

What Does the Bible Say About Who God Is?

By Trent Hunter

“What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ —A. W. Tozer

The word “God” itself suffers from some imprecision. Since every culture has different gods and ideas about gods, the word is too generic to have any real meaning.

The gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon had names like Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, Hades, Hera, and Zeus. They had personal histories, strengths, and flaws. So too did the Roman gods and goddesses. Modern [Hindus](#) worship gods with names like Lakshmi, Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma. Some debate whether the plurality of deities they honor refer to many distinct gods or manifestations of a single Supreme Being. [Muslims](#) bow before a God known as Allah. Christians recite creeds in praise of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—what they call the Trinity (we’ll talk more about that later).

When Greeks, Romans, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians refer to “God,” what they mean is not the same. There may be some similarities but there are also profound differences. The word “God” itself is like a box. It is just an empty container until someone fills it.

The Christian [Bible](#) has a great deal to say about who God is. Throughout history, Christians have looked to the Bible as an authoritative source for knowing God. Let’s consider a few of the key things the Bible says about God.

The God Who Speaks

Scripture begins with God. It assumes he exists. In part that is because when the Bible was written no one said he didn’t. Why answer a charge no one is making? What Scripture does tell us, however, is that the God who exists speaks and reveals himself in and through creation. As philosopher and theologian Francis Schaeffer famously wrote, “He is there and he is not silent.”²

Now, this is not necessary. God could have created it all and stepped back just to see what would happen next, as many [Deists](#) have thought. But the Bible clearly portrays God as an involved player on the stage of history—speaking, instructing, caring, and redeeming.

God reveals himself because he wants to be known, but for us to [know God](#) completely is impossible. As Scripture says, “How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out.”³ This comes as no surprise. We don’t know anyone or anything completely. As finite creatures, all our knowledge is limited. But even if we can’t know God completely, that doesn’t mean we can’t know him at all.

Psalms 19:1 states: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” In other words, creation talks. It tells us something about what God is like. Just as a painting reveals something about the soul of the artist or a sonnet reveals the heart of a poet, so creation discloses something of the essential nature of God.

Consider this: Whatever we see that has power, God has more. Whatever we see that is good or lovely, God is better and lovelier. Wherever we see creativity, we know it started with God. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.”⁴

But God has given us more than creation to tell us about himself. He has spoken to people and given us his written Word. Psalm 19:7-10 says that the words of God contained in Scripture are trustworthy and reflect key aspects of his nature:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1961), 1.

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972).

³ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Job 36:26

⁴ *Ibid.*, Romans 1:20.

The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.

The God Who Creates

We don't have to read very far in the [Bible](#) before we learn something else important about God. The first line of the first chapter of the first book tells us, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."⁵ In this simple sentence we learn that God is the creator of all things.

As creator, God himself is not created. He exists eternally. He is before all things and the source of all things, having created them out of nothing. He knows all things, and he is present everywhere at all times. As the eternally existent One, he is self-existing and self-sufficient. That means that, unlike human beings, God needs nothing outside himself.

He did not create the world to fill a void within himself, and he doesn't need help from anyone or anything in order to exist.

That God wants us to know him as the eternal Creator is also clear from the revelation of God's personal name. When Moses asked God for his name, God replied:

"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [YHWH], the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation."⁶

God divulges to Moses his name: YHWH (generally translated "the LORD").⁷ That name is based on an eternal claim: "I AM WHO I AM." In essence, God said, "My name is, 'I exist'—in the past, in the present, in the future."⁸

In the world of the Bible, names said something about the one named. God revealed his name to Moses in order to reveal something important about himself—chiefly, that he exists eternally and has life in himself. Human beings are born and die, but God exists for eternity.

But we can learn more about God from the story of creation. At the end of each day of creation, God surveyed what he made and "saw that it was good."⁹ God does not make things that are bad or even mediocre. He makes good things. Why? Because *he* is good. The essential goodness of God is fundamental to the Scriptures, and as a result one can expect that he is also good toward his creatures.

As our creator, God is also [personal](#). This idea is a bit difficult to wrap our minds around, but this is something that sets Christianity apart from several other religions.¹⁰ Some religions teach that God is more like an impersonal force or object. The Bible, however, portrays God in language that sounds strangely familiar.

Consider the verbs associated with God: God sees. God hears. God laughs. God grieves. God loves. God rescues. God speaks. God sends. Consider further some of the personal metaphors used to refer to God: God is father, king, warrior, and shepherd.

The language used in the Bible to describe God is decidedly anthropomorphic. That is, it starts with us below in order to say something significant about God above. It starts with what we know in order to say something about the one who wants to be known. But if, as we said earlier, God cannot be known completely, neither can the language we find in the Bible adequately describe him or exhaust his nature.

In light of all of this, look at how the Apostle Paul introduced the Christian God to the polytheistic people of his day:

⁵ *Ibid.*, Genesis 1:1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Exodus 3:14–15.

⁷ The original written Hebrew language did not include vowels. When spelled out, YHWH is generally written Yahweh.

⁸ The origin and meaning of the divine name are debated. See Ernst Jenni, "Yahweh," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 2:522–526.

⁹ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 1:10,12,18,21,25.

¹⁰ For a survey of the world's various religions and worldview, see James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. . . . Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.¹¹

God is the Lord of all creation. He doesn't need anything from us. He is the source of life. He ordained that human beings would inhabit the earth, and he set times and seasons for nations to rise and fall. So it makes no sense to imagine that he can be contained in some image we can fashion.

God is just and he rules and judges the world with justice. This sense of God's justice or righteousness is central to the Scripture. God is always in the right and he seeks to make right everything that is wrong. This means that he rewards those who do right and punishes those who do wrong. But right and wrong are not matters of private opinion or popular vote; God determines right and wrong. According to the Scripture, God's righteousness will ultimately extend to all creation, and he will restore creation to what it was meant to be in the first place—perfect and pure.

Now, much of what the Bible teaches about God rubs us the wrong way. We don't like to think that God is as powerful as he is, as good as he is, or as righteous as he is. Some prefer to act as if he doesn't exist. But Scripture tells us that God's "eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."¹² So we can't claim ignorance—at least not for long. We are "without excuse."¹³

The God Who Saves

God reveals himself in Scripture as not only the Creator but also the Savior. By exploring God as creator, we acquainted ourselves with his sheer greatness; by exploring God as savior, we will survey his marvelous grace, which is founded in God's pleasure in showing favor to those who don't deserve it.

Let's begin with the first chapter of the Gospel of John. His opening line may sound a bit familiar: "In the beginning was the Word."¹⁴ Does it remind you of the first words of the book of Genesis—"In the beginning, God created"? If so, then you've picked up on John's not-so-subtle connection between the story he is going to tell and the story of creation.

But what is this "Word"? Pretty immediately, we learn that "the Word" refers to a person—a "him," in fact. Take a look at these stunning lines from the verses that follow:

- "The Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . Through him all things were made."¹⁵
- "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."¹⁶
- "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."¹⁷

This "Word" is none other than [Jesus Christ](#). That is, the God who reveals himself in creation has revealed himself most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ, the Creator entered into his creation. Humankind may have been banished from God's presence in the Garden of Eden, but in Christ, God came "to seek and to save the lost."¹⁸ And this God who walked the earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is present with those who believe in him through the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

If you've been reading carefully, you have just bumped up against one of the loftiest of the Bible's teachings concerning God: God is three in one. Or, as theologians put it, God is a Tri-unity or Trinity. Theologian Wayne Grudem has summed

¹¹ *The Holy Bible*, Acts 17:24–26, 29–31.

¹² *Ibid.*, Romans 1:20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible*, John 1:1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, John 1:1–2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, John 1:11–13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, John 1:14–18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Luke 19:10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Galatians 4:6.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226.

up what is called the doctrine of the [Trinity](#) nicely in this sentence: “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.”²⁰ The three-in-oneness of God means they are one in substance and purpose even as they remain distinct persons. Later church leaders refer to the Trinity as a mystery, yet it is a mystery firmly rooted in the Bible.

If you think this sounds strange or even incomprehensible, you are not alone. The Trinity is a complex philosophical and theological doctrine with which some of the Church’s most astute minds have been grappling for generations. But a God big enough to create the universe can hardly be explained by our mathematics. Still, some attempt to do so. Others are content to say it is simply a mystery and leave it at that. What is clear is this: the doctrine of the Trinity is deeply rooted in Scripture. Though difficult to wrap our minds around, the concept of the Trinity is our way of making sense out of the complexities of everything the Bible says about God.

In order to appreciate fully all that it means for the triune God to be a saving God, we need to explore how God’s [grace](#) is demonstrated across Scripture. As we will see, it is not true, as some suggest, that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is a God of grace. If you read the Bible carefully, you will see the full effect of God’s wrath against sin in the New Testament.

Jesus’ self-sacrifice demonstrates decisively the seriousness with which God deals with sin. Second Corinthians 5:21 states: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, Jesus became what we are so that we might become what he is. This interchange in Christ reveals not only God’s wrathful disposition toward sin but his gracious disposition toward sinners. At the same time, the Old Testament is filled with hope and promises of God’s loyal love and grace. The Old and New Testaments are simply different points along one unified story.

Consider God’s grace in dealing with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God gave them every tree in the garden of delight to enjoy; he insisted they not eat from only *one* tree. But Adam and Eve violated God’s directive. They did not trust God and, in eating, effectively shook their fists at their Maker. After the first couple disobeyed God in the garden, death became our reality.

But God also said to the serpent—which Scripture reveals to be the one who tempted Eve: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”²¹ This interesting verse does more than account for why some humans are afraid of snakes; it foreshadows God’s action to reverse all of the effects of sin in the world. Adam and Eve would die, but not right away. In fact, God clothed the couple, gave them many children, and gave them life for many more years. That’s why Eve’s name means, “mother of all living.”²² A merely just God would not do this; he would simply punish for wrongdoings. But God is not only just; he is gracious. He is not only Creator but Savior.

God’s plan to redeem the world began with one man, a nomad named Abram. God approached Abram with a lavish promise of grace: a promise to make his name great, to give him land, to fill the earth with his descendants, and to bless the whole world through him. So God made a covenant with Abram and his children, a covenant that exists to this day. Deserved? No. All of grace.

Humanity rejected—and continues to reject—God, but God remains a gracious and saving God.

The Cross and the Question

So the Bible reveals that God is just and gracious. But there is a tension here. How can he be both? How can God be gracious to those who have done wrong and deserve justice? How can he be righteous and still love those who are not? If God merely overlooks wrongdoing, then he is neither good nor just.

This tension is at the very heart of the Bible; the person who is wrestling with this is on the brink of discovering the riches of who God is. So what is the answer? How can God remain just and save sinners?

We find the answer from a man named John the Baptizer, a man sent from God as “a witness” to Jesus.²³ This is how John

²¹ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3:15.

²² *Ibid.*, Genesis 3:20–21.

²³ *Ibid.*, John 1:8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, John 1:29.

introduced Jesus: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”²⁴

For the original hearers, this announcement would have called to mind the story of the Exodus. In the Exodus, the most profound story of redemption in the Old Testament, God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. In a specific portion of the narrative, God saved them through the sacrifice of many lambs, whose blood was painted on the doorposts of their homes. Jews celebrate the Passover sacrifice annually, keeping alive the memory of how God rescued their ancestors and made them a chosen people.

By calling Jesus “the Lamb of God,” John also harkened back to the words of the prophet Isaiah. Hundreds of years before Jesus’ birth, Isaiah prophesied about God’s “Suffering Servant” who would bring salvation from sin:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. . . . Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.²⁵

By referring to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,” John foretold the manner and meaning of Jesus’ death. All four New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life climax with his death on the cross. Their interpretations of that event are uniform: Jesus died on behalf of sinners.

It is on the cross that we see God as he truly is. Consider how the writers of the New Testament understood the nature of God in relation to the cross:

- “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”²⁶
- “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”²⁷
- “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”²⁸
- “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice . . . so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”²⁹

On the cross, God’s manifold perfections meet in a single event. We see at once the God of justice and of love. He is just—he does not let sin go unpunished. He is love—he takes that punishment on himself. John Piper put it this way: “The wisdom of God has ordained a way for the love of God to deliver us from the wrath of God without compromising the justice of God.”³⁰

If we want to know what God is like, we must look to the cross, where the sheer greatness and the marvelous grace of God meet for the benefit of sinners.

The God of Christianity

“Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God.”³¹ That’s how one historian began his book on church history. It’s true. It is also true that Christianity is the only religion whose God is exalted through humiliation. As we ponder who God is—great and gracious, Creator and Savior, Triune Lord—may we do so with faith. And may we look forward all the more to the day when we will worship Christ, the eternal Son, the slain Lamb, and join the chorus that says:

“[Christ,] you are worthy . . . because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. . . . Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! . . . To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! . . . Amen.”³²

²⁵ Ibid., Isaiah 53:5–7, 10.

²⁶ Ibid., Romans 5:8.

²⁷ Ibid., Ephesians 1:7.

²⁸ Ibid., 1 Peter 1:3.

²⁹ Ibid., Romans 3:23–26.

³⁰ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 1996), 59.

³¹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 3.

³² *The Holy Bible*, Revelation 5:9–14.