

understanding
the Bible's teaching

GOD

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What the Bible tells us about **GOD**

Most people believe that there is a supreme being and this has always been so. Primitive or isolated tribes share this belief with many different organised religions. Surveys show that belief in a God is something built into the human mind. One commentator said that we are born with *'a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and purposeful and that some kind of intelligent being is behind that purpose'* (Dr Justin Barrett, University of Oxford's Centre for Anthropology and Mind: BBC Radio 4, 2008). Common to these various beliefs is the idea that these powerful beings interact in some way with humans.

This basic human feeling has expressed itself in the worship of a wide array of deities. Almost every ethnic group has its own different concept of the nature and personality of the being they either revere or fear. But, sadly, with one exception, the evidence for the existence of such beings is very scanty. What they are and what they do is the product of the human imagination.

The exception is the God of the Bible – the book that claims and can be shown to be the message of the Creator of all things. The evidence that the Bible is God's Word is the topic of another booklet in this series. Here we will look at what the Bible says about God and the relationship that human beings can have with Him.

God is supreme

The Bible's consistent teaching is that there is only one God, and that other so-called gods are figments of the imagination. Here are examples from both the Old and New Testaments:

'Is there a God besides me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one' (Isaiah 44.8).

'They have no knowledge, who carry the wood of their carved image, and pray to a god that cannot save ... there is no other God besides me... ' (Isaiah 45.20, 21).

'...we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth ... yet for us there is only one God, the Father, of whom are all things...' (1 Corinthians 8.4-6).

God is without beginning or end

This one God has always existed and always will exist. Bounded as we are by the limits of our short existence it is very difficult to understand the concept of a Being that has no beginning or end, but that is the Bible's teaching as the following verses show:

'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God' (Psalm 90.2).

'Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honour and glory for ever and ever...' (1 Timothy 1.17).

This eternal God is located in a place that the Bible describes as 'heaven'. God is also everywhere present and knows everything that is going on: '*...“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*' (Jeremiah 23.24).

The characteristics of God

It may seem that the God of the Bible is a very remote, even frightening Being. However, further investigation of His qualities and accomplishments reveal Him as a God whom we can honour, trust and love. Unlike the many gods that have been worshipped throughout history, the God of the Bible is revealed as One whose blend of characteristics marks Him out as special, indeed unique.

powerful and majestic

There is no limit to what God can do. '*Is anything too hard for the LORD?*' an angel asked Abraham (Genesis 18.14). This was repeated when the angel Gabriel appeared to the virgin Mary (Luke 1.37). Speaking of a humanly unattainable feat Jesus said to his disciples:

'With men this is impossible'; then he added 'but with God all things are possible' (Matt 19.26). In this way God tells us that all His promised actions will inevitably take place: 'Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it' (Isaiah 46.11).

This powerful God is very majestic. We are told that He *'alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power' (1 Timothy 6.16). Therefore all people should worship Him, as did King Solomon of old in words that find an echo in the closing words of 'The Lord's Prayer':*

'Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head over all' (1 Chronicles 29.11).

wise and righteous

The well-known human adage: *'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'* cannot be applied to God. For combined with His great power is infinite wisdom that always governs His actions. This is repeatedly stated in Scripture. God is described by Job as *'wise in heart and mighty in strength'* (Job 9.4); Daniel said of God: *'wisdom and might are his'* (Daniel 2.20); and the Psalmist exclaimed: *'Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; his understanding is infinite'* (Psalm 147.5). As a result we can be sure that whatever God does cannot be faulted, even if our limited perception might think otherwise. Abraham acknowledged this when he said: *'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'* (Genesis 18.25).

Throughout the Bible this impossibility of God doing anything wrong is described as His *'righteousness'*. Daniel expressed this in his prayer to God: *'O Lord, righteousness belongs to you...the LORD our God is righteous in all the works which he does...'* (Daniel 9.7, 14). It is not for puny man to criticise God's actions and to accuse Him of injustice or failing to care about the things that occur on earth. To those who attempt to do this the Apostle Paul wrote: *'...indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"'* (Romans 9.20).

all-knowing

Another aspect of God's character and one that can be both a warning and encouragement is that God knows everything. By His Spirit power He *'looks to the ends of the earth, and sees under the whole heavens'* (Job 28.24) and therefore nothing is hidden from Him. Every one of our thoughts, every action and every intention is known to God. One of the Psalms of David reminds us of this. Addressing God he wrote:

'You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off ... and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, you know it altogether ... Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ... If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me", even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from you, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to you.'

(Psalm 139 2-12; see also Jeremiah 23.24)

loving

If this seems to make God forbidding and remote, the Bible reveals another side to God's character. In contrast to the pagan idols that were believed to terrorise their deluded devotees, the God of the Bible is a loving God. He really wants the best for the world, even for those who at times do not respond to Him. God's chosen people the Jews frequently turned away from Him but even then He could say to them: *'Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness I have drawn you'* (Jeremiah 31.3).

This love was especially shown in His concern for the plight of the human race which had brought upon itself the tragedy of sin, evil, disease and death. We are told that God would eventually remedy this, but only by the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. Possibly the best-known verse of Scripture says: *'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). The same apostle John later wrote: *'In this the love of God was manifested towards us, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. 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 4.9,10).

For those who believe in Jesus this awesome God becomes a loving Father who personally cherishes His children. Jesus told his followers that *'he who loves me will be loved by my Father'* (John 14.21) and this mutual love will at last bring its reward.

merciful

But what of human failings? The Bible teaches that ever since our first parents disobeyed God's command in Eden, mankind has been inherently prone to sin, which if not forgiven brings eternal death. The Bible tells us that God is not vindictive, but merciful to those who love and try to obey Him, just as a father understands the weaknesses of his children. Here are some examples:

'I am the LORD your God...showing mercy to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments' (Exodus 20.2, 6).

'For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him'
(Psalm 103.11-13).

'The Lord is very compassionate and merciful' (James 5.11).

This Divine compassion will result in the gift of eternal life to genuine believers. In his preaching the Apostle Peter said that those who truly believe in the work of Jesus will be forgiven their failures: *'...through his name, whoever believes in him will receive remission of sins'* (Acts 10.43). The Apostle Paul told the Romans that *'the wages of sin is death'* and he added that for those who receive forgiveness *'the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'* (Romans 6.23).

God the Creator

Many Bible passages describe God as the Creator of all things. Its simple but majestic opening words are: *'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'* (Genesis 1.1) and throughout the Old and

New Testaments we are reminded of this. God Himself says through Jeremiah *'I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by my great power...'* (Jeremiah 27.5). In the New Testament Jesus endorses the Genesis record: *'Have you not read that he who made them at the beginning "made them male and female"?'* (Matthew 19.4). The Apostle Paul preached about *'the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them'* (Acts 14.15).

For a detailed examination of the theory of evolution in relation to the Bible, we recommend that you read the booklet 'Light on Creation' available from The Dawn Book Supply.

The reason for creation

It is much more important to enquire about the reason for God's creation. The immense activity must have had an important purpose and this has been outlined by God Himself:

'For this is what the LORD says – he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited'

(Isaiah 45.18 NIV).

'...truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD' (Numbers 14.21).

This planet will finally reflect God's glory when Jesus returns to set up God's Kingdom on earth and when all true believers will be given the gift of immortality. As the Apostle Paul wrote, when Jesus returns, he *'will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body'* (Philippians 3.21). When sin and death are removed God's ultimate purpose in creation, as described in the last book of the Bible, will be realised:

'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away' (Revelation 21.3,4).

For a more detailed study of the Bible hope for the future see the booklet in this series entitled 'The Kingdom of God'.

What do I gain from believing in God?

The Apostle Paul wrote *'godliness with contentment is great gain'* (1 Timothy 6.6) and we have thought about some of the Bible's teaching about the God who invites men and women everywhere to believe in Him. The Bible tells us that the person *'who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him'* (Hebrews 11.6).

He also welcomes and listens to our prayers to Him. We read that *'the prayer of the upright is his delight'* (Proverbs 15.8), and so we are encouraged by the Apostle Paul: *'...in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God'* (Philippians 4.6) and to *'come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need'* (Hebrews 4.16). We can come to Him through the saving work of His Son Jesus. Those who do will experience the delightful relationship expressed by Jesus in his prayer to his Father just before his crucifixion: *'Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me'* (John 17.24).

In their letters to the early Christian believers, the apostles expanded on this theme, telling their readers of the amazing transformation that will take place when they will share the Divine nature in God's Kingdom on earth. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote: *'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love him'* (1 Corinthians 2.9). This is not something God has made difficult for us to do for Jesus said to his disciples: *'Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'* (Luke 12.32).

We hope this brief introduction to the Bible's teaching about God and His plan of salvation will help you to humbly and thankfully acknowledge, praise and obey Him while there is the opportunity to do so.

'Let everything that has breath praise the LORD' (Psalm 150.6).

The following pages set out some of the reasons why the teaching of the Bible is not compatible with a belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. The majority of Christians believe in the Trinity and if you are among them we ask you to read on with an open mind.

One God or three?

Despite the very many Bible references that assert the unity of God, most Christians today believe that this one God is made up of three persons who are co-equal: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is considered such a defining aspect of Christianity that anyone who does not believe in the Trinity is not regarded by the established Churches as a true Christian!

But is the Trinity a Bible doctrine, or is it a deviation from the beliefs of the first century Christians? Those who believe in the Trinity will point to several Bible references in support of their view, but most if not all such passages are capable of alternative explanations. If you already believe in the Trinity it is quite possible to come to the Bible to find apparent support for this belief. However this is very different from coming to the Bible with no preconceived ideas and letting God's Word speak for itself. On this topic more than many others, it is vitally important to recognise that one passage of Scripture must never be interpreted so as to contradict another and by far the majority of such passages give no support for the Trinity.

We note that when asked what is the greatest commandment Jesus replied with a quotation from Deuteronomy that is free from all ambiguity: *'The first of all the commandments is: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one"'* (Mark 12.29).

Let's examine some more clear Bible passages which describe the relationship of the Father to the Son.

The Father is greater than Jesus, both now and for all time

'My Father ...is greater than all' (John 10.29).

'...my Father is greater than I' (John 14.28).

'...Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God' (Luke 18.19).

'Now when all things are made subject to him (to Jesus at the completion of God's plan for the world), then the Son himself will also be subject to him (God) who put all things under him, that God may be all in all' (1 Corinthians 15.28).

The Father is the God and Father of Jesus

Both before and after his resurrection, Jesus called his Father 'My God':

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27.46).

'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God' (John 20.17).

When giving the Revelation from heaven to the Apostle John, Jesus four times in one verse describes the Father as 'My God':

'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God.'

(Revelation 3.12)

All these passages are incompatible with the belief that God and Jesus are co-equal.

Jesus is always described as a man

Many times before and after his resurrection, Jesus is referred to as a man or son of man but not as God.

It is '*the Son of Man*' that '*has power on earth to forgive sins*' (Luke 5.24). On the day of Pentecost Peter identified the Messiah with '*Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you*' (Acts 2.22). It was by this same man that the resurrection of the dead has been made possible (1 Corinthians 15.21). But more than this, even the glorified Jesus, both in his mediatorial work now in heaven and in his future glory and exaltation when he returns to earth, is still described as the Son of Man. Jesus told his accusers that they would see '*the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven*' (Mark 14.62).

Meanwhile it is '*the man Christ Jesus*' who is described as the mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2.5). It is '*the Son of Man*' who is to

return to earth *'in the glory of his Father with his angels'* (Matthew 16.27, 25.31). The same event is to be heralded by the *'sign of the Son of Man'*, after which men will *'see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory'* (Matthew 24.30). It is Jesus, *'the Son of Man'*, who is to be the future judge of the believers (John 5.27) and he is the *'man whom he (God) has ordained'* to judge the world in the future (Acts 17.31).

If the first century Christians believed that the resurrected Jesus was the second person of a Trinity, why did they still describe him as a man? Instead Jesus is always mentioned as being distinct from his Father, as in this passage which admits of no other meaning:

'There is ... one Lord (Jesus), one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all'
(Ephesians 4.4-5).

A man like us

Also contrary to the Trinitarian concept is the clearly stated fact that Jesus had to share the same nature as all mankind if his sacrifice was to be of benefit; and also he had to die – which a divine being could not do:

'Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same, that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death...Therefore, in all things he had to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people' (Hebrews 2.14, 17).

But what of this passage ...?

Those who accept the Trinity almost invariably turn to one or two Bible passages in support of the doctrine. As we look at some of these, remember to distinguish between what the passage actually says and what any preconceived views might suggest.

Jesus said: *'I and my Father are one'* (John 10.30). Does this mean *'one'* in the Trinitarian sense? It is always a good idea to look at the context of the passage and when doing this we note that Jesus here is

describing himself as a shepherd and reassures his sheep that they are safe in his hands (verse 28). But he goes on to say that his sheep have been given him by God, and because the Father is *'greater than all ... no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand'* (verse 29). He then says that in this determination to protect the sheep he and his Father are one – that is, they are united in protecting the flock. This is the clear meaning of this saying and by no stretch of imagination can this statement of a unified intention to support the flock be interpreted as support for the doctrine of the Trinity – even if you ignore the reference to God being greater than all.

Another favourite passage of Trinitarians is John chapter 1 which contains a reference to *'the Word'* being with God at the beginning (verse 1) and then being made flesh (verse 14). However, once it is realised that *'the Word'* is translated from the Greek *'logos'*, meaning *'an inward thought or reason'* (Liddell and Scott's Lexicon) the intention of the writer becomes clear. The Apostle John is not saying that Jesus personally existed from the beginning, but that he was there in the mind of God as His later intention. This intention was put into effect when God's plan became reality – i.e. *'the Word became flesh'* (verse 14).

There is one verse in the New Testament that seems to support the doctrine of the Trinity: *'For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one'* (1 John 5.7). But it is unfortunate for Trinitarians that it is now universally recognised that this verse is a much later addition. It is not known in any manuscript before the fourth century AD and was obviously inserted to bolster the newly defined doctrine. This emphasises the point that the Bible does not teach the doctrine of the Trinity, otherwise its insertion would not have been necessary.

History of the Trinity

How then was the Trinity introduced into the Christian Church? It can be demonstrated beyond doubt that the doctrine of the Trinity was a gradual development in the centuries after the apostles had passed off the scene. All church historians acknowledge this. Here are some examples:

'It must be owned, that the doctrine of the Trinity ... is not in so many words taught us in the Holy Scriptures. We ... nowhere read in Scripture, that the one God, the one Lord, is not only one person, but three persons in one substance. There is no such text as this, "That the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped"' (Bishop Smallridge, 1663-1710).

'I ask with all humbleness where the idea of Threeness is expressed in the New Testament with a doctrinal sense and force? Where is the Triune God held up to be worshipped, loved and obeyed? Where is He preached and proclaimed in that threefold Character? We read "God is one" as too, "I and the Father are one"; but nowhere do we read that Three are one, unless it be in a text long since known to be interpolated... Certainly not in Scripture do we find the expression 'God the Son', or 'God the Holy Ghost' (Thomas Mozeley, 1880, brother-in-law of the nineteenth century Roman Catholic, Cardinal Newman).

'It must be admitted by everyone who has the rudiments of an historical sense that the doctrine of the Trinity, as a doctrine, formed no part of the original message. St. Paul knew it not, and would have been unable to understand the meaning of the terms used in the theological formula on which the Church ultimately agreed' (Dr. W. Matthews, Dean of St. Paul's, 1940).

The church '*ultimately agreed*' on the Trinity after a series of bitterly contested and unrepresentative Councils in which, by the year AD 325, the co-unity of the Father and Son were accepted. Only much later was the Holy Spirit added as the third member of this alleged Trinity. In the end the new doctrine was enforced, not by the church, but by the Roman Emperor of the time in order to achieve peace in his domain. All who did not accept it, he said, '*must expect to suffer severe penalties*' (Emperor Theodosius AD 380).

For a more detailed study of this subject we direct readers to a book entitled 'The Trinity – True or False?' published by The Dawn Book Supply.

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