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THE GODHEAD

There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation.

At Calvary almost everyone rejected Jesus. Only a few recognized who Jesus really was—among them, the dying thief who called Him Lord (Luke 23:42), and the Roman soldier who said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

When John wrote, "He came unto His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11), he was thinking not merely of the crowd at the cross, or even of Israel, but of every generation that has lived. Except for a handful, all humanity, like that raucous crowd at Calvary, has failed to recognize in Jesus their God and Saviour. This failure, humanity's greatest and most tragic, shows that humanity's knowledge of God is radically deficient.

Knowledge of God

The many theories attempting to explain God, and the many arguments for and against His existence, show that human wisdom cannot penetrate the divine. Depending on human wisdom alone to learn about God is like using a magnifying glass to study the constellations. Hence, to many, God's wisdom is a "hidden wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:7). To them God is a mystery. Paul wrote, "None of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

One of the most basic commandments of Scripture is to love "God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37; cf. Deut. 6:5). We cannot love someone we know nothing about, yet we cannot by searching find out the deep things of God (Job 11:7). How then can we come to know and love the Creator?

God Can Be Known

Realizing the human predicament, God, in His love and compassion, reached out to us through the Bible. It reveals that "Christianity is not a record of a man's quest for God; it is the product of God's revelation of Himself and His purposes to man." This self-revelation is designed to bridge the gulf between a rebellious world and a caring God.

The manifestation of God's greatest love came through His supreme revelation, Jesus Christ, His Son. Through Jesus we can know the Father. As John states, "'The Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true'" (1 John 5:20).

And Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

This is good news. Although it is impossible to know God completely, the Scriptures afford a practical knowledge of Him that is sufficient for us to enter into a saving relationship with Him.

Obtaining a Knowledge of God

Unlike other knowledge, the knowledge of God is as much a matter of the heart as it is of the brain. It involves the whole person, not just the intellect. There must be an openness to the Holy Spirit and a willingness to do God's will (John 7:17; cf. Matt. 11:27). Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Unbelievers, therefore, cannot understand God. Paul exclaimed, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:20,21, NIV).

The way we learn to know God from the Bible differs from all other methods of acquiring knowledge. We cannot place ourselves above God and treat Him as an object to be analyzed and quantified. In our search for a knowledge of God we must submit to the authority of His self-revelation—the Bible. Since the Bible is its own interpreter, we must subject ourselves to the principles and methods it provides. Without these Biblical guidelines we cannot know God.

Why did so many of the people of Jesus' day fail to see God's self-revelation in Jesus? Because they refused to subject themselves to the guidance of the Holy spirit through the Scriptures, they misinterpreted God's message and crucified their Saviour. Their problem was not one of intellect. It was their closed hearts that darkened their minds, resulting in eternal loss.

The Existence of God

There are two major sources of evidence for the existence of God. The book of nature and the Scriptures.

Evidence From Creation

Everyone can learn of God through nature and human experience. David wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). John maintained that God's revelation, including nature, enlightens everyone (John 1:9). And Paul claimed, "Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20).

Human behavior also gives evidence for God's existence. In the Athenian worship of the "unknown God," Paul saw evidence of a belief in God. Said he, "The One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Paul also said the behavior of non-Christians revealed the witness of "their conscience" and showed that God's law is written "in their hearts" (Rom. 2:14,15). This intuition that God exists is

found even among those who have no access to the Bible. This general revelation of God led to a number of classical rational arguments for the existence of God.

Evidence From Scripture

The Bible does not prove God's existence. It assumes it. Its opening text declares, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The Bible describes God as the Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of all creation. God's revelation through creation is so powerful that there is no excuse for atheism, which arises from a suppression of divine truth or from a mind that refuses to acknowledge the evidence that God exists (Ps. 14:1; Rom. 1:18-22,28).

There are enough evidences for God's existence to convince anyone who seriously tries to discover the truth about Him. Yet faith is a prerequisite for "without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

Faith in God, however, is not blind. It is based on sufficient evidence found both in God's revelations through the Scriptures and through nature.

The God of the Scriptures

The Bible reveals God's essential qualities through His names, activities, and attributes.

God's Names

At the time the Scriptures were written, names were important, as they still are in the Near East and Orient. There a name is considered to reveal the character of the bearer, his true nature and identity. The importance of God's names, disclosing His nature, character, and qualities, are revealed in His command "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7). David sang: "Praise to the name of the Lord Most High" (Ps. 7:17). "Holy and awesome is His name" (Ps. 111:9). "Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted" (Ps. 148:13).

The Hebrew names El and Elohim ("God") reveal God's divine power. They depict God as the strong and mighty One, the God of Creation (Gen. 1:1; Ex. 20:2; Dan. 9:4). Elyon ("Most High") and El Elyon ("God Most High") focus on His exalted status (Gen. 14:18-20; Isa. 14:14). Adonai ("Lord") pictures God as Almighty Ruler (Isa. 6:1; Ps. 35:23). These names emphasize the majestic and transcendent character of God.

Other names reveal God's willingness to enter into a relationship with people. Shaddai ("Almighty") and El Shaddai ("God Almighty") portray the Almighty God, the source of blessing and comfort (Ex. 6:3; Ps. 91:1). The name Yahweh, translated Jehovah or LORD, stresses God's covenant faithfulness and grace (Ex. 15:2,3; Hosea 12:5,6). In Exodus 3:14, Yahweh describes Himself as "I am who I am," or "I shall be what I shall be," indicating His unchangeable relation to His people. On occasions God even revealed Himself more intimately as "Father" (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16; Jer. 31:9; Mal. 2:10), calling Israel "My Son, and My firstborn" (Ex. 4:22; cf. Deut. 32:19).

Except for Father, the New Testament names for God carry equivalent meanings to those of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus used Father to bring us into a close and personal relationship with God (Matt. 6:9; Mark 14:36; cf. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

God's Activities

Bible writers spend more time describing God's activities than His being. He is introduced as Creator (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 24:1,2), Upholder of the world (Heb. 1:3), and Redeemer and Saviour (Deut. 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:19), carrying the burden for humanity's ultimate destiny. He makes plans (Isa. 46:11), predictions (Isa. 46:10), and promises (Deut. 15:6; 2 Peter 3:9). He forgives sins (Ex. 34:7), and consequently deserves our worship (Rev. 14:6,7). Ultimately the Scriptures reveal God as Ruler, "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17, NIV). His actions confirm that He is a personal God.

God's Attributes

The Writers of Scripture provide additional information on the essence of God through testimonies about His divine attributes.

God's incommunicable attributes comprise aspects of His divine nature not given to created beings. God is self-existent, for He has "life in Himself" (John 5:26). He is independent in will (Eph. 1:5), and in power (Ps. 115:3). He is omniscient, knowing everything (Job 37:16; Ps. 139:1-18; 147:5; 1 John 3:20), because, as Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:8), He knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:9-11).

God is omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-12; Heb. 4:13), transcending all space. Yet He is fully present in every part of space. He is eternal (Ps. 90:2; Rev. 1:8), exceeding the limits of time, yet is fully present in every moment of time.

God is all powerful, omnipotent. That nothing is impossible to Him assures us that He accomplishes whatever He purposes (Dan. 4:17,25,35; Matt. 19:26; Rev. 19:6). He is immutable—or unchangeable—because He is perfect. He says, "I am the Lord, I do not change" (Mal. 3:6; see Ps. 33:11; James 1:17). Since, in a sense, these attributes define God, they are incommunicable.

God's communicable attributes flow from His loving concern for humanity. They include love (Rom. 5:8), grace (Rom. 3:24), mercy (Ps. 145:9), patience (2 Peter 3:15, NIV), holiness (Ps. 99:9), righteousness (Ezra 9:15; John 17:25), justice (Rev. 22:12), and truth (1 John 5:20). These gifts come only with the Giver Himself.

The Sovereignty of God

The Scriptures clearly teach God's sovereignty. "He does according to His will....No one can restrain His hand" (Dan. 4:35). "For You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created" (Rev. 4:11). "Whatever the Lord pleases He does, in heaven and in earth" (Ps. 135:6). So Solomon could say, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1). Paul, aware of God's sovereignty, wrote, "I will return again to you, God willing" (Acts 18:21; see Rom. 15:32), while James admonished, "You ought to say, 'If the Lord will'" (James 4:15).

Predestination and Human Freedom

The Bible reveals God's full control over the world. He "predestined" people "to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29,30), to be adopted as His children, and to obtain an inheritance (Eph. 1:4,5,11).

What does such sovereignty imply for human freedom?

The verb to predestinate means "to determine beforehand." Some assume these passages teach that God arbitrarily elects some to salvation and others to damnation, irrespective of their own choice. But study of the context of these passages shows that Paul does not speak about God's capriciously excluding anyone.

The thrust of these texts is inclusive. The Bible clearly states that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). There is no evidence that God has decreed that some persons should be lost; such a decree would deny Calvary, where Jesus died for everyone. The whoever in the text, "'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), means that anyone can be saved.

"That man's free will is the determining factor in his personal destiny is evident from the fact that God continually presents the results of obedience and disobedience, and urges the sinner to choose obedience and life (Deut. 30:19; Joshua 24:15; Isa. 1:16,20; Rev. 22:17); and from the fact that it is possible for the believer, having once been a recipient of grace, to fall away and be lost (1 Cor. 9:27; Gal. 5:4; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:29)...."

"God may foresee each individual choice that will be made, but His foreknowledge does not determine what that choice shall be....Bible predestination consists in the effective purpose of God that all who choose to believe in Christ shall be saved (John 1:12; Eph. 1:4-10)."

Then what does Scripture mean when it says that God loved Jacob and hated Esau (Rom. 9:13) and that He hardened Pharaoh's heart (vv. 17,18; cf. vv. 15,16; Ex. 9:16; 4:21)? The context of these texts shows that Paul's concern is mission and not salvation. Redemption is available to anyone—but God chooses certain persons for special assignments. Salvation was equally available to Jacob and Esau, but God chose Jacob, not Esau, to be the line through whom He would take the message of salvation to the world. God exercises sovereignty in His mission strategy.

When Scripture says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart it is merely crediting Him with doing what He allows, and not implying that He ordains it. Pharaoh's negative response to God's call actually illustrates God's respect for his freedom to choose.

Foreknowledge and Human Freedom

Some Believe that God relates to persons without knowing their choices until they are made; that God knows certain future events, such as the Second Advent, the millennium, and the restoration of the earth, but has no idea who will be saved. They feel that God's dynamic relationship with the human race would be in jeopardy if He knew

everything that would transpire from eternity to eternity. Some suggest that He would be bored if He knew the end from the beginning.

But God's knowledge about what individuals will do does not interfere with what they actually choose to do any more than a historian's knowledge of what people did in the past interferes with their actions. Just as a camera records a scene but does not change it, foreknowledge looks into the future without altering it. The foreknowledge of the Godhead never violates human freedom.

Dynamics Within the Godhead

Is there only one God? What of Christ, and the Holy Spirit?

The Oneness of God

In contrast to the heathen of surrounding nations, Israel believed there was only one God (Deut. 4:35; 6:4, Isa. 45:5; Zech. 14:9). The New Testament makes the same emphasis on the unity of God (Mark 12:29-32; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Tim. 2:5). This monotheistic emphasis does not contradict the Christian concept of the triune God or Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; rather, it affirms that there is no pantheon of various deities.

The Plurality Within the Godhead

Although the Old Testament does not explicitly teach that God is triune, it alludes to a plurality within the Godhead. At times God employs plural pronouns such as: "Let Us make man in Our image" (Gen. 1:26); "Behold the man has become like one of Us" (Gen. 3:22); "Come, let Us go down" (Gen. 11:7). At times the Angel of the Lord is identified with God. Appearing to Moses, the Angel of the Lord said, "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6).

Various references distinguish the Spirit of God from God. In the Creation story "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). Some texts not only refer to the Spirit but include a third person in God's work of redemption: "And now the Lord God [the Father] and His Spirit [the Holy Spirit] have sent Me [the Son of God]" (Isa. 48:16); "I [the Father] have put My Spirit upon Him [the Messiah]; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:1).

The Relationship Within the Godhead

The first advent of Christ gives us a much clearer insight into the triune God. John's Gospel reveals that the Godhead consists of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal persons having a unique and mysterious relationship.

1. A loving relationship.

When Christ cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34) He was suffering from the estrangement from His Father that sin had caused. Sin broke humanity's original relationship with God (Gen. 3:6-10; Isa. 59:2). In His last hours,

Jesus, the One who knew no sin, became sin for us. In taking our sin, our place, He experienced the separation from God that was our lot—and perished in consequence.

Sinners will never comprehend what Jesus' death meant to the Godhead. From eternity He had been with His Father and the Spirit. They had lived as coeternal, coexistent in utter self-giving and love for one another. To be together for so long bespeaks the perfect, absolute love that existed within the Godhead. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) means that each so lived for the others that they experienced complete fulfillment and happiness.

Love is defined in 1 Corinthians 13. Some may wonder how the qualities of longsuffering or patience would apply within the Godhead, who had a perfect loving relationship. Patience was first needed when dealing with rebel angels, and later with wayward humans.

There is no distance between the persons of the triune God. All three are divine, yet they share their divine powers and qualities. In human organizations final authority rests in one person—a president, king, or prime minister. In the Godhead, final authority resides in all three members.

While the Godhead is not one in person, God is one in purpose, mind, and character. This oneness does not obliterate the distinct personalities of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nor does the separateness of personalities within the Deity destroy the monotheistic thrust of Scripture, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God.

2. A working relationship.

Within the Godhead an economy of function exists. God does not unnecessarily duplicate work. Order is the first law of heaven, and God works in orderly ways. This orderliness issues from and preserves the union within the Godhead. The Father seems to act as source, the Son as mediator, and the Spirit as actualizer or applier.

The incarnation beautifully demonstrated the working relationship of the three persons of the Godhead. The Father gave His Son, Christ gave Himself, and the Spirit gave Jesus birth (John 3:16; Matt. 1:18,20). The angel's testimony to Mary clearly indicates the activities of all three in the mystery of God becoming man. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Each member of the Godhead was present at the baptism of Christ: the Father giving encouragement (Matt. 3:17), Christ giving Himself to be baptized as our example (Matt. 3:13-15), and the Spirit giving Himself to Jesus to empower Him (Luke 3:21,22).

Toward the end of His earthly life Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit as counselor or helper (John 14:16). Hours later, hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out to His Father, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). In those climactic moments for salvation history the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all part of the picture.

Today the Father and the Son reach out to us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me" (John 15:26). The Father and Son

send the Spirit to reveal Christ to each person. The great burden of the Trinity is to bring God and a knowledge of Christ to everyone (John 17:3) and to make Jesus present and real (Matt. 28:20; cf. Heb. 13:5). Believers are elected to salvation, Peter said, "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:2).

The apostolic benediction includes all three persons of the Godhead. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14). Christ heads the list. God's point of contact with humanity was and is through Jesus Christ—the God who became man. Though all three members of the Trinity work together to save, only Jesus lived as a man, died as a man, and became our Saviour (John 6:47; Matt. 1:21; Acts 4:12). But because "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19), God could also be designated as our Saviour (cf. Titus 3:4), for He saved us through Christ the Savior (Eph. 5:23; Phil. 3:20; cf. Titus 3:6).

In the economy of function, different members of the Godhead perform distinct tasks in saving man. The work of the Holy Spirit does not add anything to the adequacy of the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made at the cross. Through the Holy Spirit the objective atonement at the cross is subjectively applied as the Christ of the atonement is brought within. Thus Paul speaks of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

Focus on Salvation

The early church baptized persons into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). But since it was through Jesus that God's love and purpose were revealed, the Bible focuses on Him. He is the hope foreshadowed in the Old Testament sacrifices and festivals. He is the One who occupies center stage in the Gospels. He is the Good News proclaimed by the disciples in sermons and writings—the Blessed Hope. The Old Testament looks forward to His coming; the New Testament reports His first advent and looks forward to His return.

Christ, the mediator between God and us, thus unites us to the Godhead. Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The good news is centered in a Person and not merely a practice. It has to do with a relationship, not just rules—for Christianity is Christ. We find in Him the core, content, and context for all truth and life.

Looking at the cross, we gaze into the heart of God. On that instrument of torture He poured out His love for us. Through Christ the love of the Godhead fills our aching, empty hearts. Jesus hung there as God's gift and our substitute. At Calvary God descended to earth's lowest point to meet us; but it is the highest place where we can go. When we go to Calvary we have ascended as high as we can toward God.

At the cross the Trinity made a full revelation of unselfishness. There was our most complete revelation of God. Christ became man to die for the race. He valued selflessness more than self-existence. There Christ became our "righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Whatever value or meaning we have or ever will have comes from His sacrifice on that cross.

The only true God is the God of the cross. Christ unveiled to the universe the Godhead's infinite love and saving power; He revealed a triune God who was willing to go through

the agony of separation because of unconditional love for a rebel planet. From this cross God proclaims His loving invitation to us: Be reconciled, "and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7, NIV).