE CHURCH

### Article II: God

*There is but one true God, who eternally exists as three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who share in the work of creation, maintenance of the universe, sovereign control of history, redemption of believers and judgment of angels and mankind.*

and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God; 3) The Father is distinct from the Son and the Son is distinct from the Spirit and the Spirit is distinct from the Father; 4) God is Trinity and acts as Trinity. Therefore, God does not change into different forms (modalism) and does not work independently of himself. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are involved in every act of God from Genesis to Revelation, from the first day of creation to the last in every aspect in our lives.

Fred Sanders in *The Deep Things of God* shows very clearly how essential aspects the Christian life are only possible with a Triune God. Experiencing salvation is about being adopted by the Father through faith in the Son and given new life by the Spirit. Prayer is mediated through Jesus to the Father and enabled by the Spirit crying “Abba Father.” Scripture is hearing the Father’s voice, through the Son and in the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Living out our Christian life is truly and most fundamentally about living in light our belovedness as son’s and daughters of God.

The scriptures clearly teach that there is one God (Deut 6:4; Ex 20:2-3; Mt 22:34-40; Jam 2:19). In the Old Testament, an appearance of the Lord or an angel of the Lord implies distinctions within God’s essence (Gen 18:1; Dan 3:24-25; Is 48:16; 61:1; 63:9,10). There is a hint of the Trinity in Genesis 1:26 when God refers to himself in the plural is at the creation of male and female. However, the Trinity is a mystery in the sense it was something previously hidden in the Old Testament but made known more fully in the New Testament through the sending of the Son and the Spirit. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mentioned together in several places (Mt 3:16-17; 28:18-20; 1 Cor 12:4-6; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). Each is ascribed divine characteristics as well as distinct functions in the work of creation and redemption. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equally God and equally share the divine attributes. They have all existed eternally in unity and have acted within redemptive history as one God.

but it is essential for the nature of God and Christian salvation. While it can be difficult to understand, there is tremendous fruit for the believer in studying the Trinity. “Christianity is nothing less than the life of God in the soul of man.”<sup>3</sup> It is important subject because we are talking about what kind of God he is and distortions on the nature of God do have implications for the thriving of every church and believer.

The basic points of this doctrine are as follows: 1) There is one God; 2) The Father is God

The “persons” of the trinity are not to be misunderstood as individual persons as some may think of individual people with distinct wills or personalities. There is one will within God and the classic understanding of persons is they point to distinct “relations of origin” which simply means the persons describes a relationship and nothing more.<sup>5</sup> God exists in an inseparable unity of three persons who are distinct in that the Son *eternally proceeds* from the Father and the Spirit is *eternally spirated*. In other words, the sending one is the Father. The one who takes on flesh is the Son. The one who indwells the believer is the Spirit. Relative to the world, God is undivided as Father, Son, and Spirit (external actions). Relative to himself eternally, Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct (internal actions). Only the Father begets the Son and not vice versa. It does not mean God the Son was born physically or he is younger or that he is smaller. He is not *less than* the Father but has eternally been the Son and it is he alone who took on our humanity.

Thus, creation and salvation within the Christian faith are fully and completely a work of God’s grace who acted not because he desired to show his power, but out of the overflow of the eternal love between Father, Son, and Spirit. All other creation narratives in other religions rely on a god creating to prove its power. But the Christian faith is about a God who created and who saved out of the overflow of his love. Hence the union of husband and wife serves as an analogy for the Triune God who beget children in the consummation of their relationship who are born out of their love for one another.

## GOD THE FATHER, PATROLOGY

### Article III: God the Father

*God the Father is unique in nature. He is eternal, having no beginning or end. He is the Father of Jesus Christ whom He sent in bodily form. He is our Creator by virtue of our physical creation, and becomes our spiritual Father by election and adoption. He created mankind for the express purpose of fellowship with us as His children, to the praise of his Glory.*

Language about God should properly be understood *analogically*. Meaning, we should not understand God the Father being utterly devoid of meaning or an empty cipher we fill with everything we think of about fathers from a creaturely sense. It can be helpful to ask what God *is not* in addition to asking what God *is*. It does not mean God is a male who had sex with a woman and birthed a son. God is Spirit and thus is beyond male and female. God the Father is so because he *eternally* has a Son. The Son did not come to be at some point in eternity (this is the heresy of arianism). The primary significance for Christian salvation is that of sonship, we are adopted by the Father with the full rights and privileges of access to God by faith in his Son.<sup>6</sup>

All good things come from the Father (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:15; Jam. 1:17). He created through the Word (Jn 1:3). The Father does the work of designing creation and redemption (Ps 2:7-9; 40:6-9; Is 53:10; Mt 12:32; Eph 1:3-6). He sends the Son and the Spirit and reveals himself through the Son. He points us to the Son to enable belief (Jn 6:37, 44, 65). He is the Father of all his spiritual children, both Jew and Gentile (Hos 11:1; Is 63:16; Is 64:8; Mt 5:45; 6:6-15; Rom 8:16). He gives us only good things (Mt 7:11). He provides for us (Mt 6:25-34). He is the object of our prayers and ultimately our worship (Mt 6:6-9; 1 Cor 15:24-28). He exercises loving discipline on his children (Dt. 8:5; Heb 12:9-10). He chooses his people in his foreknowledge (Jer 1:5; Eph 1:4-5). The love of the Father is chiefly important to the Christian gospel. It is the Father who loved the world despite its sinfulness (Jn. 3:16-17). It is the love of the Father that caused him to sacrifice his only Son to be reconciled to us. It is through this mission of redemption that the Father makes himself known to us to which all our longings for a good father point (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). The gospel is about reconciling us to our heavenly Father (2 Cor. 5:18; 1 Jn. 2:13) and finding our life in being his child.

## GOD THE SON, CHRISTOLOGY

### Article IV: The Son

*By miracle of the virgin birth, the Lord Jesus Christ, eternal Son of God, became man without ceasing to be God in order to reveal God and to redeem man. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He is the means of Creation, and the visible expression of the invisible God. No man comes to reconciliation with God the Father except through Jesus Christ.*

Jesus revealed himself as fully God, having existed eternally, and being one with the Father (Jos 5:13-15; Dan 3:25; Jn 8:58; 14:7-9). Others testified to his divinity as well (Jn 20:28; Col 1:15-20; Phil 2:5-11). He is the exact representation of God (Heb 1:3). He always was God and always will be. Jesus was fully human. He was born of a virgin woman, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and grew up in the same way as we do (Is 7:14; Mic 5:2; Mt 1:20; Lk 2:52). He experienced physical limitations and the full range of human emotion (Mt 4:2; 9:36; 26:38; Mk 10:14; Jn 13:23; 19:28). His knowledge reflected his human and divine nature being at times supernatural (Mt 26:34; Jn 4:18) and at other times limited (Mk 9:21; 13:32). He possessed a human body (Lk 24:39; Jn 8:40). Jesus was sinless though tempted as we are and perhaps to a greater degree because he never gave in to sin (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5). He was sent by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Is 11:1-5; 50:5-7; Mt 3:16; Jn 4:34). Jesus was perfectly obedient to the Father in his humanity and demonstrating his deity by doing the kind of works the Father does (Jn. 5:19; 8:28-29). His primary message was repentance and faith to enter the kingdom of God which he also demonstrated by preaching, teaching, and healing (Mk. 1:15; Is 61:1-3; Mt 9:35-38).

The relationship between the two natures of Jesus Christ can be as perplexing as the Trinity. It is also distinctively Christian compared with other religions. Jesus was human and divine at the same time (Jn 1:14; 1 Tim 3:16). The two natures do not exist separately in Christ as if he possesses a human nature and a divine nature side by side, or that one was acquired at some later point in time. The two natures were united together in one person, what is referred to as the hypostatic union. This does not diminish or confuse the distinctions between the two. Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, remained fully divine (Col 2:9) and took on the full qualities of humanness (Is 49:1-13; Phil 2:6-7). He took on the nature of a servant not considering equality with God something to be used for his own advantage. He added humanity to his divinity by leaving his heavenly position and the constant use of his divine powers during his earthly ministry. His was a self-limitation of the use of his divine abilities in accordance with the Father's will and Holy Spirit's leading (Jn 5:19; Is 61:1-3; Mt 4:1). Jesus was always fully divine and human throughout his work and life and continues to be so today sitting in his glorified state at the "right hand" of the Father (Acts 7:55). He was also more human than we are, since in him the image of God was perfectly manifested.

It is through Jesus that the Father is made known (Jn. 1:1-3, 18; 14:9; Heb. 1:3). He fulfills the office of priest, prophet and king. He is the true and better Adam (Rom 5:15), the true and better Moses (Heb. 3:1-6), the true and better David (Is. 9:7; Heb. 1:8), and true and better high priest (Heb. 4:14-16). His sacrifice is superior and the fulfillment of all the Old Testament sacrifices (Is. 52-53; Heb. 9:12-15, 26-28). His sacrifice on the cross is the once for all penal substitutionary atonement available to all people (Lk. 22; 2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore, because of his work on the cross Jesus is the only savior from human guilt and shame before God, demonic forces (1 Jn. 3:8; Heb. 2:14-15), human sinfulness, broken relationship with God and other human beings. He is our justification (Rom. 2:23), our propitiation (1 Jn. 2), our expiation (Rom. 3:28), our ransom (Mk. 10:45), our ultimate example, our righteousness (Rom. 3; 5), our redemption (Is. 61; Lk. 1), our reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:21), our salvation, and our revelation. Jesus' resurrection ensures victory over all of sin and its effects for those who believe in him. It ensures the ultimate restoration of all creation. After his resurrection in his glorified body, he ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father and to rule over the church and all creation (Dan. 7:13-14; Col. 1:19-20; Rev. 21:5). He will literally return in the future to judge the living and the dead and bring the kingdom in all its fullness (1 Cor. 15:24-25).

## GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT, PNEUMATOLOGY

### Article V: The Holy Spirit

*The Holy Spirit is God, sent by the resurrected Jesus to reveal and glorify Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit living in the believer is the proof guaranteeing our inheritance in Jesus Christ. He provides spiritual gifts to all believers, and indwells, guides, teaches, empowers and comforts them. He convicts the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgment.*

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and is fully God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Jn. 16:5-15; Acts 5:3-4). The Holy Spirit possesses the divine attributes and is involved in creation and its renewal (Ps. 104:30). He is involved in conviction of sin (Jn. 16:5-8), regeneration of the believer (Jn. 3:5-8), resurrection (Rom. 8:11), and inspiration of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). He is also personal in nature, which is clear because of personal masculine pronouns used to describe the Holy Spirit even though the Greek word for “spirit” *pneuma* is a neuter word. This is evidenced by not only equating the Spirit with God but also his work of distributing gifts to believers (1 Cor. 12:11). He can be grieved (Eph. 4:30) and intercedes for us (Rom. 8:26). The presence of the Spirit sanctifies God’s people and sets them apart (Ex. 33:15-16). He empowers God’s people for ministry (Jdg. 6:34; 1 Sam. 10:10; 1:13). He is evidenced in God’s people by a demonstration of righteousness, peace, and the fruits of the Spirit (Is. 32:16-20; Gal. 5:22-23). In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon specific people for a specific task and for a limited time (1 Sam. 10:6-7). He came upon Jesus during his ministry (Is. 42:1-4; 61:1-3; Mt. 3:11; Lk. 4:1). The Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures and reminds the believer of Jesus’ teachings. He gives gifts to the body of Christ for the equipping and edification of the body (1 Cor. 12). There are several lists of these gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:4-11) but they are not exhaustive. It is the work of the Spirit that gives evidence of true salvation through the transformation of the believer.

## The Attributes of God

The attributes of God refer to the qualities of his nature. They apply to the whole of who God is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some attempt to lift one attribute over the other or use them to explain the dynamic of the interrelationship of the Trinity. Perhaps the only one where this may be argued is that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8-10).<sup>7</sup> Scripture simply affirms God’s character and his attributes are who he is and not a composite, a collection of fragments, but comprise the whole of who he is. The attributes of God are often broken up into different categories and one popular method is the communicable and incommunicable attributes. The former is ones that we can reflect in part and the latter ones that are unique to him, e.g. holiness vis-a-vis all-powerful. This categorization is to help us consider once again, how God is like things we know in creation in an analogical sense and also how he is not like his



creatures. Thus some of God's attributes are stated negatively rather than positively. For example, God is unchanging or immutable is a denial that God experiences change like creatures or creation does. We will use the natural and moral categorization for the sake of simple language. The natural attributes of God are those related to his nature and being as the only God and Supreme being that exists. The moral attributes are those displayed in his action.

We will begin with the natural attributes. **God is a living God (Jn. 5:26)** who has revealed himself as the great "I am" (Ex. 3:14). Thus he is self-existent and his existence does not depend on anything though all other created things are dependent upon him (Acts 17:24-26). This is also intrinsic to his nature as Trinity. Thus, he created everything simply because he wanted to. He does not need us nor was he lonely. God's grace and love then is truly unconditional. **God is personal** which is demonstrated by the fact he has a name (Ex. 20:7) and his believers call on him by name (Gen. 12:8). **God is spirit (Jn. 4:24)** and thus God is not spatially confined and cannot be fully represented by our images of him (Ex. 20:3-6). There is nowhere he cannot be found (Ps. 139; Jer. 23:23). **God is transcendent (Is. 40:18, 25; Ps. 113:5-6) and immanent (Ps. 139)**; that is he is both distinct from creation and intimately active in it. This means God is not "in" a rock or even a person in a literal sense. Remember scripture speaks of God analogically to help us comprehend him. God is "present" spiritually but he remains distinct and is not fused with us in some physical or metaphysical way. **God is infinite and thus omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient (Mt. 10:29; Gen. 18:10-14; Jer. 32:17; Mt. 19:26)**. Expanding on these strikes both fear and adoration towards him for he is not limited by space or time. He is totally sovereign and all-powerful for there is nothing impossible with him (Matt. 19:26). He knows everything and he is absolutely wise and good in all he does. **God is eternal** (Ps. 90:1-2; Eph. 3:21; Is. 44:6; Rev. 22:13). **God does not change** with respect to his essential character (Ps. 102:26-27; Jam. 1:17). **God is glorious**. The word glory also means "weight" or "heavy". God then is *immense* and "heavier" than anything else. Nothing can withstand his glory without a mediator (who is Christ). This is illustrated by Isaiah who upon seeing a glimpse of his glory was struck by his sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people (Is 6:1-11).

Next are the moral attributes. This list is not exhaustive and much more can be said about the surpassing character of God but it serves to list the major ones. **God is holy** in that he is separate from creation and he is absolutely pure and good (Ex 15:11; Lev 19:2; Is 6:1-2; Jam 1:13; Mt 5:48). **God is righteous and just** (Ps 19:7-9; Jer 9:24; Dt 7:9-10). Meaning he always does what is right and will bring about absolute and perfect justice for he has all the power, wisdom, intelligence and the heart to accomplish what needs to be done. God is then impartial and does not discriminate or show favoritism to anyone unfairly or unjustly. This always means God must, out of his love and justice, punish the guilty. But his mercy triumphs over

judgment to the repentant. God's vengeance should be understood in light of him being a just being. The vengeance of God is about him making things right. When God brings vengeance he is bringing justice. For this we should fear him and praise him. **God is faithful** and shows covenant faithfulness to his people. He does not and will not ever break his contract or vow with his people. He will accomplish his purposes. He is long-suffering, meaning he longs for, is jealous for, and is patient with our redemption and relationship with us. He is a wonder to behold and is beautiful, which is reflected by the simplicity and complexity of his being as well as his creation. God invented art and is the consummate artist. God invented science and is the consummate engineer. Of all of his qualities, perhaps the most cherished and all encompassing are that of **God's mercy, grace, truth and love** (Ex 34:6-7; 1 Pet 4:19; 1 Jn 4:8-10; Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; Eph 2:7-9; Jam 2:13). God is quite to forgive the repentant as the Father embraces his prodigal son. God is gracious with us giving us things we neither asked for or need. God is truth and is therefore utterly trustworthy and only he speaks it in a way that is healing, frightening, uplifting, loving, gentle, and firm. Ultimately, God is love. He acts in a loving way toward us even in his discipline. All that God does for us is for our good. His love is not only expressed in action but also in affection. His love is both heartfelt and dutiful. His love is overflowing for he shows it to thousands of generations of those who follow him. Truly, as Paul says, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33).

#### FURTHER RESOURCES

Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*

An fun and engaging read introducing what the Trinity is and why its important.

Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*

An accessible and deeply rich treatment of the Trinity.

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*

A modern classic on the attributes of God

Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*

A great writer and popular book that exposes parts of Jesus we have overlooked

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 54.

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd. Ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>5</sup> Relations of origin goes back to Gregory of Nazianzus. See Ben Myers very accessible and concise book *The Apostles Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Lexham Press, 2018), 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> Some today may find the associations of maleness in the language of Father and Son to be patriarchal and degrading to women. But this neglects the power of the adoption metaphor Paul uses in Romans 8:15,23 and Galatians 4:5 relies upon a technical legal term for sons adopted under Roman law that gives them the full rights and privileges of a firstborn son. See the work of Dr. Erin Heim (who also is a personal friend).

<sup>7</sup> Erickson, 318.