

## God is . . .

### Three and One

John 8:48-58

Mark Vroegop

<sup>48</sup> The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" <sup>49</sup> Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. <sup>50</sup> Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. <sup>51</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." <sup>52</sup> The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' <sup>53</sup> Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" <sup>54</sup> Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' <sup>55</sup> But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. <sup>56</sup> Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." <sup>57</sup> So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" <sup>58</sup> Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:48–58).

J.I. Packer, in his classic book *Knowing God*, helps us understand the significance of this nine-week summer series we start today:

*What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus gives? The knowledge of God . . . What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God.<sup>1</sup>*

Now you probably realized that knowing about God—at some level—is important. But I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't realize how foundational the knowledge of God is to every aspect of your life. You probably lived most of your life this last week unaware of how much your view of God informs your thoughts, your actions, and your motives.

For example, did you groan over something that you read online or watched on the news? Where did your sense of right and wrong come from? Did you choose to respond with kindness to someone who was mean? What motivated that decision? Did you spend any time reading the Bible or in prayer this week? What caused you to do that? Did you see something beautiful in creation this week, and did you feel your heart drawn to gratitude or worship? Where did that come from?

I would suggest that all of your answers to those questions are somehow connected to your knowledge of God. The holiness and righteousness of God are in the background when we watch the news. The mercy of God should affect how we treat others. The knowability and personal nature of God invite us

<sup>1</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 29.

to commune with Him. And the creative power of God, as seen in creation, declares what He is like according to Romans 1:20.

A.W. Tozer said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>2</sup> The reason? Because it informs how you live, how you worship, and even where you spend eternity after you die. If you don’t know that God is holy, that we are sinners, that God is forgiving through Jesus, and that He keeps His promises, there is no hope for eternal life.

Your existence, the entire universe, and any hope of heaven hinge on what God is like.

Over the summer, we are going to learn about the attributes of God. We’ll learn about His holiness; His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence; His love and mercy, His sovereignty, His transcendence and immanence, His goodness, His justice, and His faithfulness. Along with these sermons, we have some excellent books that you could read this summer.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that the attributes of God are merely an intellectual or a theological exercise. And don’t assume that if you are familiar with some of these attributes of God that you don’t need to go deeper. I hope our journey through what God is like will lead you to not only know more about God, but also to worship Him and obey Him. I hope you will taste and see the Lord’s goodness this summer (Psalm 34:8).

### **Starting with the Trinity**

We are going to begin our journey with what may be the most important or defining attribute of God: His triunity or three-in-one essence. The biblical vision of God involves the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person of the godhead is equal in His divine nature, yet has a unique role. God is one in essence, but three in person.<sup>3</sup> The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit operate together with complete harmony, uniqueness, oneness, and perfection. God is three-in-one.

Let me give you a helpful definition:

*The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God’s whole and undivided essence belongs **equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully** to each of the three distinct Persons of the Godhead.<sup>4</sup>*

Each of those words—equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully—relate to historical errors that the church has made when considering the three-in-one nature of God.

For now, I simply want to start with emphasizing the importance of the triunity of God. It is foundational to our understanding of what God is like, but it is also central to Christianity. In previous sermons, I’ve talked about the difference between theological issues that are essential, that are convictions, and that are preferences. The doctrine of the Trinity is in the “essential” category. You cannot be a Christian and deny the Triune nature of God.

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<sup>2</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Ware, 41.

The entire plan of salvation and forgiveness of sins is built on this attribute of the Godhead.

*The Christian God, to be savior, must then be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, our salvation comes as the Father judges our sin in his Son, who became incarnate and lived his life in the power of the Spirit as the perfect and sinless God-man and accomplished his perfect obedience to the Father through the power of the Spirit. Disregard the Trinity and you necessarily undermine salvation.<sup>5</sup>*

The Trinity is that important. It is where our study must start because it is foundational.

### **Jesus' "I AM" Statement**

There are many texts that affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. We'll look at a number of them. But I want to start with the definitive text where Jesus claimed to be God. Understandably, it created great controversy. It nearly got Him stoned well before the crucifixion.

In John's gospel, Jesus's teaching involved a series of "I am" statements. In John 6:35, He says He is the "bread of life." In 8:12 He calls himself the "light of the world."<sup>6</sup> Jesus is defining Himself as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and as possessing the same nature as God. John 5:18 summarizes the situation well:

*<sup>18</sup> This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18).*

In John 8 this conflict continues and escalates. It started with Jesus calling God his Father and suggesting that the Jews had a different father (John 8:38). When they point to Abraham as their father (8:39), and when they accuse Jesus of being born in immorality (8:41), Jesus tells them that their father is the devil (8:44) and that the reason they don't hear His words is because they are not "of God" (8:47). Can you feel the tension?

In verse 48, things get hot. The Jews use a racial slur ("you are a Samaritan"). They accuse Him of not being a true Jew and being guilty of heresy—something for which the Samaritans were known. The religious leaders also suggest Jesus is possessed by a demon.

Jesus responds in verses 49-51. Once again, He affirms His relationship with the Father, and His desire to glorify the Father. Jesus tells them that the Father is the judge. But Jesus also links obedience to His words with not seeing death (v. 51). This is a clear statement about His divinity. Jesus is claiming to be equal with God.

This leads to another question from the Jews regarding whether Jesus considers Himself to be greater than Abraham, the one whom Jews considered their father (vv. 52-53). Jesus' response is to simply say that it is the Father who glorifies Him and that this is the same God of whom the Jews said, "He is our God." (v. 54). What's more, Jesus claims to know the Father and to keep His Word (v. 55). Here there is a

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<sup>5</sup> Ware, 17.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive list see: [https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart\\_43\\_08/](https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart_43_08/)

claim of intimacy, of relationship, and of perfection. And then, Jesus tells them “. . . your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (v. 56). Jesus is saying that Abraham was rejoicing in something greater than himself—the Messiah, which is what Jesus is claiming to be.

The text reaches its climactic point in verses 57-58. The Jews challenge Him about His age, since He is clearly not old enough to have lived during Abraham’s time. And then, Jesus says the thing that nearly gets him killed: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (8:58).

Jesus used the single statement that the Old Testament connected to God Himself. When God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, He said, “I AM who I AM” (Ex. 3:14). This was the sacred name of God, Yahweh, which communicated God’s eternity, His self-existence, and His “other-ness.” Jesus was asserting that He was not only older than Abraham but that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It is no wonder that the Jews picked up stones to kill Him. With this “I am” statement, Jesus claimed to be God. And it was this claim that would ultimately lead to His crucifixion.

Just consider how amazing and vital it is to the foundation of Christianity for Jesus to make this claim. It demonstrates the incredible sacrifice that Jesus was willing to make in order to redeem sinful humanity from our rebellion. The second person of the Trinity took on all the limitations of our humanity. He selflessly embraced being tired, experiencing hunger, weeping at the death of a friend, fighting off temptation, and dealing with proud and arrogant people. He is God-man, perfect in obedience and all-powerful in His essence.

If you are a follower of Jesus, this should serve as a powerful motivation for you to worship Jesus, to tell Jesus how much you love Him, and to recommit yourself to follow in His example.

But we should also marvel at the fact that this God-man was killed at the hands of sinful human beings. We should tremble at the consequences of sin in us and in our world. We should realize that sin is so bad and so tragic that it took the death of the Son of God to liberate us from its hold. Sin required the death a member of the triune God.

### **The Trinity in Scripture**

We’ve started in John 8 because it is one of the clearest examples of Jesus’ relationship with the Father and of His claim of deity. But that is not the only place where we find texts referencing the Trinity.

The Old Testament hints at the presence of three persons. For example, in the first chapter of Genesis, we find a reference to the Spirit hovering over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2), and we hear God say, “Let *us* make man in our image, after our likeness . . .” (Gen. 1:26). At the same time, we find a significant emphasis on the oneness of God. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*.” This text emphasized that in a culture filled with many false “gods,” there was only one, true God. And it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is why worshipping anyone else, other than God, is expressly forbidden in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20).

In the New Testament, we see the same three-in-one dynamic. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 in Mark 12:29— “the Lord our God, the Lord is one”—and He calls the Father “the one true God” in John 17:3.<sup>7</sup> We also find multiple and poignant references to the three persons of the Godhead. A few examples:

- At the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3, we find the Spirit of God descending on Jesus as a dove, and a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”
- The first chapter of Ephesians includes a greeting “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2) along with a reference to being sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (1:13).
- In 2 Corinthians 13:14 we read this benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The life and ministry of Jesus was marked by the trinitarian work of God.<sup>8</sup>

- The Father is the architect behind the incarnation of the Son of God (Heb. 10:8)
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35)
- It is the Spirit that thrusts Jesus into His temptation, where He must depend on the Father’s words (Mark 1:12, Matt. 4:1-11)
- In His death, Jesus offered Himself up by the Spirit of God (Heb. 9:14)
- Our salvation is grounded in the Father’s love (Eph. 1:3-6), made possible by the incarnation of Jesus (Eph. 1:7), and applied to us by the work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14)

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we see both the oneness and the triune nature of God as central to God’s work in the world. The redemptive arc of creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration are all marked by work of the Trinity. All three are involved but in unique and different ways.

### **The Beauty of the Trinity**

Our previous definition identified that *God’s* whole and undivided essence belongs **equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully** to each of the three distinct Persons of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and the Spirit are all equally God. This was to avoid a heresy called Arianism, which taught that Jesus was not fully God. Each person is eternally God, which avoids suggesting any member’s nature could be created. All three members are simultaneously God. Jesus never ceased to be fully God, even though he was fully human. And all three members are fully God. Father, Son, and Spirit are not one-third of God.<sup>9</sup>

The previous paragraph helps us understand what unites the Trinity. But what is special or unique about the trinitarian nature of God?

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<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (ed.), *Biblical Doctrine – A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 201.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Jones, *God Is – A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ware, 41.

First, it demonstrates the relational unity of the nature of God. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit operate in a oneness together marked by mutual affection, love, and togetherness. Alone is not a word that is a part of the divine vocabulary, which is why Jesus' cry on the cross— "Why have you forsaken me?"—was so brutal. Community and interdependency are part of the nature of God Himself. Is it any wonder that God would say about Adam, "It is not good for him to be alone" (Gen. 2:18)?

Second, we find a beautiful diversity with God. Each member of the Trinity possesses roles which are distinct from one another. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each have a unique participation in accomplishing the work of God. The triune God is marked by a beautiful harmony. God is not uniform, nor are the three persons identical in their tasks and activities. "This diversity speaks of the richness of God, while never allowing the richness of differentiation to lead to discord."<sup>10</sup>

We also discover the compelling authority-submission structure, which characterizes the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Bruce Ware summarizes this well:

*The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. As such, the Son submits to the Father just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence.<sup>11</sup>*

The Trinity demonstrates the beauty of a divine plan for function and order. We find differing roles but equal value. We discover the appropriate use of authority and the right application of submission. And this authority-submission framework is central to the relationship of God Himself.

Finally, the triune essence of God reminds us that our worship and adoration is by the Spirit, through Jesus, for the glory of the Father. When we gather together, all three members of the triune God receive our worship and our praise. Each of them—in unique ways—is deserving of our affection and adoration. We assemble in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The triune God is accomplishing His plan to sanctify us. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each have a role in this beautiful and compelling work.

Do you see how foundational this is to a Christian's understanding of the world? You may be here today, though, and realize that you really don't know God. What I've just described to you may sound glorious, but you may be filled with an overwhelming sense of fear because you are starting to see what God is really like. I'd like to encourage you. That "sense" that you have means you are starting to see God for who He is. And the hope of the gospel is that in Jesus our separation from God can be bridged by turning to Christ. Why not come to Him today and be right with God?

## **Thinking About God**

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<sup>10</sup> Ware, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ware, 21.

Now let me pause here. I trust that all of us realize that talking about God in this way should be doing something to your heart. This information is different than any other kind of learning. Other subject matters may cause you to marvel at what you are seeing, discovering, or considering. But this kind of truth must lead you to worship. There is a real danger here that must be avoided at all costs.

You must never approach the study of God as if it were mere information. Knowledge about God without worship of God leads to cold-hearted hypocrisy. We need to push our theology toward doxology, or we have not really understood God. What's more, we ought to be warned that if worship doesn't happen, pride can easily set in.

The study of God should lead to a deeper level of humility. If I teach you correctly, and if you hear me in the right way, it would seem not only odd but deeply wrong, for either of us to leave this place and talk about how great we are. The study of God's attributes must lead to an elevated view of God in our minds and hearts.

What's more, it should lead to specific spiritual growth steps in our lives. For example, if God has placed you in a position of authority, you must use that authority in the same manner that the Father uses His authority. If God calls upon you to be submissive to another person, you should respond with the kind of attitude that fits with the obedience of the Son. And in your actions, you should seek to promote the affirmation and esteem of others that marks the triune God. We should put away enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy (Gal. 5:18-19). Can you imagine an argument between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

If that has marked your life in the last week, why not turn and repent right now? See it for what it is. Grieve over it. Turn to Jesus yet again and allow the Spirit to empower you to be a different person this week.

The Bible tells us that the followers of Jesus are partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). This means that as you grow spiritually, God is creating within you aspects of His nature. You are becoming godly—more and more conformed to the image of Christ. Now this will not be over until we see Him face to face. But part of the beauty and the power of Christianity is seeing this take place, in part, even now.

Finally, for all this talk about knowing God, J.I. Packer reminds us of something else:

*What matters supremely, therefore, is not in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—that fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Packer, 37.

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